

WRITING THE DEVOURING NEON:  
CELEBRITY AND AUDIENCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE 1973-2003

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## **ABSTRACT**

MATTHEW JONATHAN LUTER: Writing the Devouring Neon:  
Celebrity and Audience in American Literature 1973-2003  
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

This project argues that contemporary American authors, rather than rejecting altogether mass media celebrity culture as a threat to literary culture, instead comment on the idea of fame and specific celebrity images through their depictions of audiences within their texts. Mob-like crowds in which audience members bear no individuality or agency signal a reading of celebrity as destructive. Where audiences are depicted as more active and occasionally resistant, celebrity becomes a neutral or even positive force. Additionally, writers who find celebrity a useful conceptual category in their work need not limit the scope of their cultural commentary to media matters alone. Some writers find that their characters' interactions with famous figures provide useful starting points for broader meditations on issues of national identity, race, gender, and both public and private history.

By considering literary responses to celebrity culture that range from biting criticism to cautiously optimistic to sympathetic and positive, this dissertation argues that no single type of response to the centrality of fame in contemporary culture dominates the American literary scene. Fame as a cultural signifier, then, should be neither dismissed entirely nor embraced fully. Furthermore, since authors frequently indicate their own attitudes toward celebrity via their representations of audiences within literary texts, these authors as a group emphasize the power that individuals have to interpret and

subsequently accept or reject any message mediated by a corporation, a media outlet, or any other seat of cultural power. By conveying how crucial it is for audiences to act independently, these writers argue that good citizens must first be good readers.

Primary texts include fiction, essays, and plays by Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, Tom Carson, Adrienne Kennedy, and Bobbie Ann Mason.

## **DEDICATION**

For my parents,  
who sometimes told me I watched too much TV,  
but never told me I read too many books.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

I.	AN OVERVIEW OF CELEBRITY THEORY AND THE CELEBRITY LITERARY CHARACTER .....	1
	Defining the Celebrity.....	7
	Historicizing the Celebrity .....	10
	Celebrity as Discursive Idea .....	13
	Literary Interruption One: Heeeeeere's Chance—er, Chauncey—er, Somebody!! .....	15
	Celebrity as Psychically Disruptive .....	17
	Literary Interruption Two: When Stars Attack!! .....	18
	Celebrity as Consumer Product .....	23
	Celebrity as Ideological Construction.....	27
	Celebrities and Active Audiences .....	31
	Literary Interruption Three: You're Going Out a Youngster, But You've Got to Come Back a Star!! .....	35
	What's to Come .....	39
II.	“AN ENORMOUS SERIES OF WHITE EMPTY SPACES”: CELEBRITY AND ABSENCE IN BRET EASTON ELLIS.....	43
	Hype, Buzz, and the Celebrity Audience.....	45
	Ellis as Self-Aware Literary Celebrity.....	48
	The Contemporary Celebrity Novel.....	51
	The Politics of Celebrity (or a Lack Thereof).....	54

	The Duality of the Celebrity Image .....	62
	A Call to Audience Action.....	66
III.	RESISTING THE DEVOURING NEON: AUDIENCE AS CROWD, CROWD AS THREAT IN DON DELILLO .....	68
	The Problems: Audiences as Crowds; Commodification; Violence.....	70
	The Solutions: Audiences As Listeners; Violence; Self-Abnegation .....	79
	Readership As Crowd .....	93
	The Determinism of the Celebrity Image .....	98
	The Image, the Product, and the Audience .....	101
	The Resistant Artist, Audience (Maybe) Not Required.....	110
IV.	IRONY, CELEBRITY, AND AUDIENCE IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE .....	115
	The Ironic Postmodernist Audience.....	116
	Irony and Celebrity Consumption.....	121
	The Sincere Artist and the Ironic Audience.....	131
V.	MORE THAN A VAST AVANT-POP WASTELAND: TELEVISION, HISTORICAL FICTION, AND TOM CARSON .....	145
	Just Sit Right Back and You'll Read a Tale .....	147
	A Tale of a Televised Trip .....	152
	That Started from This Historic Port .....	156
	Aboard This American Ship .....	161
	(And the Rest) .....	167
VI.	RECONTEXTUALIZING CELEBRITY AND RESISTING PASSIVE SPECTATORSHIP IN ADRIENNE KENNEDY .....	170
	Gender, Viewership, and Hollywood Film .....	172



Celebrity and Identification .....	177
Rewriting Celebrity Images .....	180
VII. CELEBRITY AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: (POP) CULTURAL HISTORY IN BOBBIE ANN MASON .....	187
Historicizing Popular Culture .....	192
Popular Culture as Resonant and Resistance .....	195
Pop History as Political History.....	200
VIII. CONCLUSION.....	213
REFERENCES .....	220

**CHAPTER 1**  
**AN OVERVIEW OF CELEBRITY THEORY**  
**AND THE CELEBRITY LITERARY CHARACTER**

Among printed material that tries to make sense of the flood of interest in American celebrity culture, the *Celebrity Register* is perhaps the most useful and yet remains the strangest book of its kind. First published in 1959, the *Celebrity Register* consists of brief biographies of thousands of celebrities. The book puts into a more permanent, published form a selection of the celebrity-related information that the Celebrity Information Service, established in 1939 and still in action today, had been providing to newspapers and magazines for years. To read the five editions of the *Celebrity Register*, particularly their introductions, is to see in skeletal form a trajectory of changing attitudes toward fame in the second half of the twentieth century.

The first edition of the *Register* includes an introductory essay called “From the ‘Four Hundred’ to the ‘Four Thousand,’” observing with some bemusement the ways in which high society’s traditional symbols of class privilege—money and the right surname—bear less weight than they once did. The *Register* will focus on “not the family name but the fame name” and “not who somebody *was* but who somebody *is*” (v; italics in original). The second edition already starts to revise the *Register*’s idea of celebrity, defining fame more in terms of what it is than what it isn’t. Where the 1959 edition claimed to focus on what famous people do, the 1963 edition admits that the

celebrities in a field are not “necessarily the real ‘do-ers’ in the field. They are, rather, the ‘be-ers’—sometimes almost entirely due to press agency” (v-vi). Both editions further acknowledge that the achievements of those profiled in the books may well be somewhat ephemeral.

Things get strange in the 1973 edition’s intro, as the editors try to draw a stark contrast between “the celebrity and the VIP.” The former’s fame belongs to the individual, they say, while the VIPs is “basically positional.” Fair enough—but then comes a bizarre set of binaries: VIPs are part of the Establishment, but celebrities go on talk shows; VIPs get honorary degrees, but celebrities get awards; VIPs are probably Republicans, celebrities probably Democrats. If that’s not enough, readers are also told, you can usually tell a VIP from a celebrity by examining the length of one’s hair, the width of one’s tie, or the amount of jewelry and cash on his or her person (v-viii). Underlying it all is an uneasiness about a post-Sixties generation gap—the sense that there could have been tense office meetings about whether rock stars and naughty comedians and Timothy Leary really needed to be in this book alongside the aging Old Hollywood elite. Celebrity now can be regal and urbane, or it can be gritty and challenging.

But by the time of the last two editions of the *Register*, celebrity culture’s conquest of the American mass cultural imagination seems so complete, to judge from the introductions, that such debates about what celebrity really should mean seem relics of more turbulent times. The 1986 edition’s intro dispenses with any philosophical musings on the nature of celebrity in favor of a tribute to the *Register* itself, from none other than New York gossip columnist Liz Smith. Smith does speculate, though, that the

then-recent explosion in popular celebrity journalism can be attributed to a sudden vacuum in journalism after the resolution of Watergate—after years of obsessive attention to those layers of gossip, maybe we just have a natural need for gossip that has to direct itself someplace (n.p.). By the 1990 edition, there's no reflection at all, but a brief tribute to the *Register*'s creator, Earl Blackwell, and a series of blurbs touting the usefulness of the *Register*—from celebrities themselves: Helen Hayes, Audrey Hepburn, Brooke Shields, and Walter Cronkite (n.p.). By this point, the book sees no need to justify its own existence. Furthermore, there's now the suggestion that Blackwell has gained a celebrity status of his own just from knowing a lot of stars and their business.

Running through this strange series of five volumes is a playful sense of serendipity: in the 1986 edition, one can find Eugene Ionesco and Jeremy Irons on the same page, just like Eldredge Cleaver and Van Cliburn, or my favorite strange pair, Joseph Heller and Jesse Helms. We're meant to marvel at the sheer weirdness of some of these juxtapositions, I would argue, but also meant to ask whether the implicit equation of all these famous folk is appropriate. And inclusion in the book can seem frustratingly arbitrary: both Simone de Beauvoir and Brigitte Bardot—another unusual duo in themselves—make volumes 1, 3, and 4, but are absent from the second. The lessons of this quintet of books, then, could be these: celebrity is fickle; it's not inherently connected to wealth, achievement, or cultural influence; it's certainly not connected to traditional sites of power; and over the past several decades, celebrity has become ever more prominent in the national psyche.

The *Celebrity Register* tells us about as much as a general reference work possibly could about celebrity culture. For more imaginative and, yes, argumentative

takes on the American fascination with fame, contemporary postmodern literary writing is a fruitful destination. This project examines American celebrity culture since 1970 by attending to what several major U.S. writers have had to say about the dominance of, potential destructiveness within, and aesthetic pleasures to be found in the lives, work, and images of movie stars, rock musicians, celebrity writers, television personalities, fashion models, and the like. This panorama of notable figures represents a broad scope of levels of talent, ideological purposes, and appeals to their respective audiences, but an overview of theoretical writing about fame and its modern manifestations presents some key points of agreement as well as some trenchant points of divergence.

I draw primarily from American literary fiction (and one play) since 1970 not only because the contemporary U.S. is quite possibly the most fame-obsessed national culture the world has seen, but also because fame itself can be understood as a linguistic construct, with individual celebrity personae defined discursively and through collaboration between the celebrity, his or her body of work, the machinery of publicity, and audience interpretations of all of the above. This introduction, however, includes brief readings of some modernist and late modernist works in order to emphasize that even though American celebrity culture, at least as it is popularly understood, usually gets dated from sometime around the roughly contemporaneous beginnings of the television and rock and roll eras (and hence is linked more to literary postmodernism than modernism), literary employment of the celebrity image runs throughout twentieth-century American fiction. Celebrity also serves as an ideal locus for investigation of some recurring questions within the critical discourse on American postmodern literature: the blurring of lines among fiction, nonfiction, and historiography; the appropriation of

pop cultural material within literary fiction; and the role of literary fiction in an age that is no longer dominated by print culture. Most of all, celebrity culture literalizes some of the most commonly used metaphors and theoretical concepts in postmodern literary theory. When Richard Schickel asserts that popular entertainment is so ubiquitous in American consumers' lives that, starting in the 1920s, that "our definition of reality began to alter" to the point that "[i]t is not too much to say that we then had two realities to contend with" (8), he in effect brings Baudrillard from the seminar room to the living room. In that understanding of audience activity, the conflation of reality and simulated reality (or simulacra, to use Baudrillard's term) to the point that the two are indistinguishable ceases to be an abstract concept and begins to more closely resemble *The Way We Live Now*.

Furthermore, when authors write about celebrity characters and celebrity itself, especially in a way that critiques the culture of fame—as most writers discussed herein do one way or another—they ask the vital question of whether celebrity culture can be resisted at all. As soon as a novelist publishes a work that reaches an audience of any size, he or she becomes a celebrity, sometimes against the writer's own will. The danger exists, then, for the writer's ideas and work to be co-opted by the system he or she writes to critique. While writers can certainly choose to deal with their fame in widely differing ways—Norman Mailer chose to be Mailer, J.D. Salinger chose to be Salinger—the very well-known-ness of a famous writer may limit his or her ability to stand outside the culture of fame as a critical observer. Don DeLillo insists on staying on the margins, in other words, while Bret Easton Ellis entered the fray—yet both mount scathing critiques of fame-centrism. Their differing vantage points on that culture, however, inevitably color how we interpret the works themselves.

Two final notes on methodology: first, much of the theoretical work from which I draw in this introduction discusses celebrity through the lens of the movie star, focusing less on the musician, the athlete, the television performer, or even the literary celebrity. This is so for several reasons: to begin, serious and non-condescending consideration of the celebrity as a special person (and a special signifier) originates in the academic field of film studies, especially in the work of film scholars like Edgar Morin and Richard Dyer. Also, Old Hollywood is, at least in the English-speaking world, the twentieth century's most prolific site of celebrity production and discourse. As Morin puts it, "The stars are typically a cinematic phenomenon, and yet there is nothing specifically cinematic about them" (4). As a result, the pinnacle of showbiz stardom consistently gets linked not to the familiarity of the television host or the idealized body of the fashion model, but to the uneasy mix of exceptionality and normality, talent and dumb luck, epitomized by the film star.

I must also add that I am drawing no strict line between real and imagined celebrities within the fictional texts. That is to say, I treat, for example, the fictional Bill Gray in DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) in no fundamentally different way from the way I treat David Foster Wallace's use of David Letterman in the short story "My Appearance." This is not to deny that Letterman is a flesh-and-blood human being and that Gray never was, but to emphasize that DeLillo—like all writers discussed herein—creates "Gray" from scratch. In much the same way, Wallace does not purport to show readers The Definitive, Essential Self Of David Letterman, but "Wallace's Letterman," depicted in a particular manner with certain attributes emphasized for Wallace's own purposes. His Letterman is not necessarily my Letterman or your Letterman—and it likely isn't

Letterman's Letterman either. Furthermore, few of the writers discussed here choose to work only with real, fictional, or based-on-real celebrities. As a result, I notice that a writer's construction of a fictional celebrity, for instance, consistently informs the way the same writer will construct an image of a real person, and vice versa: Bret Easton Ellis's mode of characterizing Victor Ward in *Glamorama* (1999) informs his mode of characterizing some of the real celebrities who make cameo appearances in the same novel.

### **Defining the Celebrity**

Even a mere working definition of celebrity, then, is a tricky proposition. First, there's a distinction to be made between the celebrity and the political leader, folk hero, or mythic persona. When we speak of the "biggest" celebrities of our time as distinct from simply the best-known names or faces, we rarely refer to elected officials, business leaders, or religious authorities, even though they may have more real influence over individuals' lives. And when a term like "star" does get used with reference to those leaders, it's often with a clear modifier limiting one's stardom to a specific arena: "a rising star in the Republican Party," or "a star CEO," for instance.

Celebrity in the abstract, then, must be understood as a kind of cultural influence distinct from political or macroeconomic influence. Stars—a term I'll use basically interchangeably with "celebrities"—wield no direct influence over their audiences, though the psychic power they bear is undeniable. Still, the fundamental quality that defines a celebrity—that places him or her in fame's stratosphere—is slippery. Daniel Boorstin's widely quoted definition of celebrity addresses the difficulty of synthesizing



all of the threads in the tapestry of contemporary America's fame culture. "The celebrity," he argues, "is a person who is known for his well-knownness" (57).

That definition is not so tautological as it appears. Boorstin references the *Celebrity Register* here, registering particular bemusement at philosopher Bertrand Russell's proximity to actress Jane Russell. He uses the book's surprising juxtapositions to demonstrate that his definition works since, at their core, the philosopher and the actress, to use only one such incongruous pair, are united only in the familiarity of their names and, to some, their work (59). Still, the intellectual, the innovator, and the industrialist must be distinguished somehow from the starlet, the socialite, and the swindler—right? And surely in a more useful way than the *Celebrity Register*'s artificial VIP-versus-celebrity contrast?

Elias Canetti defines the celebrity in contrast to the ruler and the rich person. While the rich collect commodities and the ruler collects followers, he argues, the celebrity collects "a chorus of voices [that] repeat his name," with the celebrity caring little to whom the voices belong, as long as they speak his name (396-397). Francesco Alberoni defines stars as those notable people "whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of interest" (75). In other words, an elected official cannot be considered a celebrity simply because his or her familiarity is accompanied by opportunities to affect the material, as opposed to merely the psychic, lives of people. The celebrity, on the other hand, wields no such direct influence. Alberoni further explains that modern societies that value celebrity still judge their celebrities and their leaders of real influence by entirely different sets of criteria. An athlete who wants to get

into politics, for instance, will be judged during elections by the same standards as the career politician; no informed public assumes that a star could lead a nation *solely* because he or she can hit a ball well.

Adding an element of taxonomy to the definition, Chris Rojek divides celebrity status into three categories: the ascribed, the achieved, and the attributed (17).<sup>1</sup> The ascribed celebrity gains stature solely from a position, often hereditary, with no achievement required. Royalty provides the best examples; notable heirs and heiresses to business fortunes can possess ascribed celebrity also. Achieved celebrity is the most familiar of Rojek's three types of fame and the type possessed by most of the famous people discussed in this project. These are the actors, musicians, athletes, artists, and other stars who gain fame through individual achievement due to personal talent or craft. More than the ascribed or attributed celebrity, I would add, the figure of achieved celebrity has sought his or her fame; it should be noted, though, that reactions to this fame vary widely. Attributed celebrities are those figures who do not seek fame but find it given to them on the basis of some widely-known action. These are the Ordinary Joes and Jills of human interest stories: the sudden heroes, the parents of sextuplets, the accidental YouTube stars. Some have performed accomplishments of considerable skill in the course of their daily life, while others seem pure creations of a cultural moment.

It is worth adding that Ernest Cashmore asserts that these three categories have begun to break down in the current decade. He attributes the blurring of the divisions to the rise of reality television (203-204), but certainly the even more recent wave of user-generated content made instantly visible through Web 2.0 technology (e.g., blogging

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<sup>1</sup>This taxonomy seems to mirror one that Boorstin also endorses (45): Malvolio's "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em" in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (2.5.126-127).

software, YouTube, podcasting) has enabled sudden celebrities to attempt to demonstrate genuine achievement or, viewed more cynically, to extend their fifteen minutes indefinitely. Like all cultural phenomena represented primarily through mass media, the phenomenon itself will inevitably change as the public's mode of consumption changes.

### **Historicizing the Celebrity**

Defining fame and sorting celebrity types is slippery enough; establishing any clear genealogy of the idea and practice of fame is even harder. The literary texts on which I focus in this project are TV era, rock era, nightly-news era artifacts, but fame's prehistory dates back centuries. Leo Braudy characterizes Alexander the Great as the first true celebrity in the sense that he did active self-mythologizing with an eye to posterity (29-51). Rojek agrees that the ancient world had its notable men and women, "[b]ut they did not carry the illusion of intimacy, the sense of being an exalted confrère, that is part of celebrity status in the age of mass-media" (19). That attention to one's own reputation and image decades, even centuries after death underpins all impulses toward fame-seeking, Braudy continues. Fame in any form, he asserts, "promised a way to evade death and deny its ultimate power" (553).

Twentieth-century achieved celebrity begins on the stage, in the so-called legitimate theater, the music hall, and vaudeville, but its power is intensified and accelerated by the technology of film. Schickel asserts that the public figures most often discussed in major American magazines were leaders in politics, business, and industry until around 1920, after which the balance of celebrity attention shifts toward entertainers (6-7). It can be no coincidence that this shift is concurrent with the silent screen's

considerable growth in popularity and a rapid spread of permanent movie theaters throughout the U.S.

Yet film actors and actresses themselves were not known entities in the medium's infancy. The earliest U.S. cinema did not identify its performers by name onscreen, in part because many actors had theater careers that they felt could be damaged by participation in this fledgling popular medium, and in part because studios knew that grooming individual actors for stardom might lead to star behavior, star demands, and inevitably, star salaries (DeCordova 5-6). The event most often cited as the birth of the movie star was a simple publicity stunt: a fabricated 1910 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* story that claimed that Florence Lawrence, then known primarily as the "Biograph Girl" after the studio to which she was under contract, had been killed in a car accident. The story was denounced as a lie the next day in trade papers by Carl Laemmle, the same publicity agent who placed the story in the St. Louis paper. Dyer interprets this event as marking the first piece of extra-cinematic American film discourse—the first public discussion of a film performer that does not focus on the performer's onscreen appearances (*Stars*, 9-10).<sup>2</sup>

The story is also, then, the first example of movie star discourse that is in no way related to the performer's talent. As such, it explodes the notion that the publicity machine's capability of creating overnight celebrity, turning the anonymous figure into the big name of the moment, is a particularly recent invention. The narratives of the celebrity as the especially talented figure and as the product of publicity itself "have actually *coexisted* for more than a century, usually in odd but harmonious combinations" (Gamson 16; *italics in original*). The ultrapopular gambits of P.T. Barnum, for example,

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<sup>2</sup>See also the multiple interpretations of the significance of this event in DeCordova 2-6.

provide a particularly visible example of the triumph of self-serving publicity in the nineteenth century (Gamson 22).

More recently, Mark Rowlands has referred to one dominant style of fame of the current moment, a type with a shorter life cycle meted out in fifteen-second rather than fifteen-minute intervals, as “new variant fame,” abbreviated “vfame” (20), basing the coinage on the medical name for the human variant of mad cow disease (25-26). He thus implies that this celebrity, “unconnected, in any important way, to the sorts of features—excellence, broadly construed—that traditionally made people famous” (91), is somehow an aberration in the history of celebrity, but it has always existed in one form or another. It’s fair to say, though, that it seems ever more the rule and less often the exception.

Furthermore, individual star images have their own historicized narratives. Dyer asserts that “not only do different elements predominate in different star images, but they do so at different periods in the star's career. Star images have histories, and histories that outlive the star's own lifetime” (*Bodies* 3). Consider the surprises in older volumes of the *Celebrity Register*: it is jarring to read about, say, Jane Fonda as a promising young actress with no mention of political activism, or to find capsule biographies of Woody Allen or Michael Jackson that make no mention of their late-career legal woes. A logical extension of this phenomenon applies to deceased celebrities whose work and image still have meaning (and generate profits) after their deaths—from James Dean to Tupac Shakur—and who are subject to less commodified reinterpretation and rediscovery by their artistic inheritors—Andy Kaufman and Janis Joplin come to mind.

The most important conclusion to draw from this rough genealogy is that fame itself has a history, with individual points on its curve tied—like all social forces—to

their respective historical moments, to technology, and to intellectual and ideological changes. As Braudy's monumental history of fame concludes, "no pattern traced here has the force of a determining causality. Fame is metamorphic. It arises from the interplay between the common and the unique in human nature, the past and what we make of it. There can be no single perspective, no secret key by which to unlock what it really is" (591).

### **Celebrity As Discursive Idea**

Celebrities can have cultural and economic impact even after the deaths of the human beings behind the images because, with the transformation from private to public figure that all celebrities undergo, the name, image, and work of a star become widely disseminated and, crucially, widely discussed. The celebrity remains a person but also becomes a discursive idea. Dyer defines the "star image," distinct from the famous person *per se*, as a complex and sometimes self-contradictory construction, "made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion*, *publicity*, *films*, and *criticism* and *commentaries*" (*Stars* 60; italics in original). It's important to note that the celebrity himself or herself takes an active role in some production of star discourse—especially self-promotion—but has no control at all over much of it. Dyer expands on this concept to create a truly all-encompassing definition of the star image:

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech. (*Bodies* 2-3)

Since a celebrity image, then, is comprised not only of the famous person and his or her work but also all of the extracinematic (or extratelevisual, extramusical, etc.) discourse surrounding the celebrity, we must understand star images as complex signs. John Ellis complicates this convention by describing star images as ultimately “paradoxical,” “incoherent,” and “incomplete” (93). To speak in semiotic terms, the intertextual signifier can be summed up in the familiarity of a famous face, but that signifier is far more than the face alone. Furthermore, the signified can be understood not just as “this actor” or “this musician,” but as a construction with an attached ideology, or even an attached pseudo-fictional celebrity narrative. The celebrity remains a person, in other words, but the image is an amalgam of person, role, and public persona. Morin demonstrates this fusion when he recalls a Gary Cooper fan club’s desire to nominate Cooper for U.S. President following the actor’s appearance in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936): “All the heroes Gary Cooper contains within himself direct him to the presidency of the United States, and, reciprocally, Gary Cooper ennobles and enlarges all the heroes he plays: he *garycooperizes* them. Actor and role mutually determine each other” (28; italics in original).

These two identities, then—the essential self that happens to be a well-known actor and the communal identity defined through fan discourse and public appearances—remain in uncomfortable tension. Fame causes a kind of psychic fracture: “celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self [...] between the I (the ‘veridical’ self) and the Me (the self as seen by others)” (Rojek 11). Rojek recalls Cary Grant’s oft-quoted statement, “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant,” demonstrating the extent to which even the celebrity himself is frequently

aware of this double identity and the distance between an inner self and the projected self

(11). Yet Morin views the distance between the performer and the role as an opportunity

for the creation of a new and imaginatively rich combined image:

If Gary Cooper profits from the innocent sagacity of Mr. Deeds or the virile virtues of the pioneer, he remains Gary Cooper. If Gary Cooper is still Gary Cooper, he assimilates Mr. Deeds and the pioneer into his own personality. [...] The actor does not engulf his role. The role does not engulf the actor. Once the film is over, the actor becomes an actor again, the character remains a character, but *from their union is born a composite creature who participates in both, envelops them both: the star.* (29; italics in original)

We must be careful, then, to understand the star *image* as something separate from the famous person, but something that could not exist without the person's fame in the first place.

### **Literary Interruption One: Heeeeeere's Chance—er, Chauncey—er, Somebody!!**

Jerzy Kosinski explores this sense of a split celebrity self in his novel *Being There* (1971), the story of Chance the gardener, a humble and uneducated man who, inadvertently renamed Chauncey Gardiner, winds up a top economic adviser to the President of the United States through a series of misunderstandings. Though critics and readers still disagree as to whether Chance is mentally disabled or just overly naïve—too innocent for this world—Kosinski literalizes the sense of a split self in one key scene. Chance's homespun conversation about gardening has been taken by the Washington elite as an elaborate metaphor for a troubled economy, and a late-night talk show has tapped him to be a last-minute guest in place of the unavailable Vice President.

Chance's primary mode of interaction with the world outside his garden has been watching television, but he evinces no understanding of how television works. He's excited about his upcoming appearance, though, and Kosinski tells us he "wondered



whether a person changed before or after appearing on the screen. [...] Would there be two Chances after the show: one Chance who watched TV and another who appeared on it?" (61). Until this point, Chance has been known to the public only by name, but not by sight. His sense that entering the image world will result in a psychic—or maybe even a physical—break between Chance as a viewer and Chance as an object reveals an anxiety over a loss of control over his own image. Though Chance would likely not be able to articulate it as such, he becomes slowly aware of his transformation from private figure to discursive idea. As a result, this extraordinarily simple-seeming reflection winds up asking not what aspect of a celebrity image dominates in a famous person's own life, but questioning the essential meaning of the self. Chance asks whether his identity is defined by his own thoughts and desires or by the perceptions of others.

As Chance walks on stage to be interviewed, he is aware of a live audience, but he's puzzled that "unlike the audiences he had seen on his own TV set, he could not distinguish individual faces in the crowd." On a literal level, the studio lighting distorts his vision, but Chance's unease is exacerbated by a sense that he has "abandoned himself to what would happen" and is "drained of thought." He knows "[t]he cameras were licking up the image of his body, were recording his every movement and noiselessly hurling them into millions of TV screens scattered throughout the world" (64). The verbs here imply a lack of control on Chance's part over his own actions as well as a sense that television itself is devouring Chance. The most active thing happening is not Chance's movement or speech, but a violent appropriation of Chance's words, actions, and image. The description of the camera as a consuming and dehumanizing device continues as Kosinski explains how television "kept peeling [people's] images from their bodies until

they were sucked into the caverns of their viewers' eyes, forever beyond retrieval, to disappear" (65).

Kosinski draws a sharp distinction between Chance the gardener and Chauncey Gardiner. The narration uses the name Chance only, while the name Chauncey Gardiner appears only in other characters' dialogue. In this scene, Chauncey Gardiner gets thrown to the masses, a crowd that Chance the gardener has no chance of either individuating or resisting. This remarkable scene ends with Chance's reflection that his viewers "would never know how real he was, since his thinking could not be televised. And to him, the viewers existed only as projections of his own thought, as images" (65). The irony here is that Chauncey Gardiner, the talk show guest, is a creation and an accidental one at that—and that Chance's thinking isn't about a troubled American economy at all. Paradoxically, Kosinski suggests that if the show's viewers suspect that Chance isn't quite real, they may actually be on to something. By extension, then, the writer also implies to readers that if they sense that any celebrity they see on television—even one who isn't involved in one big hoax, but just seems to be *performing* his celebrity self instead of *living* his essential self—seems less than real, then those viewers may actually be on to something then too.

### **Celebrity As Psychically Disruptive**

This sense that celebrity culture causes a split between the real and the artificial is not limited to the psychology of the stars. Schickel asserts that a similar fracture takes place within the consciousness of the media consumer. We pay attention both to our own lives and to artifice-laden representations of celebrities' lives. Celebrities become ultrafamiliar to consumers, who become in certain ways "more profoundly involved with

their fates than we are with those of most of the people we know personally” (8).

Schickel’s claim prefigures Brian McHale’s argument regarding the difference between the modernist and the postmodernist narrative space. Modernist narrative, McHale says, is epistemological: characters are not aware what can be known with certainty, and for that reason literary modernism’s analogue in popular culture is the detective story.

Postmodern narrative, conversely, is ontological: as in science fiction, its popular analogue, characters are not always certain what world they inhabit and what its rules of operation are (9-10, 16). In this formulation, modernist narrative requires readers to figure out how best to interpret the world with which they are presented. Postmodern narrative, more complexly, forces readers to juggle attention to multiple worlds—the worlds that readers inhabit themselves, the worlds that fictional characters inhabit, and the semi-fictional middle space that appears when the boundaries separating the two get blurred.

### **Literary Interruption Two: When Stars Attack!!**

McHale continues, “[T]he bandying-about of celebrities’ names holds a certain appeal for readers; it has the scent of scandal about it [because] boundaries between worlds have been violated. There is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters” (85). Real people just aren’t supposed to show up unannounced in novels whose primary concern is not history, many would say, and if they do, they’re supposed to appear in order to establish historical context and lend verisimilitude to the proceedings. And if they do make even brief cameos, their appearances carry with them a sense of the unexpected and even the transgressive—they enact the sense of ontological doubt that

McHale describes by forcing audiences to consider the implications of an overlap between the novelistic world and the reader's world. In other words, if my favorite actor shows up in my favorite novel, then maybe neither world is fully real or fully fictional. I'll consider here a few works that violate that implied boundary.

Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961) begins with an author's note that reads in part, "When movie stars are mentioned, it is not the person of the actor which is meant but the character he projects upon the screen." Percy emphasizes the disconnect between the publicly constructed self and a culturally produced self perceived by others. Interestingly, Percy expresses in the author's note a preference within the novel for the depiction of the culturally projected celebrity over the full veridical self. Percy's celebrities are objects, not subjects, a relationship that is signaled by the novel's title. Binx Bolling, Percy's protagonist, is a moviegoer, far more accustomed to seeing a mediated cultural image from an auditorium seat—the sign of "movie star" on the screen—than a famous actor or actress up close. Also, the particularity of the title—*the*, not *a* moviegoer, and a singular *moviegoer*, not *moviegoers*—implies that Binx is representative of most film audiences, as if we're seeing the species of "the moviegoer" in his natural habitat.

The most prominent use of a real celebrity in *The Moviegoer* takes place early in the novel, on the streets of the French Quarter of New Orleans, the city in which most of the novel is set. Binx admits an attraction to the idea of an encounter with a flesh-and-blood celebrity: "I have my reasons for going through the Quarter. William Holden, I read in the paper this morning, is in New Orleans shooting a few scenes in the Place d'Armes. It would be interesting to catch a glimpse of him" (10-11). The word

“glimpse” implies an intimacy, even a sense of transgressive surveillance, that isn’t built into moviegoing. In spite of a sense of cool detachment which Binx employs to place himself above those who react more strongly to seeing Holden, Binx still acknowledges an intriguing novelty in the possibility of seeing a star outside of the usual context. Adding to this sense of narrative detachment is the fact that Binx’s own celebrity sighting is itself mediated; he doesn’t describe seeing Holden, but describes seeing a honeymooning couple seeing Holden. The young groom “perks up for a second” at the sight of the star, “but seeing Holden doesn’t really help him. On the contrary. He can only contrast Holden’s resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence” (16). In his case, seeing a celebrity on the street unexpectedly causes an ontological reaction in the groom, but not one that questions the reality of the image before his eyes. Instead, Holden’s reality is clear to the young man, and his own reality is diminished by Holden’s presence.

Until, of course, Holden needs his cigarette lit, and this unnamed gentleman is more than glad to provide a light. Binx’s narration, a description of the young man’s evident though coolly restrained joy at coming to the movie star’s service in such a manly and fraternal way, raises the striking of a match to the level of triumph without mocking the importance of this man’s recovery of a sense of productive self. “He has won title,” Percy tells us, “to his own existence [...] He is a citizen like Holden; two men of the world they are” (16). And importantly, his young bride seems appropriately impressed too. Ironically, the young man’s brief favor for Holden—an act that places him in the role of a servant, after all—elevates him in the eyes of Binx, Holden, and the surrounding crowd, allowing him to rejoin the ranks of those who bear their “own existence.”

Percy attributes Holden's considerable cultural capital to “[a]n aura of heightened reality” that “moves with him and all who fall within it feel it” (16). While Binx admits to being susceptible to Holden's charm, he separates himself from the signature hounds or teenybopper fans that typify those most interested in star sightings. “I have no desire to speak to Holden or get his autograph. It is [his] peculiar reality which astounds me,” Binx says (17). For Binx, witnessing someone in person whom he has already seen onscreen is profoundly reassuring. Later in the novel he describes the phenomenon of “certification,” his term for one's excitement at seeing onscreen a viewer's own neighborhood (63). To Binx, such an experience is comforting because it proves to the viewer that he or she truly exists, “is a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere” (63). To Percy, the idea that viewers need such reassurance is distressing to say the least.

A more unusual, fanciful, and probably impossible unexpected celebrity interaction occurs about halfway through Thomas Pynchon's masterful meganovel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Pynchon's protagonist Tyrone Slothrop, a U.S. army lieutenant during World War II, is in Germany about two months after V-E Day, at the time of Truman, Stalin, and Churchill's Potsdam Conference. As this memorable scene takes place, Slothrop is recovering hashish that has been buried just outside the window of Truman's temporary White House. He hears someone exit the building, and “Slothrop freezes, thinking *invisible, invisible*....Footsteps approach, and over the railing leans—well, this may sound odd, but it's Mickey Rooney” (382). Pynchon's incidental “well, this may sound odd,” functions as a wink and nudge to the reader as the novelist acknowledges that this unexpected cameo is transgressive, as McHale discusses.

Rooney's sudden appearance seems arbitrary, and Pynchon plays it for laughs even while highlighting some important attributes of the literary celebrity cameo.

First of all, Slothrop recognizes Rooney in terms of his film roles, betraying an initial inability, at first sight at least, to separate the person from the image. Pynchon's character "recognizes him on sight, Judge Hardy's freckled madcap son, three-dimensional, flesh, in a tux and am-I-losing-my-mind face" (382). All in one sentence, Slothrop identifies the film character, then recognizes the human being, then registers Rooney's shared awareness that this encounter is inexplicable. The actor seems to be in on the joke every bit as much as the reader.

The celebrity sign itself here is simultaneously interchangeable and ultra-specific. True, it might make more sense for a tough-guy actor to show up, and it would make less sense (but be funnier) if a noted comedian made the cameo instead. But either way, Slothrop's reaction would likely remain the same, as it reflects the sense that the level of cultural capital in his vicinity has just risen sharply. "He *knows* he is seeing Mickey Rooney, though Mickey Rooney, wherever he may go, will repress the fact that he ever saw Slothrop," Pynchon tells us. "It is an extraordinary moment," so remarkable that Slothrop is temporary silenced, literally starstruck. "His speech centers have failed him in a drastic way," but he still realizes that saying "'Hey, you're Mickey Rooney' seems inadequate" (382). Less than a page later, the scene has ended and Rooney is mentioned again only once in the novel's nearly four hundred remaining pages, but the sense of playful novelistic transgression remains—a breaking not so much of the fourth wall separating reader from writer, but Slothrop the moviegoer from Rooney the inexplicably present film star. Pynchon also plays briefly with the interchangeability of film star

signifiers in the scene preceding Rooney's cameo, in which other American servicemen mistake Slothrop for both Don Ameche and Oliver Hardy (381). The joke is not lost, of course, on readers who are aware of these actors' considerable physical differences. Whichever one Slothrop more closely resembles, the soldiers who mistake Slothrop's identity are excited to be around a celebrity, no matter who he is.

One more recent example of a celebrity cameo in literary fiction demonstrates that characters in a novel need not even be able to precisely identify a famous person in order for the atmosphere of heightened reality to blossom as Percy describes. Clarissa Vaughan, the protagonist of the portion of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) that is set roughly in the present, passes a movie set on a New York street. An unnamed but definitely famous actress pokes her head out of her trailer, and "while Clarissa cannot immediately identify her (Meryl Streep? Vanessa Redgrave?) she knows without question that the woman is a movie star" (27). The narrator attaches the word "aura" to the anonymous celebrity, just as Percy attaches an air of difference to Holden. Cunningham goes further, though, endowing the scene with a sense of sublime as the actress "leaves behind her an unmistakable sense of watchful remonstrance, as if an angel had briefly touched the surface of the world with one sandaled foot" (27). Equations of fame with a kind of divinity are common in writing about celebrity (Morin 25, 87-88; Dyer, *Stars* 21-22; Gamson 29); here Cunningham literalizes the metaphor via the language of transcendence.

### **Celebrity As Consumer Product**

Morin's coinage of the term *garycooperization* adds to Dyer's definition of the star as discursive idea a sense that star images are essentially dynamic: with each new



film, record, or magazine profile, the image changes. Each new idea attached to the persona alters the complex text that is the persona and extends its meaning. Richard DeCordova reads this mutability of the star images as conveying a built-in economic purpose. With an entire industry of publicity and celebrity journalism in place to support a kind of self-mythologizing of stars from within, a “particular kind of consumer” is constructed around the celebrity: the fan (113). Aware that star images can be self-contradictory and raise their own questions about the stability of individual identities, fans are in the position to learn more about their favorite stars—or at least, more about their projected personae—but only if they purchase magazines or movie tickets. The publicity machine, DeCordova argues, uses this awareness to sell the star as a commodity. Advertise one actor’s presence in a film or even a magazine profile, for instance, and you promise two things: some continuation of an existing persona (e.g., John Wayne will exude a traditional masculinity; Joan Crawford’s character will be strong-willed), and some new articulation or extension of that image. The result is continued consumption of the star image, perpetuating the symbiotic yet always unequal relationship between the commodified celebrity and the loyal consumer.

An implied continued relationship between the celebrity and the consumer, then, is crucial for the longterm viability and endurance of a star image. What’s more, the suggestion of a possible intimacy between star and fan links the concept of stardom to a sense of democracy that many understand as inherent to the phenomenon of celebrity. Popular representations of fame in America imply that any consumer could potentially be friends with a star, but many also hold firm to the notion that any of us could *become* a star. Dyer underlines the contradictions built into this set of notions—the belief that stars

are much bigger and better than us but also just like us—in a list of four qualities that the Hollywood star system seems to hold simultaneously true: “that ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; that the system rewards talent and ‘specialness’; that luck, ‘breaks,’ which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom” (*Stars* 42). The ideal star, then, comes to fame both effortlessly and with effort, and exudes both normalcy and exceptionality.

The alleged easy accessibility of fame runs at least as far back as the Hollywood legend of Lana Turner’s mythic discovery at a Los Angeles soda fountain—a story that really does cast Turner as both ordinary and extraordinary—and the idea survives today in the current ubiquity of reality television. In between the two come a rise in the influence of the paparazzi and an explosive growth in the sheer amount of celebrity journalism. In both cases, the frequent publication of photos of the unguarded daily lives of celebrities implies a high level of accessibility to them. Even the titles of today’s glossy supermarket celeb magazines imply some real connection, however tenuous, between the fan and the star. *People* tells us that at the very least, we’re the same species as the beautiful people, and the occasional inspiring human interest story therein, in its proximity to red carpet photos and movie reviews, keeps alive the sense that some form of closeness with the stars is a genuine possibility. *Us Weekly*’s use of the first person pronoun is no accident either, implying something significant but unnamed that is shared by reader and subject; this is pointedly not a publication about “them.”

Those magazines date back to the mid-1970s, but this sort of publication is nothing new. The fan discourse of Hollywood’s Golden Age bears an investment in making stars seem as accessible as possible: all-American, unpretentious, independent,

and vaguely middle-class. For example, Gamson reprints a photo of the young Judy Garland playing baseball (30), while Morin recalls a fan magazine article attributed to Ginger Rogers, stirringly titled “Why I Like Fried Potatoes” (73). Yet it would be inaccurate to assert that these homespun (and obviously constructed) personae always dominate the images of the lifestyle of the rich and famous. As Morin puts it, “The star system seems to be ruled by a thermostat: if the humanizing tendency that reduces the star to the human scale brushes everyday life a little too closely, an internal mechanism re-establishes her distance, a new artifice exalts her, she recovers altitude” (23). He describes the famously aloof (or at least, aloof in her famous persona) Greta Garbo as “in our midst and yet not among us” (9), and in a lovely phrasing, characterizes the celebrity world itself as one that “hedgehops rather than soars above our daily life” (23). Well before this emphasis on the normalcy of stars, though, it is the rule and not the exception that the fan and publicity discourse of early American cinema depicts stars as extraordinary. Images of film performers begin to lean toward the ordinary around 1930 (Dyer, *Stars* 21-22; Morin 23; Gamson 29). Certainly the innovation of sound film contributes to this shift; as soon as audiences can hear the actors speak, their air of the untouchable begins to dissolve.

This tension between normality and exceptionality is central not just to U.S. celebrity iconography but to the popular idea of the American spirit construed much more broadly. The American mythology of the self-made man, from the nineteenth-century transcendentalists forward through Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen, Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, Welles’s Charles Foster Kane, and beyond, is founded not on a sense of inherent specialness within these Great Men, but on singlemindedness of purpose and, often,

dumb luck, or at least being in the right place at the right time. Implicit in that mythology, then, is an emphasis not on social connections or formal education as singular paths to success, but on an American land of possibility.<sup>3</sup> Gamson paints democratized fame as defined by a “‘paradoxical uniqueness,’ a compromise between an aristocracy of the personally distinguished and an egalitarian democracy in which all are deserving. ‘Praise me because I am unique,’ went the logic, ‘but praise me as well because my uniqueness is only a more intense version of your own.’” Crucially, that uniqueness is tied not to any single undefinable X-factor, but to “qualities that could potentially exist in any man” (18-19).

Childhood fantasies aside, mature fans know how slim the odds are of having meaningful personal interactions with the famous. As Alberoni explains, stars “appear, contrary to fact, as being potentially in interaction” due to “the false impression of proximity suggested by television shows, or through the juxtaposition of photographic evidence with press articles, or because of the care which is taken to present to the public friendly and cooperative forms of interaction and to soften hostile and competitive forms” (84). Ultimately, then, this appearance of potential intimacy is only that—an appearance.

### **Celebrity as Ideological Construction**

Alberoni also asserts that fame cannot exist in a society unless its culture assumes that certain fields of endeavor are considered unimportant politically (76). That is to say, movie stars would not embody a type of fame distinct from the fame of political leaders, unless there exists a widespread sense that movie stars simply *aren't* political leaders.

Dyer disagrees, saying Alberoni's assumption “ignores the ideological significance of the

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed, Boorstin points out that “[o]ur most admired national heroes—Franklin, Washington, and Lincoln—are generally supposed to possess the ‘common touch.’ [...] We admire them, not because they reveal God, but because they reveal and elevate ourselves” (50).

stars,” leaving no room for either explicit political statements by celebrities or implicit political connotations to star images (*Stars* 7-8). I would counter that Alberoni never denies that stars can carry ideological power, but he does assert that celebrity power is not officially institutionalized and therefore seems diffuse in comparison to the power authorized to an elected official at the ballot box. Individual star images aside, though, perhaps the most contentious question in theoretical writing about celebrity is the question of what role stars play within the complex system of a capitalist society that conflates art and commerce, person and personality.

One point of agreement in the works of several theorists of celebrity is that stars are profit-making entities (Turner 34; Dyer, *Bodies* 5; Mills 74), and they affect the profits of more people than just their movie studios or record labels. Morin calls the celebrity “a total item of merchandise” as well as “not only a subject but an object of advertising. She sponsors perfumes, soaps, cigarettes, and so on, and thereby multiplies her commercial utility” (113). P. David Marshall interprets that participation in commodity culture as an implicit endorsement of capitalism on the star’s part and a demonstration (perhaps even a warning) of the ways in which people can become commodities (x). Disagreement exists, however, as to whether celebrities should be understood primarily as human cogs in mere machines of an inhumane culture industry, or whether celebrities and audiences maintain some agency even within a capital-centric culture of celebrity. In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception,” Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that celebrity has a narcotizing effect, depicting a myth of upward social mobility so publicly and effectively that the masses latch onto the illusion of self-celebrification and reject the real possibility of social change.

Their Marxist argument centers on the idea that “the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (133-134). Since much cultural production in a capitalist economy is then geared toward the widest audience possible with the goal of increasing profit, they assert, this system also devalues individual expression. Celebrities, then, lose the agency to express perspectives that reject “identification with the generality” (154). For consumers, this conformist impulse results in two things: first, an “idolization of the cheap [that] involves making the average the heroic” takes place, as the same bent toward easily digestible, democratic representation that gains a wide audience also valorizes the mundane (156).

Second, the celebrity image activates consumer desires and promises their fulfillment without being able to deliver that fulfillment. Rojek explains that celebrity culture “embodies desire in an animate object, which allows for deeper levels of attachment and identification than with inanimate commodities. Celebrities can be reinvented to renew desire and because of this they are extremely efficient resources in the mobilization of global desire. In a word, they *humanize* desire” (189). In other words, we rarely develop attachments to objects unless they have a sense of the personal attached to them first. Sometimes this attachment represents a relational bond—a precious family heirloom or a fondly remembered gift from a close friend— but we can develop attachments to objects that have celebrity-based attachments built in as well. A car, a jacket, a piece of jewelry—all may be reminiscent of an admired character played by an admired celebrity actor, so a relational, quasi-personal attachment is thus established. Ultimately, then, possession of the celebrity’s image and associated

ephemera is thoroughly possible, but any true relationship with the celebrity remains impossible. “Capitalism can never permit desire to be fulfilled, since to do so will neutralize desire and thus, forfeit economic growth,” Rojek writes (189). The result of this activated but basically unconsummated consumer desire, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s view: more spending and the perpetuation of the capitalist system, even to the detriment of the masses.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s ideas have no doubt been influential, but they are not without detractors. Alberoni calls it “simplistic and naïve” to assume that celebrity is an entirely fabricated phenomenon, pointing out that no publicity machine necessarily manipulates consumers or celebrities. Instead, the machine may “facilitate and direct into a chosen path” stars who may appeal to particular consumers (92). Rojek concludes that “the question of who is attributing celebrity status is moot,” given that celebrities are “cultural fabrications” (10). And Boorstin emphasizes that celebrities are “morally neutral” and “the product of no conspiracy” (59). If there is any agreement here, it is that celebrities are collaborative creations. They cannot be considered entirely self-made, entirely audience-made, nor entirely publicity-made.

Alberoni does not name Horkheimer and Adorno, but he clearly has their perspective in mind when he attacks the “theory of the ‘narcotizing illusion,’” pointing out that the Marxist interpretation of celebrity’s origin and purpose is weakened by the fact that fandom is not strictly a phenomenon of industrialized nations, the working class, or the capitalist world. “Interest in stars,” he asserts, “can be found through the whole range of the political keyboard, without any distinction” (93).

Moreover, several celebrity theorists argue that Horkheimer and Adorno dismiss as an impossibility any instance of an audience rejecting the celebrity narratives and images passed on via the culture industry from above. Horkheimer and Adorno's audiences, broadly drawn as "the masses," lack agency; in contrast, Dyer's studies of the appropriation of star images by subcultures in his study *Heavenly Bodies*—a feminist understanding of Marilyn Monroe, a reading of Judy Garland favored in the gay community, and a reinterpretation of Paul Robeson by African-Americans—demonstrate the considerable room that exists for resistant readings of even the most familiar celebrity personae.

### **Celebrities and Active Audiences**

The resistant reading also underlines, of course, how unpredictable audiences can be, and how audiences' understandings of celebrities and their actions can subvert the intentions of entertainment corporations or publicity machines. Gamson describes how within the entertainment and publicity industries, there is a considerable lack of agreement as to whether it is to the industry's benefit for consumers to be well-informed about the machinations of "celebrity-production activities" (125). Nevertheless, audiences play a crucial role in igniting and perpetuating interest in a star and his or her image. Alberoni indirectly critiques Horkheimer and Adorno again when he describes celebrity culture as more akin to a democratic republic than a dictatorship. "The star system thus never creates the star," he asserts, "but it proposes the candidate for 'election,' and helps to retain the favour of the 'electors'" (93). In other words, film studios or record labels can promote a celebrity as a commodity as much as they want, but they'll never force consumers to buy a movie ticket or an album on the strength of



savvy marketing alone. For the system to perpetuate itself at all, audiences play a crucial role. Dyer even asserts that fan activity, along with “box office receipts and audience research,” provides a space for an audience to respond fairly directly to the producers of celebrity images. He acknowledges, though, that while fan discourse, diffuse and lacking in consensus, does not equal the power of media corporations, it does provide evidence that audiences are never fully unthinking (*Bodies*, 4).

The consumer has considerable control over a star image, then, but theoretical writing about celebrity that acknowledges the diversity and the agency of audiences in the creation of star images is a relatively recent phenomenon. Gamson explains, “Bringing in the actual receivers of culture is a major first step in that direction [i.e., allowing for heterogeneity and activity in both producer and consumer] since it focuses attention on the *meaning that emerges from the interaction* of the text with those encountering it” (199; italics in original). Toward this end, he also contributes a taxonomy of the types of audience members, termed *traditional*, *second-order traditional*, *postmodernist*, *gossiper*, and *detective* (146). This set of subject positions represents a wide spectrum of attitudes toward the perceived realism (or lack thereof) of celebrity images; the awareness of the means of production within the entertainment and publicity industries; the degree to which a star’s fame is merited or unmerited; and the audience member’s mode of engagement with the star image. It’s crucial to recognize, though, that virtually no audience member is consistently on one side of the believing-to-nonbelieving continuum. Gamson argues that most of us “actively travel the axis of belief and disbelief” daily (149), as we might view the fame of an award-winning, hype-

eschewing stage actress as legitimate while we dismiss as pure construction the fame of a chart-topping but pitch-corrected pop idol.

Audiences, then, I would conclude, play a far more active role in creating star images than earlier theorists, particularly Horkheimer and Adorno, suggest. That is not to say, however, that an audience's will is necessarily equal to the star's or the publicity machine's power in every case; audiences can intervene by reinterpreting a star's achievements, but they cannot retroactively change the nature of the achievements themselves. As Boorstin puts it, "We can fabricate fame, we can at will (though usually at considerable expense) make a man or woman well known; but we cannot make him great" (48). Boorstin summarizes a final key aspect of celebrity that is a point of agreement across nearly all theoretical writing on fame: ultimately, celebrity status is unconnected to talent. While hundreds of great actors, musicians, athletes, and the like win great fame, many equally talented people may not, and many far less talented ones can gain recognition also. Talent may contribute to or accelerate celebrity, but it is seldom a requirement.

James Monaco contrasts modern mass-media celebrity with the types of greatness represented in Thomas Carlyle's taxonomy of heroes, concluding that celebrities "needn't have done—needn't do—anything special. Their function isn't to act—just to be [...]" Often the pure glow of celebrity comes first; action follows. Celebrity makes the accomplishment possible" (6). Or, perhaps more exactly, if a high level of name recognition comes first, it at least makes accomplishment seem more newsworthy. In fact, it can even lower the bar of what achievement is impressive: consider the cases of

stars who attempt crossovers in the showbiz world, to have their records reviewed as “not bad for an actor” or their film performances called “an okay job for an athlete.”

Again, it’s worth remembering that a disconnect between fame and accomplishment is hardly a recent phenomenon, though it does represent a shift, as Monaco reminds us, from pre-twentieth century perceptions of earned fame. Schickel characterizes the gradual transformation as beginning in the early days of American cinema, when “the public ceased to insist that there be an obvious correlation between achievement and fame” and, perhaps more notably, when it became feasible to win fame “through attainments in the realms of play” as opposed to the realms of leadership (7). Gamson returns to the legend of Lana Turner’s discovery, emphasizing the disconnect between achievement and celebrity by calling it a triumph of “just *be*”-ing over actually working (31; italics in original). At its best, this separation of achievement and fame levels the playing field and allows discovery of new talent and perspectives on the world. At its worst, the separation of achievement and fame gets us vfame, that twenty-first-century unearned fame described by Rowlands, that so irks those who dismiss celebrity culture as a vapid distraction. Vfame is not an ideal to be elevated or a desired teleological end to the story of fame’s development: indeed, Rowlands says its current prominence is symptomatic of a culture that is “constitutionally incapable of distinguishing quality from bullshit” (91). Yet any effort to decry vfame as the inevitable result of the coarsening and dumbing-down of American mass culture is just an ill-informed attempt to pathologize the present and nostalgically revere the past, all the while ignoring the fact that the fraudulent and the gifted have always coexisted in the house of fame.

### **Literary Interruption Three: You're Going Out a Youngster, But You've Got to Come Back a Star!!**

Theodore Dreiser's title character in *Sister Carrie* (1900) cannot properly be called fraudulent, and while she may be gifted, it takes more than talent to get her to the heights of fame. After Carrie has lived with Charles Drouet in Chicago for some time, Drouet persuades Carrie to take a role in a melodrama being produced by his Elks lodge. Carrie claims that she "can't act" only because she "never did" (110), but she accepts the part and turns in a good performance. The narration describes Carrie's innate talent for mimicry, and when Drouet compliments her act, he kindles her ambition (112).

Despite an earlier insistence from Dreiser's narrator that Carrie is "a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature" (212), Carrie begins seeking a theatrical agent (260-264). All the while she admits that what she really seeks is not approval of future grand achievements as a great actress, but the ability to walk down Broadway as a participant in the upper-class parade of finery (218) and to enjoy the theater's "wondrous reality" as a place "above the common mass" and "above insignificance" (269). Dreiser reminds us, though, that "Girls who can stand in a line and look pretty are as numerous as labourers who can swing a pick" (265), an observation that explains that the position of chorus girl is a job defined more by appearance than talent.

After Carrie joins a chorus line, her rise to fame seems largely happenstance. She is initially singled out as superior to her colleagues when a theatrical manager asserts that Carrie "knows how to carry herself" (278), a distinction that may carry some small recognition of talent, but certainly not much. Her career as a comic actress begins when she improvises one line, a forbidden act in performance at this theater, in response to a

male comic actor who had improvised one line to her. Dreiser tells us this exchange was not planned to highlight Carrie's talent; "[i]t merely happened to be Carrie who was courtesying before him [the comedian]. It might as well have been any of the others, so far as he was concerned" (301). No particular ability is implied: though her decision to improvise on stage is an active one, it gains positive significance only when it is validated by the star actor afterward. Carrie's movement on the fast track to stardom is accelerated following a fit of pouting. After her part in a later show is diminished, she frowns in rehearsal in such an amusing way that her director chooses to keep the expression in the scene. Her scowl steals the show and wins her one of her first printed notices that mentions her name, with one critic writing, "If you wish to be merry, see Carrie frown" (314). A performance defined by luck rather than ability wins her stardom, and what's more, the playwright, director, and Carrie's castmates seem to have contributed little. As another reviewer puts it, Carrie is rarely onstage, "but the audience, with the characteristic perversity of such bodies, selected for itself" Carrie's performance as a highlight (313). Carrie's celebrity is not, then, carefully manufactured, but it is collaboratively created, as Dreiser depicts an audience choosing Carrie as an actress worthy of stardom, whether or not she's earned it through talent.

The unlikely rise to prominence of Dreiser's fictional Carrie appears to have influenced E.L. Doctorow's characterization of the real-life model and chorus girl Evelyn Nesbit in *Ragtime* (1975)—Doctorow even gives "the morose novelist" Dreiser himself a brief cameo in his novel (23). Unlike Carrie, Doctorow's Nesbit has little inherent talent. Without doubt her image is collaboratively created, though the degree to which she has actively participated in her star-making or been passively sculpted into a star is up for

debate. Interestingly, Doctorow presents her as both: a purely capitalist object, created by corporations in part to suppress the working class, and a smart career woman who knows just what she's getting into. When readers meet Doctorow's Nesbit, her husband Harry Thaw has been charged with murdering Nesbit's ex-lover Stanford White, a real-life scandal that was a tabloid sensation in its day. She attends a meeting at which anarchist activist Emma Goldman speaks, and Goldman recognizes Nesbit's presence, calling her "one of the most brilliant women in America, [...] forced by this capitalist society to find her genius in the exercise of her sexual attraction" (46). Goldman compares her to J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller but decries the double standard she sees at work, implying that industrialists who get rich from the labor of others have no moral high ground over someone who uses her sexuality to her own advantage. In conversation with Nesbit later, Goldman tells Nesbit she admires her because she has "accepted the conditions in which you found yourself and you triumphed" but calls her success "[t]he victory of the prostitute" (48). Still, Goldman draws an intriguing distinction between the choices Nesbit has made and the system that, in her view as filtered through Doctorow, has made Nesbit's (non-literal) prostitution seem a viable option for supporting herself.

Doctorow's narrator returns to the idea of Nesbit's fame as collaboratively produced and ideologically motivated a few chapters later, when Nesbit testifies at White's trial:

Her testimony created the first sex goddess in American history. Two elements of the society realized this. The first was the business community, specifically a group of accountants and cloak and suit manufacturers who also dabbled in the exhibition of moving pictures, or picture shows as they were called. Some of these men saw the way Evelyn's face on the front page of a newspaper sold out the edition. They realized that there was a process of magnification by which

news events established certain individuals in the public consciousness as larger than life. These were the individuals who represented one desirable human characteristic to the exclusion of all others. The businessmen wondered if they could create such individuals not from the accidents of news events but from the deliberate manufactures of their own medium. If they could, more people would pay money for the picture shows. Thus did Evelyn provide the inspiration for the concept of the movie star system and the model for every sex goddess from Theda Bara to Marilyn Monroe. The second group of people to perceive Evelyn's importance was made up of various trade union leaders, anarchists, and socialists, who correctly prophesied that she would in the long run be a greater threat to the workingman's interests than mine owners or steel manufacturers. In Seattle, for instance, Emma Goldman spoke to an I.W.W. local and cited Evelyn Nesbit as a daughter of the working class whose life was a lesson in the way all daughters and sisters of poor men were used for the pleasure of the wealthy. The men in her audience guffawed and shouted out lewd remarks and broke into laughter. These were militant workers, too, unionists with a radical awareness of their situation. Goldman sent off a letter to Evelyn: I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is By being persuaded to identify with them. Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich. (70-71)

I quote Doctorow's text at length here for several reasons. First, the naïvete with which Doctorow endows these early publishers and moviemakers—hey, people will buy pictures of pretty girls! who knew?!—gets at a sense that something truly new is happening here. As printing and cinematic technology have made dissemination of not only celebrity discourse but, crucially, celebrity *images* more widespread than ever before, beauty does become a qualification for fame in a way that would have been impossible in a strictly print-dominated culture. This new emphasis on beauty provides further evidence that celebrity and achievement have no inherent link. Secondly, by linking Nesbit to Theda Bara and Marilyn Monroe, Doctorow signals that his narrator exists outside of Nesbit's time and is aware of a genealogy of fame. This truly new thing that Nesbit represents, then, isn't going away anytime soon. And most importantly, Doctorow provides a textual link between the capitalist machine that *creates* celebrity as

an object of exchange and a particular Marxist reading that *interprets* celebrity as a tool of oppression. It's basically a witty and sardonic re-telling of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis, but I would argue that the idea bears particularly great power here because Doctorow allows those ideas to be embodied in the businessman and the labor leader, however poorly those ideas may be received in the latter case. In other words, Doctorow doesn't just assert that these thoughts are out there—he shows us people who are thinking them.

### **What's to Come**

If there is a primary point of agreement in the various theories of celebrity, it's that in studying celebrity, one must take special care not to be too reductive, considering celebrity as a phenomenon manufactured from the star system only, or as originating from the desires of a mass audience only, or as a mode of social control. These paths may all lead to valid conclusions, but each such method has the potential to overlook a crucial aspect of this complex, multifaceted phenomenon. For that reason, my readings of depictions of celebrity in recent American literature are intentionally multivalent. Some of the following authors depict celebrity as seen by characters who are consumers, while others focus on characters who are celebrities themselves. Among the latter, some consider real celebrities rendered on the page—Elvis, Letterman, Springsteen—while others consider fictional celebrities rendered on the page in manners strikingly reminiscent of the ways that real-life celebrity images get created and transmitted. The project's trajectory moves from least to most optimistic. I begin with writers in whose work audiences either are absent or are represented as crowds only, without the power of individual resistance. I end with writers who model audience members who actively



recontextualize and interpret celebrity images and who, in so doing, actively create new art and knowledge.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two focuses on Bret Easton Ellis, a celebrity author who approaches celebrity as a culture unto itself. The world of the famous in *Glamorama* (1998) comes across as a self-contained and closed milieu to which everyday consumers of celebrity images, whether in the form of entertainment journalism or mass entertainment, have little access. Ellis's earliest consumer characters epitomize the oft-maligned trend in 1980s American fiction of flat characters defined largely through their preferences in fashion designers or rock bands. In his later *Glamorama*, an intentionally excessive satirical novel, the celebrity characters are also ideological terrorists, allowing Ellis to argue that fame is inherently politicized and to implicate the famous in negative activity that can have real and lasting ill effects on consumers. Notably, audiences to celebrity culture are essentially absent from *Glamorama*—and with the absence of audience comes an implied absence of agency on the part of individuals, who are merely consumers in the eyes of media conglomerates.

Chapter Three of this study focuses on Don DeLillo, who views celebrity skeptically and with great anxiety and animates this fear via the recurring image of the hysterical crowd. The hostile mass of audience members appears in two novels featuring reclusive celebrities: *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Mao II* (1991) center around rock star Bucky Wunderlick and novelist Bill Gray, respectively, who reject the spotlight due to a fraught relationship with their own listeners/readers. *Great Jones Street* further critiques the idea of art (and by extension, celebrity image) as commodity, while *Mao II* expresses anxiety over the power of the image alongside the decline of print culture. In DeLillo,

celebrity characters mirror the angst of post-Sixties American culture while highlighting the possibility of a real ameliorative power in art and language, as both Bucky and Bill seek a mode of artistic expression that will achieve maximum emotional impact for their audiences yet remain unsullied by the crass marketplace.

Chapter Four's focus is David Foster Wallace. Unlike DeLillo, Wallace was born into a media culture saturated with celebrity images. As a result, Wallace's take on celebrity becomes less apocalyptic, more bemused, and ultimately more honest (and ironically, more ironic) about the considerable attraction of celebrity without sacrificing any intellectual rigor. Wallace's fiction and nonfiction alike seek to overcome the tyranny of a smug postmodern irony that seeks to ridicule everything but embrace nothing. As a result, Wallace's depictions of celebrity, real or imagined, are deeply interested in these famous figures' relationships with their audiences, and those who seek to engage their readers or viewers via sincerity come across most positively.

The next chapter offers a close reading of Tom Carson's strange and pop-saturated novel *Gilligan's Wake* (2005), whose satirical meditations consider more broadly consequential matters than pop culture alone. Here I expand the scope of my argument by emphasizing that fiction that uses celebrity culture as a springboard for social comment need not limit its targets of critique to mass media and should never be content with mere frivolity. Instead, contemporary writing about celebrity can be deeply literary while also posing large questions about national identity, history, and the ideological dimensions of our own understandings of the past.

Chapter Six considers African-American playwright Adrienne Kennedy, whose play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) appropriates the onscreen

images of white entertainers for parodic and political purposes. The play recreates scenes from classic Old Hollywood films onstage, but Kennedy grafts onto these familiar images and personae an autobiographical story that resists being consumed as passively as most viewers consume Hollywood movies. Kennedy forces readers to view her concerns in terms of familiar movie stars, simultaneously borrowing emotional heft from these celebrity images while interrogating why the presence of a noted actor adds gravitas.

In Chapter Seven, I demonstrate how Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) demonstrates that engagement with celebrity culture can actually work to engender an emerging sense of political commitment, not only to shut down political awareness as the Frankfurt School critics like Horkheimer and Adorno would assert. Mason's protagonist Sam Hughes, while investigating Vietnam War-era history, can't help but notice how much pop cultural production of the 1980s proffers ambivalent attitudes toward the 1960s. Crucially, though, she interprets this television and music actively, using it all as an impetus toward a deeper understanding of history and political change.

## CHAPTER 2

### “AN ENORMOUS SERIES OF WHITE EMPTY SPACES”: CELEBRITY AND ABSENCE IN BRET EASTON ELLIS

The workings of twenty-first century celebrity grant consumers more power than ever before to create stars and to perpetuate their fame. Every YouTube hit, every iTunes download, and every Facebook friend accumulated by a current celebrity, however ephemeral that star's fame may turn out to be, represent votes cast by an audience member in favor of that famous figure. The question of what role audiences play in creating celebrity (i.e., the question of who attributes celebrity status and why) has long been common in theoretical writing about fame. Horkheimer and Adorno insist that celebrity and its empty promises of upward mobility exist in order to conceal from the masses their true plight; while Alberoni points out that neither star, starmaker, nor audience ever is fully controlled to the point of a complete erasure of agency (92) and Boorstin calls the entire system “morally neutral” (59). For his part, Rojek says celebrities are only “cultural fabrications” anyway (10). All agree that celebrity images are created via a complex collaboration between the star, some sort of publicity machine, and consumers.

Indeed, opinionated and active readers have made Bret Easton Ellis, a keen observer of American celebrity and consumer culture, one of the most polarizing figures in literary fiction today. For every reader who views him as a keen satirist, there is a

dissenter who argues that his work does not critique the tawdry side of fame so much as it wallows in it. A central critical question regarding Ellis remains whether he denigrates the idea of the Great American Novel by making it about socialites and models or he updates it by making sure it reflects the culture that the tabloid-reading public has helped create. I would argue the latter. I further assert that his employment of celebrity figures is a means to an end, and that end is indeed the great standby, nothing less than old-fashioned novelistic social criticism. His strategy lets him ask some big questions about how contemporary celebrity culture acts on its audiences and how those audiences respond in turn.

Ellis's novel *Glamorama* (1998) functions as an ideal example of how contemporary American fiction can depict celebrity as a tantalizing yet empty force, but it also demands active response from individual readers by illustrating the pitfalls of unquestioning acceptance of corporate culture. While the audacious plot of *Glamorama* is too full of double agents, red herrings, and loose ends that never get neatly resolved to allow plot summary in brief, a few things are clear: Victor Ward (the professional name and identity of Victor Johnson, son of a U.S. senator with aspirations to the presidency) is a successful fashion model and sometimes-actor who, in the first third of the novel, describes his efforts to throw the perfect opening night party for his friend Damien's New York City nightclub even as he tries to open his own club behind Damien's back. Meanwhile, the mysterious F. Fred Palakon has offered Victor \$300,000 to go to London to locate Jamie Fields, a missing model-actress and college classmate of Victor's. In London and later Paris, Victor will find himself lured into the company of a shadowy cabal of international terrorists who are also supermodels, led by Bobby Hughes, one of

Victor's professional idols. However, through frequent narrative references to directors, script changes, soundtracks, actors, and camerawork—even stray adverbs placed in quotation marks as if taken from the performance directions of a screenplay—Ellis suggests that this group's terrorist action, the effects of which are described in gruesome detail even as the organization's actual political program is left unclear, might actually be just part of a movie: an elaborate simulation or even a figment of the narrator's imagination.

*Glamorama*, I would argue, is the great novel of the age of corporate media hype. It encapsulates the ethos of a particular moment in the history of celebrity by making literal several recurring metaphors in theoretical writing about how fame affects audiences and celebrities alike. Most perversely, though, the novel consistently defines celebrity not in terms of abundance—wealth, crowds, limitless opportunity—but in terms of absence, emptiness, and lack. I will begin by explaining how corporate media hype in *Glamorama* disempowers audiences. Then I'll consider the impact of Ellis as a self-aware celebrity author, drawing from pop-cultural forms and content alike, before demonstrating how this novel makes literal some key concepts from the body of critical writing about celebrity in the twentieth century.

### **Hype, Buzz, and the Celebrity Audience**

Media outlets in *Glamorama*—MTV, fashion magazines, movie studios—wield considerable power to influence audiences, as they do in present reality, yet *Glamorama* represents what may already be a bygone media culture. The book shows us American prosperity and consumer culture after the Reagan years and the dot-com boom but well before our current recession caused many to question the ethos of conspicuous

consumption. More importantly for those interested in the machinations of fame, the book depicts the omnipresence of celebrity after the 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of cable channels and celebrity journalism are firmly established, but before Web 2.0's revolutionary facilitation of dissemination of user-produced content and the rise of reality television make anyone a potential paparazzo and a potential star. It's a picture of a time in which stars were still made and perpetuated primarily by TV networks, high-profile ad campaigns, and powerful publicists. If we now live in a time of buzz—genuine grassroots consumer excitement about a person or product, often generated and perpetuated via the Internet—then *Glamorama* shows us the last gasp of hype—intentional, corporate-created excitement that may not always resonate with buyers.

This change from a popular culture in which content is created entirely by corporations and consumed by buyers to a culture in which consumers create culture that can gain considerable width of distribution is a major paradigm shift. Recall *Time* magazine naming “You” the Person of the Year for 2006, after it appeared that blogs and YouTube videos could create stars and even sway elections (Grossman). This shift also destabilizes established understandings of what celebrity means. Rojek's tripartite taxonomy of celebrity—ascribed, achieved, and attributed fame—continues to break down as new types of celebrities emerge: the Internet celebrity, the reality TV star, and so forth. This present world, though, is not the world of *Glamorama*, which maintains a dividing line between celebrities and non-celebrities. The extensive guest list for the glitzy club openings in the book's early chapters helps ensure that the beautiful people and the everyday people do not mix. Victor Ward gets photographed by paparazzi, but

never do readers see a non-famous audience view these pictures of him or take interest in him as a fan. Ellis does not depict these models encountering autograph seekers. No possibility of these characters encountering their audiences in a meaningful way exists. True, the frequent references to camera crews following Victor necessarily imply an audience—if there really is a movie being made, then it must at some point be viewed, one could assume. On the other hand, Ellis suggests, the camera crews could be hallucinatory anyway.

Ultimately, *Glamorama* reveals, celebrity-making that focuses on corporate hype and eschews audience interaction does two things: it deprives audiences of their role in the collaborative acts of the creation and the perpetuation of fame while also erasing any need for celebrities to engage with their audiences' wider world. A book in which the famous lack awareness of the audience for their fame, then, is also a book in which the famous lack awareness of the complexity of the material world in an equally solipsistic fashion. Victor accepts this state of affairs, given that he has not only lived with the superficiality of the culture industry of which he is a part, he has embraced it. "We'll slide down the surface of things," goes a repeated refrain in the novel (144 et al.).<sup>4</sup> The phrase grants superficiality a mirthful air while implying a literal slipperiness: those who attempt to penetrate superficiality to unearth depth beneath it will find a difficult task.<sup>5</sup> But Victor hardly tries to move past his own shallowness. Consider the television monitors at Damien's club: when Victor first points them out, they're airing an MTV

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<sup>4</sup>Where not otherwise noted, parenthetical citations in this chapter refer to *Glamorama*.

<sup>5</sup>Ellis lifts the line directly from U2's "Even Better Than the Real Thing," an appropriate title for a song that gets employed in a novel so interested in the disconnect between reality and implied imagination. Additionally, Victor dismisses the then only seven-year-old song as "Old U2," emphasizing how quickly popular culture disposes of anything not of the present moment (144).



commercial in which model Helena Christensen encourages young viewers to vote, at least giving lip service to a kind of attempted advocacy (7). By the time of the club's opening, though, the screens convey no message at all, as all are tuned to "fashionable static" (148).

### **Ellis as Self-Aware Literary Celebrity**

Like Victor, Ellis himself is no stranger to early success and the accompanying glare of the media spotlight. Both reviled and adored as a literary wunderkind when *Less Than Zero* (1985) brought him fame while he was still an undergraduate at Bennington College, Ellis spent the rest of the 1980s as one of the leading names—and faces—of his generation of American writers. Controversy followed success with his third novel, *American Psycho* (1991): the gruesome satirical novel about an investment banker by day, misogynistic serial killer by night brought Ellis robust sales as well as death threats. Reviewers were divided: he was either one of American fiction's most daring and original voices or one of its most puerile and reprehensible. Having experienced considerable (and high-profile) highs and lows not just as a novelist but as a public figure, Ellis presents in *Glamorama* a scathing critique of the shallowness of 1990s celebrity culture, as represented by the insular and emotionally violent world of high fashion.

It cannot be ignored that Ellis is both novelist and celebrity himself: as one member of a loose affiliation of hip, young, and heavily-promoted fiction writers dubbed the literary Brat Pack by publishers and reviewers in the 1980s, Ellis's name appeared with frequency in both book reviews and gossip columns. It's no coincidence either, of course, that Ellis and such contemporaries as Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz shared

the Brat Pack moniker with a group of hip, young, and heavily-promoted young actors experiencing their own moments of greatest prominence contemporaneously. Writers who so classified Ellis, even if derisively, highlighted that, at least early in his career, Ellis himself and the aesthetic of his first novels—books that seem trashy and superficial on first glance and appear to simultaneously glamorize and condemn casual sex and recreational drug use—were components of a highly marketable and already-commodified image. In other words, if branding a player in a teen comedy as a Brat Pack actor positions the film for a particular market, then all the more does labeling Ellis similarly result in not just the construction of Bret Easton Ellis as a successful writer, but as a kind of literary brand name with attached cultural associations.

This is not to say that Ellis's public image has remained consistent throughout his career. He has proven remarkably adept at manipulating his public image in a calculated manner to attract attention while deflecting criticism. Ellis has called his novels "conceptual fiction" in that "the author's photograph is part of the package" (Interview). He claims that his author photos are meant to coax readers into drawing connections between the writer and his characters. In the case of the contentious *American Psycho*, he recalls, "I had seen the cover of the book and thought, 'Well, let's just freak people out and have my face be the same as the cover, lighted the same way.' With *Glamorama*, I wanted a very glitzy, fashiony type of photograph on the back of the book" (Interview). Thus he invites readers to consider the book and the author as of a piece, before readers take in the first page. Yet Ellis also claims that his readers "are smart and sophisticated enough to realize that the author is not the narrator of his novels" (Interview). He says he has "never written an autobiographical novel in [his] life," but in the same interview

explains that his fiction still comes “from a very personal place,” even the ultraviolent *American Psycho* (Interview). It’s not an overtly deceptive rhetorical move, but it is an attempt at having it both ways. Ellis evinces knowledge that his work is provocative and frequently gets understood as a reflection of his own experiences, but even as he disavows autobiographical intent, he’s willing to use to his benefit any attention that his provocations may attract. He places faith in his audience to recognize the difference between fiction and reality, but he’s never above blurring that line for the sake of entertainment.

Ellis’s play with the implied (but never confirmed) relationship between his life and his work reaches its apotheosis with the novel *Lunar Park* (2005), a book whose main character is a writer named Bret Easton Ellis who won both public success and disdain following the publication of an infamously violent book. *Lunar Park* lets Ellis interrogate his own status as literary celebrity, and appropriately enough, Random House promoted the novel via a website called “TwoBrets.com” whose split screen invited side-by-side comparison of the life histories of Ellis the writer (single, childless, full-time writer) and Ellis the character (divorced, two kids, creative writing professor, thirty-five pounds heavier than the author). True, a novelist cultivating a fictional alter ego is nothing new (consider Vladimir Nabokov and Vivian Darkbloom, or Philip Roth and Nathan Zuckerman), but *Lunar Park*’s self-reflexive, is-he-or-isn’t-he-really-this-character promotion takes Ellis’s perverse manipulation of his own persona to a new level of cerebral self-imagining. If *Lunar Park* is a portrait of a writer in mid-career, pausing to reconsider how his early work has affected the world and himself, then

*Glamorama* is a portrait of people who lack Ellis's self-awareness and see no need to pause for reflection.

### **The Contemporary Celebrity Novel**

Ellis has claimed that one of the first decisions he made in writing *Glamorama* was that the novel's first and final words would represent the widening of Victor Ward's horizons (Heath 115). The novel begins with "[s]pecks," referring to Victor's dismay at the mottled appearance of a design element in Damien's club, and ends with "mountain," as Victor sits in a lonely Milan hotel bar, staring at a landscape on a mural. Certainly Victor is a more experienced, even more world-weary person by novel's end, but I would argue that a more important trajectory of details in *Glamorama* is that of crowds to loneliness, abundance to emptiness, presence to absence. From opening scenes in full clubs, Victor moves through "an enormous series of white empty spaces" where a photo shoot is to take place, a set of "vast empty spaces" where a hip party will happen, and the "stark and functional" town house where Bobby's faction lives in London (58, 252, 265). A few crowded fashion shows and street scenes interrupt the pattern, but Victor's story ends in that "empty hotel bar" (482), lonely and confused. As anonymity gradually replaces Victor's celebrity, so Ellis also evacuates from the novel any sense of these celebrities' audiences as autonomous agents: ultimately *Glamorama* suggests that celebrity culture itself bears destructive power as long as media conglomerates understand audiences as deindividuated consumerist masses. And just as Ellis makes literal the sense of celebrity as public spectacle by having his characters constantly followed by camera crews, he also literalizes several metaphors common to theoretical

writing about fame: celebrity as psychically disruptive, celebrity as image more than person, and celebrity as collaborative creation.

*Glamorama* belongs to a long line of notable novels about media and celebrity culture, including the already remarked upon *Sister Carrie* and *Ragtime*, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), and dozens of others. Such a list would include works by any number of American fiction's most highly acclaimed writers: Don DeLillo, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and more. What's unusual about *Glamorama* is that it takes its formal cues not from traditional literary fiction or even experimental postmodern satire. Instead, as Ellis has acknowledged, the book is an audacious attempt to bring together the satirical novel and such pop-cultural forms as the blockbuster thriller—and it is this uneasy alliance that makes the novel exciting to some and suspect to others.<sup>6</sup>

Most characters in *Glamorama*, for instance, are not fully developed, and readers get little entry into their psyches, if any at all. They're not so much people as they are plot devices—Victor calls his father exactly that, in fact (36). It's an appropriate comparison to make in an amorphously-structured, plot-heavy maze of a novel<sup>7</sup> that offers no simple narrative closure, matching its consistent alignment of celebrity with lack. Explicating the narrative significance of every red herring and unexplained intrigue, if that were even possible, might turn *Glamorama* into a more cohesive story, but it would also ignore the sophisticated manner in which Ellis has linked form and

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<sup>6</sup>Indeed, Ellis asserts that much of the critical disdain for *American Psycho* comes from the incorporation of aspects of pulp fiction into a literary novel, elements that he says “a lot of the higher echelon of the literary/critical establishment have just refused to accept as being suitable for that kind of book” (Interview).

<sup>7</sup>Heath's description of reading *Glamorama* puts it bluntly: “If you try to piece together every last thread, you will fail” (119).

content. It's a novel about the idea of a pervasive pop culture that uses pop metaphors and forms to drive its own indictment of the potential for pop's destructive superficiality.

For example, "[t]he whole point of *Super Mario Bros.* is that it mirrors life," Victor tells a girlfriend early in the novel while playing the popular video game. "Kill or be killed [...] Time is running out [...] And in the end, baby, you...are...alone" (22). He doesn't know it yet, but Victor's describing his own role in the novel. He will eventually stab Bobby to death in a standoff in an airport men's room (432-36) and end his story alone in a Milan hotel after his bodyguard is killed mysteriously (478, 482). If the novel-as-video-game metaphor doesn't explain things sufficiently, there's also the possibility of interpreting *Glamorama* as a pop espionage novel instead of as a satirical piece of literary fiction. Victor meets with two people in early chapters, his father and F. Fred Palakon, who have developed detailed dossiers on his background, and both give him unlikely missions—should he choose to accept them, of course (80, 115). Ellis endorses this reading: "what happens if you take a Victor Ward—a sort of hip, vacant, air-head slacker—and suddenly drop him into a Robert Ludlum-esque espionage book," he has suggested (qtd. in Blume). One *Salon* reader, objecting to a breathless review of *Glamorama* that suggested Ellis had written the Great American Novel and deserved an instant spot in the Western canon (Keats), replied, "Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare? Oh come on, try Mickey Spillane, Harold Robbins and, in honor of 'Glamorama,' Judith Krantz" (Letters). While I don't share that reader's dismissiveness toward Ellis's work, for my money, the comparisons are fairly apt in that they demonstrate a useful literary lineage for this book.

Popular genre novels rarely age well, so a piece of genre fiction so invested in pop culture's fast-moving, superficial present finds itself in an even more evanescent, even disposable position. Certainly *Glamorama* is a vivid snapshot of one subculture in one moment in time, and if that time has passed and left behind a depiction of a culture that looks hugely irrelevant barely ten years later, then it only emphasizes 1990s American celebrity's lack of durability alongside all of the novel's other absences. Ayers's review claims that the book "warrants critical attention not as an original or successful novel, but rather as a text that typifies a momentary cultural ethos. [...] In ten years *Glamorama* will lie buried under the glaciers of consumer memory." I cannot agree that only one decade has rendered this novel irrelevant or unnecessary, but Ellis himself acknowledges that loads of the pop references in *Glamorama*—particularly references to Victor's hundreds of famous friends—may have a short shelf life: "I'm hoping that if the book is around and all these people are forgotten and we're all dead," he says of the catalogs of celebrity names, "then the names will function as just that—just clumps of names" (qtd. in Blume).<sup>8</sup>

### **The Politics of Celebrity (or a Lack Thereof)**

But *Glamorama*'s purpose does not lie in convincing its readers that the whiz-bang thrills of the bestselling potboiler represent a better site for celebrity depiction than the high literary novel. Instead, *Glamorama* seeks to demonstrate, through its often discomfiting juxtaposition of fashion and terrorism, that the high-profile American celebrity culture of the affluent 1990s seeks to provoke a constant state of anxiety and

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<sup>8</sup>Bilton makes a similar claim for Ellis's earlier work: as *Less Than Zero* ages, he argues, it "has also become increasingly abstract. If you don't recognize the logo or the label, then the signs no longer signify anything (beyond being badges of pure consumerism) floating free across the page. With each passing year, the work becomes more weightless, intangible, evacuated of meaning" (201).

inferiority in the mind of the consumer akin to that created by political terrorism. Fashion magazines, red carpet interviews, and televised award shows all remind their readers and viewers that a wealthier, more famous, and more attractive class of the famous and fabulous exists and that their lofty status is fundamentally unattainable to the average consumer. Ellis sees this practice of the American pop-culture industry as akin (though not identical) to terrorism: “The basic connection I saw,” he asserts, “was insecurity. The fashion world survives by foisting a sense of insecurity upon the public [...] a desire for something unattainable. For terrorists, the goal is not really the bombing of the embassy or the airliner; it’s to make you feel unsafe, to give you a sense of insecurity about your world” (qtd. in Blume). Or as Jamie Fields describes her experience of her own fame to Victor, “I was responsible for the increased suicide rate among...teenage girls and young women who realized they would never look like me....I was told this in editorials...angry letters from overweight mothers...essays by women in NOW....I was told I was destroying lives...but it didn’t touch me because no one we knew was real” (311; ellipses in original). As painful as all of this is to Jamie, Ellis doesn’t allow the reader sympathy for her since she recalls the effects of her stardom while deeply involved with Bobby’s faction. She’s become a pawn in service to his violence, much as she had been a mere tool by which magazine editors and fashion designers profited.

Highly politicized actions that endanger the lives of innocents, Ellis acknowledges, are not easily comparable to the vague sense of social inferiority engendered by the fashion industry, yet *Glamorama* literalizes the comparison in order to critique the superficiality and lack of social commitment within the celebrity culture of its



day. Ultimately, *Glamorama* is unique among American novels about conspicuous consumption in its alignment of celebrity not with economic abundance—monetary wealth, expansive real estate holdings, or large spheres of cultural influence—but with scarcity. While many American novels with notably affluent characters catalog the possessions of the rich in loving detail, from Jay Gatsby's rainbow of shirts in Fitzgerald to the size and décor of Sherman McCoy's expensive apartment in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and beyond, Ellis's protagonist here is professionally unfulfilled, lonely, and short on cash. Victor Ward exemplifies Ellis's perception of 1990s American celebrity culture as defined by an absence of meaningful political commitment; an absence of stable individual identity; and even an absence of real consequences for negative actions, represented by the novel's profound lack of character development.

As such, I would argue that *Glamorama* is not fundamentally a novel about terrorism, a claim that neither renders the book entirely apolitical nor denies the destructiveness of politically motivated terror. Put another way, celebrity in Ellis's novel does have political meaning in the broadest sense of the word—fame itself and the celebrity characters' own images wield a kind of psychic power over consumers—but this book is not about terrorism's geopolitical ramifications. Recall Alberoni's definition of celebrity as a kind of notoriety that lacks any accompanying institutionalized political power: for him, celebrity itself is defined by a *lack* of ability to alter the material lives of the public in visible ways, in contrast to the real power wielded by political or military leaders. I acknowledge that a novel that treats terrorism metaphorically and occasionally as an elaborate simulacrum is an unnerving proposition for many readers, especially post-

9/11; Angela Woods, however, has argued that Ellis denounces terrorism precisely through *Glamorama*'s excessively gruesome narration of its corporeal effects.<sup>9</sup> And while William Stephenson has enumerated the ways in which Ellis suggests that Bobby's terrorist group "is connected to Libya and the Palestinian liberation movement" (283), nothing about these scattered textual clues suggests that Ellis—or more to the point, that Victor—feels any particular political sympathy at all. Ellis's characters namedrop all the right places, including Beirut and Dublin, to imply that Bobby Hughes's unnamed faction of model-terrorists are involved in multiple geopolitical hot spots. Not only are the varying terms of these conflicts never addressed, however, no real distinction is ever made between the ideologies at play either, suggesting that for Bobby and his associates, the troubles in Northern Ireland are basically the same thing as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>10</sup> Both involve spectacle and media coverage that inevitably focus on the body, phenomena with which these model-terrorists are familiar, thanks to both of their lines of work. Victor's narration following a bombing of the Paris Metro displays the faction's ideological cluelessness while explaining how the models manage to elude detection: "The blast will be blamed on an Algerian guerrilla or a Muslim fundamentalist," he explains, "or maybe the faction of an Islamic group or a splinter group of handsome Basque separatists, but all of this is dependent on the spin the head of France's counterespionage service gives the event" (319). For Victor, it's all the same, since none of the above directly affects his fame in an adverse manner.

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<sup>9</sup>See also Houen and Peterson for retrospective readings of *Glamorama* through a post-9/11 lens.

<sup>10</sup>See also Michaels for more on the implications of *Glamorama*'s characters' lack of ideological interest.

Ellis not only condemns this willful ignorance of all that does not glitter, he pathologizes it.<sup>11</sup> The difficulty in interpreting *Glamorama* lies not in its labyrinthine plot or its numerous references to celebrities who aren't still household names (indeed, if some ever were). Victor Ward is a classic unreliable narrator, and while he is naturally able to distinguish between reality and fiction as far as they relate directly to him and his career—he can spot an altered photograph of himself a mile away—the frequent references to camera crews following him all over Europe, awareness of scripts and script changes, and interactions with a director and cinematographer force readers to actively decide how much trust to place in Victor's own narration. If everything that happens in *Glamorama* is part of an elaborate, multi-layered screenplay, then why is Victor surprised and genuinely frightened by the actions of Bobby's terrorist faction? And if no one is making a movie and Victor knows it, then who are these folks with Steadicams who request retakes of specific conversations? While Ellis may not tell readers to question Victor's sanity outright, he suggests a narrator with a fractured psyche. As Felix, the mysterious camera crew's alleged cinematographer, tells Victor, another model has told him that Victor is “under extreme emotional pressure, possibly due to a major drug habit [...] He also says you tend to hallucinate frequently and that nothing coming out of your mouth is to be believed [...] He also said he thinks that you're quite possibly an insane individual and also—however improbably the director and I thought this sounded—rather dangerous” (351).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>See Woods and Blazer for psychoanalytical readings of *Glamorama* that diagnose Victor with clinical mental disorders: the former considers Victor as schizophrenic, the latter Victor as narcissist. Additionally, Blazer reads the film crews that follow Victor as “hallucinatory” and the terrorist acts as “delusion[s]” (180, 181).

<sup>12</sup>If this all starts to sound familiar—a Bret Easton Ellis protagonist who is a hypermasculine, sexually promiscuous jetsetting New Yorker and who carries out acts of lurid violence that many read as potentially

When readers first meet Victor in New York well before his involvement with Bobby's faction, he comes across as too foolish to be dangerous. He's charismatic in his sociability but repellent in his naïveté. His ATM password is "coolguy" (17), and he insists that he simply cannot, could not, will not ever be called a racist because he owns a Malcolm X cap autographed by Spike Lee (67). He half-jokes about the need to unionize male models (85) but cannot otherwise muster interest in social issues that affect people other than himself or his immediate circle. After another employee of the nightclub Victor is helping open reminds him, "I think people are wondering why we don't have a whatchamacallit [...] Oh yeah, a *cause*!", advocacy on behalf of global warming, preservation of the Amazon rainforest, and research into both AIDS and breast cancer all get dismissed as "passé" (9). When an MTV interviewer asks Victor what gets him angry, "along the lines of the war in Bosnia or the AIDS epidemic or domestic terrorism," he can only reply meekly and apparently unironically, "Sloppy Rollerbladers?...The words 'dot com'?" (143; ellipsis in original). He's as savvy a consumer of pop culture as any character in American fiction—as demonstrated by his uncanny ability to match pop songs not only to their artists, but also their albums, record labels, and even track times in minutes and seconds (91)—but rarely does Victor mention a piece of pop cultural production that is any less shallow than he is. One notable exception (and also the only piece of truly politically engaged or oppositional music mentioned in a novel that obsessively describes its own soundtrack) is the Clash album

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imaginary due to unreliable narration—the numerous similarities between Victor and *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman are intentional. Bateman even has a few cameos in *Glamorama*, just as Victor debuted in Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). Ellis suggested in *American Psycho* that the super-competitive field of high finance bred a particularly dangerous (and metaphorically homicidal) kind of negative cultural influence in the Reagan Eighties; *Glamorama* can then be read as a indictment of the American celebrity industry's similar cultural reach (and danger) in the later novel's own time.

*Sandinista!*, a copy of which Victor reveals is in his apartment—but it’s unopened, of course, next to “a check to Save the Rainforest returned because of insufficient funds” (184). Victor’s superficiality reaches its logical extreme in an interview with a reporter from *Details*: “What’s wrong with looking good?” Victor asks defensively, to which the reporter counters, “Well, what if it’s at the expense of something else?” Victor’s confused response: “What’s...something else?” (57; ellipsis in original).

This shallowness makes Victor equally as susceptible to Bobby’s manipulation as did Jamie’s insecurity, exacerbated by his particular lack of interest in politics of any sort. Ellis refuses, however, to allow Victor to be seen as a singularly and anomalously shallow character.<sup>13</sup> He depicts in *Glamorama* a world that has already mixed the unimportant and the political in potentially destructive ways, especially as celebrity culture begins to encroach upon (and sometimes replace) the territory of politics and its reportage. Journalists and camera crews are nearly everywhere Victor goes, but rarely are they focused on anything but the superficial. One reporter, we learn, is “doing an article on very good-looking busboys for *Time*,” which one of Bobby’s model-terrorists has read with interest, we will learn much later (31, 316). Meanwhile, the maitre d’ at a popular New York restaurant gets interviewed for *Meet the Press* (96), and the *Details* reporter who so confounded Victor also will “interview President Omar Bongo of Gabon and his cute nephew” (54). A *Playboy* centerfold lists among her favorite things “visiting

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<sup>13</sup>Ellis introduces his interest in the lack of fruitful advocacy among the young and privileged in a 1985 *Rolling Stone* essay about Bennington College’s political atmosphere, published after the success of *Less Than Zero*. Students at even the most traditionally politically active campuses, Ellis reports, “agree that student activism has taken on a strange, pervasive party atmosphere. A keg in the name of nuclear disarmament or a keg in the name of antiapartheid or a keg for the starving masses of Ethiopia or for the prochoice movement” (“Down and Out” 80). Bennington is the model for the fictional Camden College, which numerous Ellis characters, including Victor Ward and Jamie Fields, attended in the early 1980s (115), so Victor can certainly be read as emblematic of a negative tendency that Ellis sees throughout his own class and generation.

the Pentagon's national command center" (472). A follower of Bobby's does an MTV *House of Style* interview on "what country has the sexiest soldiers" (396). Most exaggeratedly, Damien describes an audioanimatronic model, the "virtual-reality Christy [Turlington] at Fashion Café," who "quotes Somerset Maugham and discusses Salvadorian politics as well as her Kellogg cereal contract" (49). Admittedly, these are hyperbolic examples, but Ellis's satirical intent comes through loud and clear: to recognize these moments as absurd is to recognize and reject a culture that has already allowed (and some would say welcomed) the television coverage of wars, elections, and yes, terrorism often to be uncomfortably similar in style and tone to coverage of tabloid news topics. Ellis's characters see no such cognitive dissonance in a major newsmagazine covering such unworthy topics and as a result, we react negatively to their ignorance. But Ellis also implicates any reader capable of recognizing ways in which those exaggerated examples don't deviate all that far from the status quo.

Even worse, the end of the novel finds Victor's outlook on the complexities of life not markedly changed, even following multiple scenes in which Victor witnesses horrific carnage in which he has been implicated, including the violent death of his girlfriend Chloe Byrnes. Yes, readers do meet a seemingly-transformed Victor, returned from New York to Europe and ready to give up modeling for law school. "No more drinking binges, I've cut down on partying, law school's great, I'm in a long term relationship [...] I've stopped seriously deluding myself and I'm rereading Dostoyevsky," he reports (446). But to whom or what does he attribute his sobriety and newly legitimate success? "I owe it all to you, man," he tells his personal trainer (446), implying that little has really changed, which the remainder of the novel confirms. He still disparages his new

girlfriend's support of PETA (448). He still does photo shoots, albeit this time for *George*, the short-lived magazine that really did treat politics with the light, superficial touch of a celebrity tabloid. And he still has an agent who discourages work in independent film as unprofitable slumming while calling the addition of a dead girlfriend to his celebrity narrative "an inspired touch [that] is going to fade in approximately a week" (455). Most notably, he cannot entirely escape his newly violent past. Back in his new apartment, he kills an intruder, calls an unnamed associate, and identifies himself nervously, "It's DAN" (459).

### **The Duality of the Celebrity Image**

There's the punchline. That self-identification confirms what several other scenes imply:<sup>14</sup> embarrassed by his son's lifestyle and superficiality and concerned at its ill effects on a presidential campaign, Victor's father has had Victor replaced with a double who also happens to be more studious, polite, and generally functional than Victor himself ever was. When the *George* photographer tries to get the new-and-improved Victor to relax by telling him, "Hey, don't worry—it's hard to be yourself" (451), he means it literally. Ellis lets Victor Ward be replaced mid-novel by a new Victor Ward (who chooses to keep his birth name of Victor Johnson, no less) as if he's simply replacing one actor with another halfway through production of a film—an apt comparison for a novel whose narration occasionally identifies characters not by name but as "the actor playing" said character. In introducing Victor's double, Ellis acknowledges something that nearly all recent theoretical writing about celebrity takes as

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<sup>14</sup>Two of Victor's attempts at calling his sister from Milan go awry: in neither case does his sister believe she's speaking to Victor, and in the latter, another voice, after identifying himself as Victor Johnson, requests Victor stop calling (469, 476).

a first principle and that Victor seemingly will never grasp: celebrities are images just as much as they are people.

That's why celebrities can have cultural and economic impact even after the deaths (or in *Glamorama*, replacements) of the human beings behind the images: because, with the transformation from private to public figure that all celebrities undergo, the name, image, and work of a star become widely disseminated and, crucially, widely discussed. The celebrity remains a person but also becomes a discursive idea. As early as 1957, the title of one chapter of Edgar Morin's groundbreaking work *The Stars*, translated as "The Star and the Actor," implies a separation between the image and the person. In a particularly media-saturated age like the 1990s, in which movie stars' public personae are no longer closely guarded by studios, paparazzi shots of celebrities can sell for thousands of dollars, and the rare famous figure who shuns publicity seems the exception and not the rule, the celebrity image has power that the celebrity himself or herself often lacks the agency to control. Ellis literalizes this idea by having Bobby's faction digitally alter photographs of Victor and distinguish between his genuine and his faked photos via filenames helpfully coded *Victor* and "*Victor*" (357-58).

Celebrity itself, then, gets narrativized as celebrities and their images become separate entities, defined not just through an individual star's manipulation and marketing of his or her own persona but also through corporate hype, fan discourse, and publicity—or in this novel, through the nefarious actions of some shady characters. Victor is hardly the only character in *Glamorama*, after all, who leads a double life as both person and projection—the novel includes several double agents, a deathbed confession of mistaken identity (426), and the occasional revelation that major characters might actually be long



deceased (425). By not only separating a celebrity into a person and an image—a signifier and a sign, really—but also depicting genuine and false images of that person that are at odds with each other, Ellis highlights the constructedness of these images (and even the arbitrariness of their potential meanings, as Victor admits how interchangeable he is with his peers, other equally attractive models).

Further exaggeration of the function of the celebrity signifier exists in the catalogs of celebrity names—nearly all real—that Victor lists obsessively in his narration. Building the perfect dinner seating arrangement for Damien’s opening in the novel’s initial chapters requires compulsive attention to lists of RSVPs and regrets and is accompanied by commentary about which stars’ presence is most desirable in order to make Damien’s club an enviable destination. This motif continues in the Europe-set chapters as Victor keeps recording, society-page-style, what famous folks are present at each opulent party, fashion show, or unexplained bombing. Most of the celebrities mentioned are fairly well-known actors, models, and musicians, and a majority of those who are not so well-known are agents, movie producers, and trendy artists or designers, emphasizing the insularity of the circles in which Victor runs. Occasionally, though, Ellis throws a wrench into things by introducing an unexpected famous figure or even a fictional character into a list—a *Sex and the City* or *All My Children* character, or for that matter, Huckleberry Finn (68, 76, 185). Branch Davidian leader David Koresh (deceased by the time of publication) appears at a restaurant, “eating cake with Peter Gabriel” (96). And Senator Claiborne Pell shows up, most incongruously of all, to audition to DJ at Damien’s new club (106). The sheer number of appearances of this type in *Glamorama* works in contrast to the few brief cameos of familiar stars in *The Moviegoer* or *The*

*Hours*. In those cases, the serendipity and smallness of the incidents make them plausible and render them both realistic and sublime, while the convergence of dozens of celebrities in one nightclub in *Glamorama* is so clearly an invention that the effect is not heightened reality, but heightened fictionality and absurdity.

Of course, Victor has genuine relationships with none of these celebrities whose names he uses as proof of cultural insider status. Ellis even lets Victor have actual brief exchanges with real actors Skeet Ulrich and Joaquin Phoenix (135-136, 259), but in neither case does Victor's conversational partner seem entirely sure to whom he's speaking—or for that matter, why. This uncertainty stems in part from Victor's admitted resemblance to any number of other equally successful, equally attractive and hence interchangeable models. At a photo shoot that involves several other male models, he observes, "All the guys basically look the same" (58). Later, in attempting to defend his line of work to his skeptical father, he acknowledges, "I'm replaceable [...] There are a thousand guys who've got pouty lips and nice symmetry" (79). And throughout the novel, characters insist they saw Victor recently in locations where Victor insists he simply never was and refer to (digitally manipulated) photographs of Victor in settings he never experienced. Since Victor is by nature eminently replaceable, Ellis asks, why should readers attribute undue importance to the opinion, image, or lifestyle of any similar real-life celebrity so talentless and vacuous?

Furthermore, a key flashback scene near the novel's end clarifies that Victor has not fallen into this lifestyle and worldview by chance; rather, he has chosen it with full understanding of its values and ideology. Victor recalls a lazy California pool party back when he "was just becoming famous and my whole relationship to the world was about to

change" (480). The emptiness, ennui, and insularity of the event strike him as he realizes that he's entering an industry subculture in which "people were discarded because they were too old or too fat or too poor [...] they weren't remotely famous [...] we lived in a world where beauty was considered an accomplishment" (480-481). However, he consciously accepts these surroundings. "I would never dream of leaving any of this," he says, continuing, "I turned away and made a promise to myself: to be harder, to not care, to be cool" (481). Ellis's placement of this penultimate chapter of the novel, sandwiched between two scenes in which Victor is trapped in Milan, alone and frightened, implies causality. Because Victor has embraced this lifestyle, he must accept what it requires, even if that means dealing with the murderous Bobby Hughes.

### **A Call to Audience Action**

I would agree, then, that *Glamorama* demonstrates "how a commitment to dispassionate superficiality" leads to a place where "no alternative political subjectivity within or beyond it can be envisaged" (Woods). Ellis's rather moralistic point, then, is that conviction is not just unavoidable but desirable; perhaps frustratingly, though, he refuses to advocate for any particular conviction as preferable to any other, as long as it is primarily constructive. Emptiness remains a central image: the novel critiques Victor's complete lack of interest in anything outside his own career and milieu, but it ultimately suggests no specific useful alternative. Ellis does not ask readers to side with Bobby's terrorist activity, but any of the charity causes that Victor dismisses as passé seem to be fine by Ellis, and equally so. The problem with these characters is that they make no commitments at all to anything outside of themselves. A shadowy character referred to only as "Mr. Leisure" gets mentioned only three times in the novel (309, 454, 468), but

others utter his name reverently, implying that Leisure holds the key to unlocking the book's tangled web of espionage and image manipulation. The name implies "leisure class," and if this mysterious man whose name is no coincidence has set the book's action in motion, then perhaps we can blame all of the novel's violence, betrayal, and self-centeredness on the characters' conspicuous consumption. Victor's woes, then, stem from a conscious preference for emptiness over substance, made clear through his commitment to superficiality in all its forms.

By delivering to readers a frustratingly complex plot that condemns shallowness even as it depicts it, Ellis forces readers to abandon superficiality, both in consuming this novel and in living in a surface-centered, celebrity-saturated media landscape. With *Glamorama*'s satirical purpose laid bare, the imperative then falls onto readers—that is, Ellis's audience and, presumably, some of the same people who might buy magazines with Victor Ward's image on their covers—to resist perpetuating star images that are ultimately devoid of meaning. Fame becomes a wholly negative force in Ellis's novel largely because no audiences are present within the book to counter the potentially tyrannical power of media machinery. When active audiences make their presence known, however—as they have more power than ever to do, living in an age where the triumph of buzz over hype means that collective action on the part of consumers can strike a blow against the action of corporations—they can assert considerable strength via collaboration in the construction (or destruction) of celebrity images.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESISTING THE DEVOURING NEON:

#### AUDIENCE AS CROWD, CROWD AS THREAT IN DON DELILLO

Whereas Ellis makes audiences basically invisible in order to argue that they are largely powerless in contemporary celebrity culture, DeLillo makes audiences highly visible but powerful only when in the form of crowds. Individual crowd members hardly exist apart from the mass, and for celebrity artists who seek to interact meaningfully with real readers or listeners, this is a problem. Bucky Wunderlick, the reclusive rock star who narrates Don DeLillo's third novel *Great Jones Street* (1973), experiences this problem via a sense of being trapped by his own fame. Bucky has abandoned with no warning a lucrative tour as the book begins, incurring the wrath of his manager and confusing his throngs of young fans. He withdraws to a small New York City apartment, where he receives a series of visitors who all place demands on him. His associates try to get him back on tour, his girlfriend Opel tries to keep him content, and a shadowy cabal of back-to-nature radicals called the Happy Valley Farm Commune urges him to cooperate with their mission to "return the idea of privacy to American life" (16) as he holds a mysterious package for them.<sup>15</sup> His upstairs neighbor, Ed Fenig, is a hack writer who is all words and no feeling, while his downstairs neighbor, Micklewhite, is loud but aphasic, all feeling but no words. This building becomes the backdrop for Bucky's

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<sup>15</sup>Where not otherwise noted, parenthetical citations in this chapter refer to *Great Jones Street* and *Mao II* as contextually appropriate.

recovery from the hysteria of the limelight. He embodies the archetype of the celebrity whose notoriety leads him to paranoia and a retreat from the public eye.

During his seclusion he must decide what to do with a set of unreleased recordings known only as “the mountain tapes,” music that he hopes will achieve maximum expressive power through minimalist lyrical material. In order to be successful, the solution he seeks must do several things: it must let him make and distribute genuinely creative work that serves as more than just a consumer product; connect with his large audience in a positive and intimate manner; stave off his suicidal impulses; and rediscover himself as a whole person as opposed to being only a rock idol. It’s a tall order for a musician whose most famous lyrical insight is the anthemic but meaningless “Pee-pee-maw-maw.”

Though *Great Jones Street* remains one of DeLillo’s least remarked-upon works, it synthesizes several key DeLillo themes: the redemptive power of art, the playfulness and slipperiness of language, the destructive potential of mass media, and the attempt to resist the commodification of seemingly everything in the age of American late capitalism. Criticism of *Great Jones Street* thus far focuses mostly on Bucky either as an artist struggling to introduce a language of resistance into the marketplace or as a powerless cog in a vast media machine. These readings locate power either in Bucky as a creator of art, in the former, or in the corporate conglomerates that mediate that art, in the latter. I propose, however, that in reading this novel, a focus on audience serves as a particularly fruitful way to bring together DeLillo’s interests in commerce, language, and art. Like any other ostensibly famous figure, Bucky requires a wide audience to devote considerable interest, support, and disposable income to his affairs if he is to remain

viable as both celebrity and artist. As such, Bucky's shifting attitude toward his audience is just as important to this novel as his shifting attitudes toward his music and toward the marketplace. While DeLillo first locates Bucky's problems squarely in his vexed relationship with the crowds at his concerts, by book's end Bucky realizes that even if his audiences' enthusiasm has caused his recent troubles, his hope for redemption lies in the possibility of a more intimate and authentic connection with those same listeners.

### **The Problems: Audiences As Crowds; Commodification; Violence**

*Great Jones Street* opens with DeLillo's most focused description of the modern media age's brand of technologically-mediated pop celebrity. "Fame requires every kind of excess," the novel begins. "I mean true fame, a devouring neon, not the somber renown of waning statesmen or chinless kings" (1). DeLillo contrasts Bucky's fame with premodern prominence, emphasizing that this musician, unlike the statesman or king, has no power to alter the lives of citizens in material ways, keeping him consistent with Alberoni's definition of stardom. He continues by linking Bucky's fame to the hysteria of the public sphere: "Even if half-mad he is absorbed into the public's total madness; even if fully rational, a bureaucrat in hell, a secret genius of survival, he is sure to be destroyed by the public's contempt for survivors" (1). This public seeks not to preserve its idols, but to demolish them. The description ends with a brief trip through the seamy side of fame: "Fame, this special kind, feeds itself on outrage, on what the counselors of lesser men would consider bad publicity—hysteria in limousines, knife fights in the audience, bizarre litigation, treachery, pandemonium and drugs. Perhaps the only natural law attaching to true fame is that the famous man is compelled, eventually, to commit suicide" (1). Stereotypical or not, the classic associations of rock and roll with rebellion,

revolt, and physical threat are all there from the novel's first page. DeLillo elaborates on the singularly destructive potential energy inscribed within Bucky's art as he describes Bucky's audience.

DeLillo characterizes Bucky's fame as a negative force, one that drives otherwise reasonable people to either resist or be subsumed into crowds defined by the impulse to destroy. No wonder this fame is "devouring:" as described on the first page, it leads people to violence, addiction, legal trouble, and "eventually"—inevitably, even—to death. DeLillo has remarked of Bucky and the time period in which this novel is set and was published, "[H]e seems to be at a crossroad between murder and suicide. For me, that defines the period between 1965 and 1975, say, and I thought it was best exemplified in a rock-music star" (*Conversations* 65). DeLillo depicts this sense that a chaotic hysteria may coalesce into violence at any moment via descriptions of crowd reactions at Bucky's concerts. On his most recent tour, Bucky narrates, "There was less sense of simple visceral abandon at our concerts during these last weeks. Few cases of arson and vandalism. Fewer still of rape. No smoke bombs or threats of worse explosives" (2). The desires of the crowd have become so intense, so visceral, that the decrease in violence strikes Bucky as an anomaly. When Bucky leaves the tour, things get ugly again, as the crowd has "turned against the structure [the Astrodome] itself" during the band's first show without Bucky (3).

But these extreme reactions are hardly unusual, and Bucky can hardly stand apart from them. In another passage, DeLillo has Bucky recall an earlier show, occurring while "[t]he country's blood was up, this or that atrocity, home or abroad, and even before we hit the stage the whole place was shaking. We were the one group that people



depended on to validate their emotions and this was to be a night of above-average fury” (14). Bucky’s role for this crowd is both clearly defined and alarmingly diffuse. His audience expects him to respond to their emotions by reflecting them back to the crowd, but he doesn’t just do their bidding. He describes teasing the audience at first, “challeng[ing] the authenticity of the crowd’s passion and wrath, dipping our bodies in coquettish blue light” before attacking them with a quasi-physical musical assault, narrated with explicitly violent language (14). “Then we caved their heads with about twenty thousand watts of frozen sound,” the narration continues. “The pressure of their response was immense, blasting in with the force of a natural disaster, and it became even greater, more physically menacing, as they pressed in around the stage” (14-15).<sup>16</sup> The threat to Bucky’s safety is implied, but there’s still a safe distance between the crowd and the musicians—no one makes it onto the stage who isn’t supposed to be there, emphasizing the invisible wall that remains in place and separates artist from audience.

Notably, DeLillo emphasizes that Bucky’s audience does not consist of rebels without a cause: as Keesey describes their ambiguous motivation, their emotions “may be authentic” (50). Even if they don’t articulate a single cause for their rage, in the turbulent times in which this novel is set, they can take their pick. As far as we can tell from that passage, the crowd’s “above-average fury” could well be justified righteous anger, and

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<sup>16</sup>It’s also worth pointing out that rock fan discourse has for years trafficked in violent metaphor, generally understood to be so over-the-top that the possibility of reading literally phraseology like the “face-melting” guitar solo or “earth-shaking” drumbeat is laughable. I see Bucky’s narration doing the same thing here—his listeners may well have ripped seats out of the ground at the Astrodome as an expression of real rage, but these references to, say, “bashing in the heads” of listeners are not to be taken at face value. For other examples, see especially the description of Bucky’s music as “evil meat” offered to a grotesque crowd, with “every head melting in the warp of our sound” (138-139).

the only destruction clearly depicted is a torn shirt.<sup>17</sup> Of course, “all hell” did break loose, we’re told—and Bucky owns up to a big lapse of memory, so the considerable ambiguity in the passage may be concealing the concertgoers’ unseemly behavior. Either way, Bucky understands his own music and his performance of it as metaphorically violent acts. He explains the purpose of the sheer noise at his concerts in terms of how volume directly affects the audience: “We mash their skulls with a whole lot of watts. Electricity, right. It’s a natural force. [...] We process nature, which I personally regard as a hideous screeching bitch of a thing, being a city boy myself” (103-104). Bucky sees himself, then, as a conduit for the energy that already exists within his audience. His work still has the force of violence, but at least in the form he describes, that force is largely corralled into something basically innocuous and Bucky is definitely not the cause of any violence.

In every case in which DeLillo describes the audience at Bucky’s concerts, the crowd is depicted as a mass. To describe these scenes in cinematic terms, they’re long shots only; never do readers find anything resembling a close-up on an individual listener or a moment of dialogue or reaction attributed to a single audience member. And even though the bulk of the novel consists of a revolving door of visitors to Bucky’s apartment, and even though they tend to arrive one by one, these private conversations never involve Bucky interacting with a member of his audience, someone who has ever bought a record of his or who evinces an appreciation for his work as something other than a consumer product. As a result, the sense that Bucky cannot relate to his audience

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<sup>17</sup>Marshall argues that since pop music’s emphasis on novelty and quick innovation means the music “represents change itself,” a celebrity rock singer can serve as “the public representation of change,” even broad social change (196). However, as Bucky demonstrates here, this argument doesn’t mean audiences conceptualize the music in that way, as the rock celebrity’s “appeal [...] is not to the rational but to the emotive and the passionate” (Marshall 197).

in an emotionally immediate way pervades *Great Jones Street*. The reverse of that statement is true also, of course: no audience member is ever conceptualized in the book as anything but a member of a consuming crowd.

As much as Bucky's live appearances respond to and perpetuate an atmosphere of threat of which the performer has every reason to be wary, his sudden retreat cannot put any easy end to the hysteria of his own fame. Simply put, since an audience has helped create his fame, Bucky can never own complete control over that fame. Celebrity is a collaborative creation, managed and perpetuated by the famous person, the audience, and any number of intermediaries involved in production and publicity. For Bucky's fans, the musician is not just an artist and not just a person, but also a discursive idea.<sup>18</sup> As Bucky tells an interviewer, "Everybody under contract has his or her facsimile. [...] You've been conducting an interview with his facsimile" (24). Bucky's reporter-baiting literalizes basic celebrity theory there as the celebrity reminds the journalist that he will gain access only to the elements of the star persona that the celebrity wishes to make available to the public. Just as reproduction of a celebrity's work makes it possible for millions to own copies of an artist's output, this conflation of person and personality only intensifies. Later in the novel, Bucky hears his own record playing in the background during a telephone call with his manager and notes, "I heard my own voice, revolving at thirty-three and a third" (166). Missing from that description of his "own voice" turning on a record player is the actual piece of vinyl. In other words, people aren't just buying a Bucky record—they're buying (and by extension, using and perhaps abusing) a piece of Bucky himself.

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<sup>18</sup>For more on the semiotics of stardom—famous people as both signifiers and signs—see Dyer 87-159.

Bucky's management perpetuates this sense that the performer himself is a commodity. When readers first meet Bucky's manager Globke, he's wearing polyvinyl pants and fishing a dime out of a toilet bowl (6). From the start DeLillo defines Globke in terms of artificiality—his synthetic clothing—and an all-consuming impulse toward monetary profit. No wonder, then, that Bucky has trouble getting genuine or non-commercial art into the marketplace, if it has to go through Globke first. His manager takes credit for his star artist's success, claiming that he “took [Bucky] out of the rain when he was a scrawny kid and made him what he is today, an even scrawnier kid” (10-11). Yet readers never get a sense that Globke's motivation is Bucky's wellbeing or his musical talent or message. Instead, the raw power of the corporate machine behind Globke drives the manager's success, and hence Bucky's as well: “Globke was accustomed to being propelled, ballistically, to and from distant points of commerce,” the narration reads, in a sentence whose passivity—who or what is propelling him, precisely?—implies that the corporate machine itself has the agency to make things happen on its own (11). Later Globke attributes the messages he's bringing to Bucky not to record execs, but to “[t]he seventh floor,” who wants Bucky to sign some paperwork, and “[t]he sixth floor,” who invests Bucky's earnings (44). His label's monolith of a building makes these demands, then, not the people on these floors or the company headquartered there. Globke just does the legwork.

That legwork includes managing Bucky's publicity, and more often than not, manufacturing his publicity with little regard to its factuality. When Globke asks Bucky how he plans to respond to rumors regarding Bucky's whereabouts, Bucky replies that Globke can make up whatever he likes. “Whatever you write will be true,” he explains.

“I’ll confirm every word” (21).<sup>19</sup> In these conversations Bucky evinces awareness of the inner workings of fame: he’s aware that his own image comes from discourse and does not—cannot—originate in himself alone. Though always aware that his fame comes out of collaboration, enabling some kind of give-and-take with an audience, Bucky comes to realize by novel’s end that he can’t maintain sole control over his fame or his disappearance, since he never had sole ownership of his celebrity to begin with.

Aside from the descriptions of concert-set hysteria in Bucky’s narration, readers’ only other access to the real content of Bucky’s work does not come directly from the artist but is mediated through excerpts from press kits. We first read Bucky’s lyrics and interview transcripts in a package called the “Superslick Mind Contracting Media Kit: The Bucky Wunderlick Story told in news items, lyrics and dysfunctional interviews” (95). Interspersed among the reprinted lyrics from Bucky’s first few records are an interview that Bucky apparently declares over as it has barely started, a gushy profile from a *Tiger Beat*-esque teen fan magazine (published by “Star System Inc.”) and a generation-gap-revealing seminar with representatives from something called “the Issues Committee of the Permanent Symposium for the Restoration of Democratic Options” (102, 114-117). This miscellany bears a title that deviates crucially from the counterculture lingo of the day: it’s not mind-expanding, but mind-contracting. The media kit’s twofold purpose, then, is to condense the star’s persona into one easily-marketable image, and to condense (that is, to close) the reader’s mind—in effect, to

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<sup>19</sup>In *The Stars*, Edgar Morin explains that in the fan discourse associated with celebrity culture, falsehood is as good as truth anyway, as both advance the end of publicity. Though he writes of the fan discourse of studio-era Hollywood, his claims can apply just as easily to Bucky: star-making machinery, Morin asserts, “introduces into its stars’ real adventures whatever amount of fiction it can get away with, entirely fabricating certain rumors of felicity or impending divorce according to its box-office requirements” (52). He refers specifically to actors’ love lives, but tales of Bucky’s whereabouts are equally pseudo-fictional.

exert mastery over the reader's ability to interpret this musician and his music. And since the intended audience of a press kit is a media outlet who will then pass on some of this info in the context of another interview or maybe a record review, the reader of the kit—and hence the reader of the novel too—gets implicated in this oversimplification of Bucky—the conflation of Bucky the person and Bucky the rock star. Just as Bucky's audiences get depicted as incapable of individuated action apart from the crowd, the audience of the novel receives a press kit heavily calculated to direct reader perception of this artist.<sup>20</sup>

If the press kit represents the power of marketing commercial art as a consumer product, Bucky's disillusionment with the trappings of rock stardom reveals his discomfort with creating work solely for the mass market. The figure in *Great Jones Street* most attuned to the vicissitudes of the market is not Globke, but Ed Fenig, the hack writer who lives upstairs from Bucky. Fenig spouts off to Bucky a litany of genres and forms in which he's published—poetry, novels, mysteries, sci-fi, soap operas, one-act plays, pornography—but acknowledges that he'll never be famous (19). In his own way, Fenig is successful, but like Bucky, DeLillo has granted him little sense of an audience made up of individuals. He knows he has a market, but he has no concept of his readers. Fenig's description of the writer's market could well apply to Globke's perception of the music market: "The market is a strange thing, almost a living organism. It changes, it palpitates, it grows, it excretes. It sucks things in and then spews them up. It's a living

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<sup>20</sup>Also, as Boxall points out, this entire media kit has been assembled by Transparanoia, meaning that even a document that purports to represent Bucky's life, opinions, and work has been mediated by the "Orwellian, Pynchonesque corporate agency" that represents Bucky ("Media Culture" 51). Transparanoia's scope is threateningly large—we learn that it even owns Bucky's apartment building (8). Of course, the threat to Bucky's psychic wellbeing signaled in the company's name is obvious, even as we also find out that Bucky created the name himself "for our spreading inkblot of holding companies, trusts, acquisitions, and cabals" (138).

wheel that turns and crackles. The market accepts and rejects. It loves and kills” (27). For a hack like Fenig, audiences define the market, but audience members may as well not exist. His relative level of success results not from the enthusiasm of readers who buy his work but from the whims of a market that, in his formulation, has the agency that his readers lack.

Fenig perceives the market as a mutating organism with agency distinct from any decisions made by individual consumers. This view masks the fact that consumer action ultimately defines the fate of any market. Bucky understands this fact more clearly than Fenig, since fan discourse does as much as media discourse to help perpetuate the collaborative creation that is Bucky’s fame. Bucky’s audience may choose to question their hero’s motivation in leaving the tour and, for that matter, Globke’s motivation in coaxing Bucky back on the road. Continued fan discussion about Bucky’s whereabouts and mental state, however, only exacerbates the sense of a life spiraling out of control that sent Bucky into hiding in the first place. DeLillo anticipates the Elvis sightings that would so captivate Murray Jay Siskind in *White Noise* (1985) by having “Bucky sightings” reported throughout *Great Jones Street*. Bucky has allegedly appeared in “a drive-in restaurant in Ocala, Florida,” “the airport in Benton Harbor, Michigan,” “three different cities in England,” and so on (14, 131).<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, though, Bucky does not dismiss these claims as the delusions of obsessed crackpots. Early in the book he explains, “The public would come closer to understanding my disappearance than anyone else,” and he goes so far as to say that the

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<sup>21</sup>These multiple claims to Bucky’s re-emergence in unlikely locales, Dewey argues, imply “the tenuousness of anything like a ‘real’ Bucky” (34). Dewey may have in mind theoretical writing about celebrity that understands the fabricated star image as distinct from the human being—see Dyer 20 in particular—but there is little ambiguity to the descriptions of “Bucky sightings,” if any at all, that would imply that these sightings are anything but inaccurate hearsay.

future of the hysterical fans at the Astrodome “might very well depend on what I was able to learn beyond certain personal limits, in endland, far from the tropics of fame” (3, 4). Fairly or not, then he understands his own fate as coming to bear personally on the fate of his audience. Some sort of symbiosis exists, then, between artist and audience—or at least Bucky wants to escape corporate rock culture in favor of attempting a more intimate and symbiotic relationship with his listeners.

### **The Solutions: Audiences As Listeners; Violence; Self-Abnegation**

That desire for intimacy motivates Bucky’s escape and his art alike. Our narrator seems a musically restless soul; excerpts of lyrics from three different albums, collected in the press kit reproduced in the book, point to three separate aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> DeCurtis explains that Bucky’s artistic evolution suggests a “pattern of drawing inward,” from Vietnam War-era protest songs on his first album, titled *Amerikan War Sutra*, to *Diamond Stylus*, whose title implies “a kind of aestheticism” that is removed from political concerns (133-134). One repeated line from the latter record, “Long-play / is the enemy” (111, 113) signals a shift away from longwinded composition or verbosity. In other words, Bucky’s not stating a preference for 45’s over LP’s there; he’s refusing musical grandiosity of any kind. He’ll continue this line of development with his third record, *Pee-Pee-Maw-Maw* (sample repeated lyric: “The beast is loose / Least is best / Pee-pee-maw-maw”), so the mumblings of the so-called “mountain tapes” seem a logical end (118).

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<sup>22</sup>Dewey reads Bucky’s swift changes in musical content as “revealing a telling lack of any core self, any consistent vision” (34), a claim that strikes me as misguided. While fame can be psychically disruptive, few rock critics if any would attribute the musical evolution of a John Lennon, a David Bowie, or a Marvin Gaye to artistic or personal schizophrenia, though the speed with which Bucky embraces and discards musical identities does seem unusual.



Before releasing the legendary mountain tapes ever occurs to Bucky or his management, Bucky tells Opel that he “can’t go out there and make new and louder and more controversial sounds. I’ve done all that [...] Maybe what I want is less” (87). Her response: “By the end [of Bucky’s career thus far] you were making incredible amounts of noise and communicating absolutely nothing” (88).<sup>23</sup> Turn down the volume within Opel’s comment, and there’s a pretty fair description of the mountain tapes.<sup>24</sup> These tapes’ power lies in their sparseness and emotional intimacy. Recorded in Bucky’s mountain hideaway far from the bustle of celebrity, they also represent Bucky’s desire to achieve a paradoxically nonsensical eloquence through an almost illiterate, certainly ungrammatical arrangement of words that eschew the relatively traditional pop song structure and content reflected in Bucky’s early songs, excerpted in the media kit. He’s already approached a state of saying much while saying nothing through the popularity of his song “Pee-pee-maw-maw,” which he likens to “[c]hildhood incantation” reminiscent of chants “that can be traced to the dawn of civilization” (106-107).<sup>25</sup> Bucky surely knows that nonsense music has a long history in rock and roll, dating back at least to the

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<sup>23</sup>Lines like this one emphasize that for Bucky (and arguably, for his audience), the auditory power of his music is equal to the expressive power of his lyrics. It’s understandable that much criticism of *Great Jones Street* thus far considers Bucky’s art primarily through the words of the songs—readers are given the lyrics, after all, but have no access to what Bucky’s work truly sounds like—but I would argue that it’s dangerous to downplay the possibility that Bucky’s music *as music* can be intensely communicative, words entirely aside.

<sup>24</sup>Compare also to Bucky’s fantasy, described in the novel’s first chapter, of when he would know his audience’s “education would be [...] complete”: “As we performed they would jump, dance, collapse, clutch each other, wave their arms, all the while making absolutely no sound” (2). Tellingly, Bucky sees the ideal artist-audience relationship as one in which the audience is literally silenced, but by keeping this ideal in his mind’s eye only, he shows that at least he’s smart enough to know that relationship is impossible.

<sup>25</sup>Rojek argues that pop music celebrities act primarily “as a conducting rod of mass desire,” not in an articulate or intimate fashion, and these limitations on rock-star fame are most visible when musicians attempt to “articulate or codify creeds” as demonstrated by examples like the Beatles’ catchy but insubstantial “All you need is love” (69-70). One way to read Bucky’s meaningless credo and its ubiquity in *Great Jones Street* is as a quixotic attempt to make a case for the value of nonverbal communication to the semi-verbal art form that is rock music.

age of doo-wop. The shift is that as Bucky and his audience enter the post-Dylan, introspective seventies, rock listeners expect to hear actual meaning in lyrics. It's changed audience expectation—a change in the market, as Fenig would put it—that makes Bucky's new minimalist lyrics seem anomalous, not a change within the art form itself. Of course, that trend points to just another desire that can only be attributed to the audience as a mass, not as individuals.

For Bucky, the tapes' power is bound up in the noncommercial and minimalistic nature of the music they contain. He has come to view celebrity itself as little more than a vicious cycle of artistic creation, capitalistic promotion, and perpetuation of a fabricated star image. Releasing music that *Transparanoia* cannot easily market or assimilate into his existing persona strikes him as a way out of the cycle. As he puts it, "The artist sits still, finally, because the materials he deals with begin to shape his life, instead of being shaped, and in stillness he seeks a form of self-defense" (126). To a considerable extent, the materials he deals with are his own image and his audience's desires. Unfortunately, those are two things he can't escape, though he's now trying to do so via the stillness of the mountain tapes' music.

Opel tries to convince Bucky that releasing the tapes would be the perfect way for the recluse to re-enter the public world (149). Listening to the tapes again, Bucky isn't so sure. He reflects on the period when he recorded them—"I was younger then and felt an obligation to my audience," implying that he no longer feels such a responsibility—and fame itself, which he calls both "treble and bass, and only a rare man can command the dial to that fractional point where both tones are simultaneously his" (149). Bucky recognizes the need for both the high notes and the low notes—the light side and the dark

side, the good times and the bad times—in the experience of fame, but he acknowledges that few can balance the two. He hasn't yet figured out, then, how to balance the public and the private self, but he has gained a sense that he can put that imbalance to use if the mountain tapes get released on his own terms, terms that are defined by an obligation to himself and not to Globke or Transparanoia. Here DeLillo conceptualizes this music's potential release as good for Bucky's sanity, but the audience momentarily leaves the equation altogether.

Bucky may write his audience out of his motivation for releasing the tapes, but that doesn't necessarily mean the audience will disappear entirely. As a Happy Valley representative named Bohack explains, in spite of Bucky's insistence on downplaying his fame and attempting to say nothing, his listeners may well understand his actions as an unusual kind of star turn: "Demythologizing yourself. Keeping covered. Putting up walls. Stripping off fantasy and legend. Reducing yourself to minimums. Your privacy and isolation are what give us the strength to be ourselves. We were willing victims of your sound. Now we're acolytes of your silence" (194). Bucky's attempts at demythologizing himself, then, can backfire and only mythologize him more. Notably, if what Bohack describes is really happening, it's a rare moment in this novel of Bucky's audience actually creating an original interpretation of Bucky's life and work that runs counter to the artist's and Transparanoia's intent. However, DeLillo's mere suggestion of these actions, as opposed to their outright direct depiction, undercuts the possibility of them actually being enacted.

Bucky describes the tapes' creation as unremarkable and even prosaic, but he uses some disturbing imagery to explain his mental state at that time. "I had just come off a

world tour and my voice was weary and scorched,” he says, “no sound nearer to my mind than the twang of baby murders in patriarchal hamlets” (147). Bucky explicitly associates the sound of the mountain tapes with political violence, and his minimalist impulses come through in the implication that the most eloquent response to such violence—perhaps borrowing from the playbook of the Vietnam-era black humor writers—may be to eschew overt attempts at eloquence altogether. These tapes take on a life of their own, though, and Bucky soon refuses to acknowledge them in any way that would turn them into a commercial product. He declines “to accept any offer concerning this material,” explaining that “I didn’t understand the nature of my own labor” (147). He really means that he didn’t understand his own role in the corporate media machine—his requirement to deliver a marketable product to his label and to his audience, a requirement that seems to have transcended legal contract at this point and become a perceived moral obligation.

Later, the tapes are stolen. Though readers will eventually discover they have entered Globke’s hands, Bucky realizes that they are truly irreplaceable, claiming that he would “never be able to reproduce the complex emotional content of those tapes, or remember a single lyric” (164). The issue stops being a refusal to release the music and for the time being, at least, becomes a literal inability to do so. For Globke, of course, this is no real problem, and not just because he has the tapes. He also has a plan to bring Bucky back into the public eye: Bucky should do another concert tour, performing the mountain tapes’ songs live, which Bucky calls impossible:

The effect of the tapes is that they’re tapes. Done at a certain time under the weight of a certain emotion. Done on the spot and with many imperfections. This material can’t be duplicated in a concert situation. So

the tapes can be released, sure. But how do I get released? How do I get back out before crowds? I don't know how to work that little trick. (188)

Releasing the tapes solves Globke's trouble—the need for new product and more profit—but not Bucky's problem—the continued tightrope walk between a need for an audience and a fear of his audience's mania. Given that recording the tapes served the ameliorative purpose of helping him recover from the demands of a long tour, Bucky recognizes the tapes as a singular object, a spiritual object even, whose purpose would be destroyed via reproduction.<sup>26</sup> Globke can make use of the tapes only if they are reproduced, either live or on vinyl. Put another way, Bucky can't reproduce the tapes live—so he can only present a facsimile of them.<sup>27</sup> But if the live show becomes a mere facsimile, then he really is trapped in the cycle of representations.

Not only that, but now that Globke has his hands on the tapes, he's altering Bucky's music without permission in preparation to foist the tapes onto consumers. Globke describes to Bucky his studio trickery:

Right now we're culling. We're editing down to twenty cuts. Getting rid of tape hiss and other noises. Snipping and clipping. Moving things around. Making up titles. Mixing in some instrumental work on about three quarters of the cuts. The thing's going to be rough as hell. But I think that's what we need right now. We've had enough of instant phasing and sixteen track and synthesizers. The people want something plain. Plain but complicated. (199)

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<sup>26</sup>Walter Benjamin's idea of "aura" can help explain here how Bucky and Globke view the same tapes as serving hugely different purposes. Benjamin explains: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" as "reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (221). While post-rock-tour recovery is surely not the kind of traditional act he has in mind, Benjamin's core claim holds true here as he emphasizes that "the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value" (224). The mountain tapes' unique value, Bucky takes great pains to explain, lies in the purpose they served in his personal life at a particular moment—the "ritual" of his private healing. Having no mass audience ever assumed during their creation, then, the tapes take on both the power and the purpose of ritual art, and their particular status as such would be destroyed by reproduction. Globke, of course, couldn't care less.

<sup>27</sup>For Globke, that's okay too. Transparanoia, after all, "markets facsimiles" (24).

Globke's decisions to eviscerate everything that Bucky finds special about the tapes—their rawness, the enigmatic quality of the lack of titles, the sparse instrumentation—reveal a complete ignorance as to what makes the tapes important as art. For that matter, Globke seems clueless as to what might make them work as a commercial product as well, given the frequency with which he contradicts himself here. He disparages studio sweetening immediately after making the case for the necessity of studio sweetening, and that contradictory pair of final sentences evinces Globke's cluelessness about the desires of the audience for whom he prepares the tapes.

Crucially, though, the tapes have still not been reproduced for a mass market. In contrast to the earlier image in which Bucky's voice on a record gets conflated with Bucky himself, here the tapes remain an entity separate from Bucky until their mass reproduction and marketing. As they get sweetened in the studio, however, Bucky begins to lose control over them, and hence he also loses control over his self-presentation to his audience. Even so, Globke grants Bucky some small say in what he does on this comeback tour, reminding him that performing the tapes live isn't the only solution that will make everyone a load of money. He tells Bucky, "You can jam, you can whistle, you can hum, you can do top-forty AM schlock, you can just stand there and shout at the audience. It doesn't make any difference what you do. The idea is to get you out there, get the whole mystique going again, make them wet their pants, make them yell and scream" (198).<sup>28</sup> Opel has already suggested to Bucky that his ever-more-minimalist trajectory means that pretty soon he may well "crawl out on the stage at the Sands and

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<sup>28</sup>Compare to Fenig's similar claim about the benefit of cornering a small market and exhausting its buying power: "Once you pre-empt [a small market], you're good for years. Send them bird shit wrapped in cellophane, they'll buy it" (49). Fenig's disdain for and distance from his readers works in contrast to Bucky's continued desires to connect with his listeners. Globke must make a hard sell indeed to pitch a plan to Bucky that contains such echoes of Fenig's own language.

just sit there in a jockstrap grunting” (88). In comparison to Globke’s idea, Opel’s concept exudes artistic integrity. Globke, for his part, never says that whistling, shouting, and schlock-peddling are equal artistically, but he asserts that Bucky’s mass audience, the poor pants-wetting fools, will find them equal. As Globke’s moneygrubbing reaches its apotheosis here, DeLillo attributes to the media conglomerate a disregard for art, for artist, and for audience alike.

As next to impossible as reproduction and release of the mountain tapes looks to Bucky, it remains a better option than the other action he spends most of his time considering. “Suicide was nearer to me than my own big toe,” he explains. “I really think it was expected of me. If I hadn’t left the tour, one way or another it would have happened” (86). In Bucky’s mind, his retreat from his tour becomes an act of self-preservation, even as his increasingly minimalistic music suggests self-abnegation and his thoughts rarely stray too far from self-harm. His associates hardly dissuade him from suicide, as they already realize that death can serve as the ultimate act of self-mythologizing for a young rock singer.<sup>29</sup> Another rocker tells Bucky “a careful OD” would be his best option (231), while Bohack suggests the terms of the ideal suicide: “Some semi-mysterious or remote place is probably best [...] The perfect suicide is when people know you’re dead on one level but refuse to accept it on a deeper level” (243). These conversations recall the novel’s opening paragraphs, in which Bucky first imagines that his fans are turning homicidal but know “that my death, to be authentic, must be self-willed [...] preferably in a foreign city” (2). All this talk of suicide surrounding Bucky,

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<sup>29</sup>Kavadlo argues that even as early as 1973, DeLillo “understood the narrative of rock stardom before it had become everyday and cliché,” given how widely-discussed the untimely but then-recent deaths of figures like Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison, among many others, already were (92).

then, is hardly a sudden development, as it dates back to the time of Bucky's initial retreat.

Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown* (1986) includes a provocative meditation on the image—and the reality—of the suicidal artist. This image, Braudy argues, “crystallizes conflicts about fame and aspiration that in previous eras might be represented by the saint in the desert, the Renaissance melancholic, or the nineteenth-century dandy,” and centuries later we are still heirs to an uneasy romanticized notion that artistic suicide, “like certain forms of madness or crime, indicates a grander spirit, a superiority to the shackles and abrasions of the human condition” (536). Bucky does not agree, though; his objections to his acquaintances' plans for the perfect self-willed end come steeped in the language of inadequacy, of rejection of any attribution of superhuman character: “I'm not innocent enough for suicide,” he finally insists (244). When discussing death at his own hand, Bucky sees his life—and hence his art, since the man and the product have been so consistently conflated—as having been violated beyond repair, and not just by Globke's unnecessary editing tools.

Meanwhile, Bucky has gradually come to the conclusion that any power he felt he exerted over anyone—his fans, the public at large, especially anyone at his label—is illusory. In an interview collected in his press kit, Bucky exhibits his initial belief in his own agency: “I make people move. My sound lifts them right off their ass. I make it happen. Understand. I make it happen.” He goes on to describe his ambition to create music that could actually “injure people with my sound,” concluding, “That's art, sweetheart. I make it happen” (105). The repetitions in his claim imply that Bucky is trying to convince himself of his own power, especially as he contradicts his earlier



descriptions of himself as merely corralling existent violent energy and channeling it back to his audience. Still, he's associating his own agency with self-abnegation. "The more I make people move," he explains, "the closer I get to personal inertness. [...] I myself am kind of tired of all the movement and would like to flatten myself against a wall and become inert" (106-107). He feels power as the crowd's titular master, but he longs for the day when the crowd's hysteria becomes self-sustaining and he can disappear fully.

DeLillo fully illuminates Bucky's powerlessness by putting him in conversation with Watney, another famous rock singer but one with contrasting attitudes toward fame, power, and his own audience. Bucky's narration describes Watney's band's attitude and public reaction to the musicians: "The band didn't arouse the violent appetites of the young as much as it killed all appetite, causing a dazed indifference to just about everything. Watney wrote his lyrics in the back seats of limousines" (154). The juxtaposition of those sentences shows an absolute disregard for audience—a sense that this rock god feels superior to the rabble who buy his records. Watney's band neutralizes audience desire rather than channeling or responding to it. Watney has forsaken music as "just an act, just a runaround, just a show" and has refocused his efforts on his business interests instead because, he claims, "I had no real power in the music structure" (155). Where Bucky still holds out hope that the authenticity of the mountain tapes can transcend the vulgarity of the record business, Watney has succumbed to the baser commercial impulses that Bucky so disdains.

"Bucky, you have no power. You have the illusion of power," Watney explains. He appropriates the language of Bucky's interviews, arguing that "[n]othing truly moves to your sound. Nothing is shaken or bent. You're a bloody artist you are" (231). Then

he attacks the countercultural air that Bucky has tried to cultivate, asserting that Bucky can never be part of “the underground” since “the true underground idiom” of our time is actually spoken in the realms of corporate culture, high finance, the military, and the federal government (232). In fact, readers will soon find out that the mysterious package Bucky was asked to hold for the Happy Valley Farm Commune contains an experimental drug that destroys the language centers of the brain—a drug that the federal government may have been considering for the purpose of literally silencing radicals (255). If that’s true, then DeLillo has indeed hidden the underworld of this novel in the traditional corridors of power, not in the more visible counterculture of Bucky’s world.<sup>30</sup>

It’s no wonder, then, that Bucky should feel he’s ceded the power of resistance and rebellion to corporate and government interests. A primary purpose of *Great Jones Street*, after all, is interrogation of whether rebellion is possible at all if one’s rebellion requires the complicity and cooperation of a record label, a magazine, or for that matter, a major publishing house ready to print thousands of copies of a weird little literary novel about rock music. Everything in this novel, DeCurtis has explained, becomes a product in the end, with everyone wanting to gain possession of either the Happy Valley drug or the mountain tapes (137). No one in this book, he continues, can escape “the cash nexus and the exchange of commodities, outside of which there stands nothing” (DeCurtis

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<sup>30</sup>Burn points out that Globke shares his name with the “sometime Nazi party member” who wrote the law that extended dictatorial power to Hitler (“Science of Mind” 365). Watney’s former band, Schicklgruber, shares its name with Hitler’s mother, also the surname Hitler used in childhood and early adulthood. In addition to being the first in a series of characters who recall the history of Nazi Germany—see also the multiple characters in *Running Dog* (1978) looking for a film shot in Hitler’s bunker and, of course, Hitler Studies professor Jack Gladney in *White Noise*—these invocations of fascism, however small, underscore how entirely inescapable Bucky finds his situation, especially as they come from characters who lecture directly to Bucky about his own insignificance within a vast power structure.

140).<sup>31</sup> DeCurtis is correct that ultimately, as they both become mere articles of trade, the mountain tapes serve much the same purpose as the drug within the novel. But ignoring the purpose of the drug—the destruction of the ability to express oneself through language, something akin to Bucky’s artistic goal in the mountain tapes—turns the drug into a mere MacGuffin, to use Alfred Hitchcock’s term for an object that sets a plot in motion but bears no importance in itself. Since its powers match Bucky’s desires so well, this drug is no MacGuffin.

Bucky consents to have the drug tested on him, and he does indeed lose his ability to speak, albeit temporarily. His last words: “Pee-pee-maw-maw” (256). In essence, he chooses the fate of Micklewhite, whom Osteen calls the only character in *Great Jones Street* who can “escape from commodification,” over the fate of the market-defined Fenig (55). Bucky describes the return of his speech as a disappointment, a “double defeat” that put a stop to “weeks of immense serenity” (264, 265). In the book’s final line, he reveals that rumors regarding his disappearance still circulate. He explains, “The most beguiling of the rumors has me living among beggars and syphilitics, performing good works, patron saint of all those men who hear the river-whistles sing the mysteries and who return to sleep in wine by the south wheel of the city” (265). Tellingly, his favorite rumor of his whereabouts involves him living ascetically as a kind of prophet, far outside the realm of anything capitalistic—or more sadly, artistic—at all.

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<sup>31</sup>It should be no surprise that DeCurtis’s excellent article on *Great Jones Street* focuses on the corporatization and commodification of rebellion, as DeCurtis is a longtime contributor to *Rolling Stone*, a magazine loosely parodied as *Running Dog* both in *Great Jones Street* and in the later DeLillo novel of the same name. Bucky finds himself caught between the rock and hard place of rebellion and profit, DeCurtis realizes, much like *Rolling Stone*, a once truly countercultural voice that has for years now been more of an Establishment voice, albeit one on the left.

As Mark Osteen has explained, *Great Jones Street* frustrates any reader who expects that a rock and roll novel must celebrate the musical genre and mirror its exuberance, youthfulness, and hedonism (60). (In other words, this is no Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* [1987] or Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* [1995], folks.)<sup>32</sup> Yet DeLillo ultimately affirms the potential power of pop music—including hugely popular, mass reproduced, commercially marketed music—to be a genuinely revelatory art, provided that said music is just as much art as it is public commodity or celebration of fame culture. Braudy writes of contemporary celebrity, “Unless you make the manipulation of your public image itself part of your themes (Picasso, Mailer, Warhol), the only alternatives seem to be retreat, seclusion, or self-destruction” (547). Bucky tries all three of these, and while his attempts at retreat and seclusion fail, his peculiar form of self-destruction is really self-abnegation as an assertion of the self. True, he never fully buys into Happy Valley's sense that his retreat affirms the value of privacy. However, his willingness to have their drug tested on him, believing that it will destroy his ability to use spoken language, stands as a self-destructive act that also lets him come closer than ever to the kind of eloquence he's been seeking for the entire book.

While the novel begins with Bucky's separation from a mob-like audience, caused by the audience's own maniacal hysteria, by novel's end Bucky envisions releasing intimate music that simply could not be supported by a traditional mega-tour. DeLillo no longer locates the obstruction in the audience, but in the industry machine that insists on sweetening—that is, commercializing—Bucky's best work before allowing it to reach

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<sup>32</sup>Indeed, DeLillo has stated, “there is very little about rock music in *Great Jones Street*, although the hero is a musician” (*Conversations* 65). Elsewhere he acknowledges that though he “was very interested in rock music” during the period in which the novel was written and set, he “didn't buy a single record” (*Conversations* 140).

listeners. DeLillo underlines this fact by having the tapes destroyed during that commercializing process of making them market-ready: Happy Valley, fearful that the release of Bucky's mountain tapes could jeopardize their own mission, blows up the plant, Globke's favorite for its high security, where records of the mountain tapes will be pressed (246).

Ultimately, *Great Jones Street*, I agree, does depict "the failure of the music industry to articulate any form of resistance to mainstream capitalist culture" (Boxall, *Possibility* 36). It is crucial to add, however, that Bucky himself, as an independent-minded artist, does articulate that resistance on his own via the intimacy and uncommercial nature of the mountain tapes. Even if the mountain tapes are destroyed, we can understand this book itself, narrated by Bucky after all, as the celebrity's chosen form of re-emergence, a way of telling his story "to a large crowd, but silently, individually, and with increased complexity" (LeClair, *In the Loop* 107).

The tragedy of Bucky's situation, then, is that in DeLillo's textual world, at least, a near-Faustian bargain has to come to pass before the eloquent and revelatory art that Bucky wants to create can ever reach people. In order for Bucky's music to find a wide audience, it must gain wide distribution, which in turn requires reproduction, which over the course of the novel Bucky increasingly comes to view as a violation of artistic integrity and, since it results in the sheer number of potentially violent audience members at his concerts, as a very real physical threat. Bucky's image and work activate audience desire, but audience members can act on those desires only as a large, de-individuated unit. And sadly, the threatening actions of that crowd lead directly to Bucky's silencing and eventual decision to forsake creative work altogether. Telling his story via *Great*

*Jones Street* may be one way for Bucky to reclaim the mantle of artist, but he does so ruefully, as a reluctant storyteller who'd rather be singing—or mumbling—a song.

### **Readership As Crowd**

If *Great Jones Street* shows us what happens when the reclusive celebrity artist struggles to find meaning by retreating from the spotlight, then *Mao II* reveals the struggles of a famous reclusive artist who attempts to find meaning via a dramatic re-entry into the public eye. DeLillo suggests in this later work that the act of artistic creation is more vital than the reactions of an audience, though as an artist who seeks to positively engage an audience of his own, DeLillo never dismisses the power that audience members bear as individual agents. As the novel's primary action begins, *Mao II*'s central character, reclusive novelist Bill Gray, continues endless revision of his next novel, in the works for years. His assistant (and obsessive fan) Scott Martineau lives with Bill, as does Scott's partner Karen, whom Scott helped deprogram after she left an arranged marriage in the Unification Church. After years out of the public eye, Bill consents to be photographed by photographer Brita Nilsson. Meanwhile, Bill's publisher Charles Everson persuades him to travel to London to make a show of public support for a poet being held hostage in Beirut. Bill goes with George Haddad, the spokesman for the group holding the hostage, to Athens, where he is hit by a car. While on a ferry to Beirut, the author dies anonymously.

As in *Great Jones Street*, audiences themselves do not pose a threat simply by consuming the works that celebrity artists produce. And just as in the earlier novel, crowds themselves are not inherently threatening either. For DeLillo, the crowd becomes a negative force only when it acts with a collective will that shuts down the possibility of

individualized agency. The first of many crowds in *Mao II* appears in the novel's prologue, set at Yankee Stadium. Well before the central action of the novel, Karen Janney is to enter an arranged marriage in a Unification Church mass wedding. The dominant character in the scene is not Karen, but her father, Rodge, who finds the whole scene upsetting not only because he senses he's losing his daughter to something he doesn't understand, but more because the intimacy of the traditional wedding has been replaced by the spectacle of the crowd. Even worse for him than the mob on the baseball field is his inability to locate Karen in the mass of identically-dressed brides and grooms. The crowd has claimed her individuality.

"They assemble themselves so tightly, crossing the vast arc of the outfield, that the effect is one of transformation," reads the narration, implying that this change from individual to member of a larger mass represents a real threat (3). Rodge picks up on this himself, "thinking this is the point. They're one body, now, an undifferentiated mass, and this makes him uneasy" (3). He can't reconcile the crowd he's accustomed to seeing at Yankee Stadium, a crowd at leisure, with the event he's seeing now: "They take a time-honored event and repeat it, repeat it, repeat it until something new enters the world" (4). DeLillo's narration leaves open the space for a positive kind of repetition, but for now at least, this crowd is ominous. "This really scares him," he continues to think, "a mass of people turned into a sculptured object. It is like a toy with thirteen thousand parts, just tootling along, an innocent and menacing thing" (7). Comparing the crowd to a toy does not neutralize its destructive power, nor does calling it innocent. In fact, he still grants the crowd agency as a single mass and not as a collection of autonomous people, even though it has destroyed nothing yet. John Carlos Rowe agrees,

claiming that DeLillo's crowds are "not constituted by choices made by individuals to join a group movement, as in the collective formed to bring about revolutionary change, but instead by the alienation of individuals from their respective agency and the imposition of order and 'belonging' from outside or above" (*Mao II* 26).

Rodge searches through binoculars, sensing that if he does locate and thereby individuate her, even from afar, it could both heal him psychically and liberate Karen in reality. Unable to individuate her visually, he recalls her most distinctive traits: "Healthy, intelligent, twenty-one, serious-sided, possessed of a selfness, a teeming soul, nuance and shadow, grids of pinpoint singularities they will never drill out of her" (7). Momentarily, Rodge does subvert the power of the consuming crowd, as each of these descriptors points to Karen as an individual, but they're also characteristics that Karen could share with many others. Those commonalities, ironically, allow Karen to assimilate easily and quickly into a crowd. By the end of the ceremony, DeLillo makes explicit that these couples have chosen to die to self, willingly surrendering their agency to act as autonomous beings. They have been "immunized against the language of self" and "fortified by the blood of numbers" (8). By this point, Karen has begun to realize that she is both performer and audience in the spectacle of the mass wedding, subject and object. Where she had been watching the crowd of spectators, she now sees that she is an object of viewing, being photographed herself. She and her fellow brides and grooms are "here but also there, already in the albums and slide projectors, filling picture frames with their microcosmic bodies" (10). Her reverie there would normally assume some sort of achievement or specialness that's tied to her identity as an individual, maybe even as an emergent celebrity gaining awareness of a viewing audience. Here, she gets the psychic



disruption of becoming an image but without the specialness or the autonomy to act on her own accord.

DeLillo does not allow, however, his readers to dismiss easily the threatening crowd as an anomalous body that appears only on special—and especially unusual—occasions like a Unification Church mass wedding. The prologue’s final lines provoke the reader into seeing latent crowds in the most mundane daily activity. DeLillo writes:

The thousands stand and chant. Around them in the world, people ride escalators going up and sneak secret glances at the faces coming down. People dangle teabags over hot water in white cups. Cars run silently on the autobahns, streaks of painted light. People sit at desks and stare at office walls. They smell their shirts and drop them in the hamper. People bind themselves into numbered seats and fly across time zones and high cirrus and deep night, knowing there is something they’ve forgotten to do.  
The future belongs to crowds. (16)

There are two ways to read that ending. If it’s menacing, that’s because we can’t see—on the basis of the text proper—any individuality in the performers of these actions. They’re all doing the same thing, and doing it corporally. Of course, these actions in themselves are hardly ominous—what’s so bad about lots of people having tea at the same time? But subtextually, they may all have different reasons for performing the same actions, or they may represent a crowd uniting for reasons more liberatory than threatening, a possibility that DeLillo neither depicts nor dismisses. If that’s so, then the concision and finality of that last sentence isn’t strictly a threat—it also holds out the possibility that groups of people acting together can do positive things without sacrificing the agency and the sacredness of the individual.

A conversation between Karen and Scott drives home the difference between the crowd and a mere mass of people in one location. Scott asks, “When I think of China, what do I think of?”, to which Karen replies, “People.” Scott corrects her. “Crowds [...]

I think of how they merge with the future, how the future makes room for the nonachiever, the nonaggressor, the trudger, the nonindividual.” (70). The contrast between “people” and “crowds” makes the implicit argument that once assimilated into crowds, people lose their individuality. What’s more, Scott’s “nonachievers” and “nonindividuals” wind up assimilated easily into crowds since those classifiers do not exist to highlight specialness.

What does all this business of the threatening crowd have to do with the story of the reclusive celebrity author Bill Gray, who has avoided crowds for years, other than the fact that Karen will come to live in the Gray household? One clue comes following Bill’s meeting with his publisher, at which Everson pitches to Gray the idea of showing public support for the poet-hostage. As Bill leaves the publisher’s building in the final paragraph of Part One of *Mao II*, DeLillo tells us he “joined the surge of the noontime crowd” (103). After all of the association of crowds with threat in the first half of the novel, it’s next to impossible to read that surge as anything but a bad omen. Another vital answer comes to us via the scenes, late in the novel, in which Karen watches on television a crowd of mourners grieving the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini. She hears a news commentator call the crowds “[r]ivers of humanity” and sees “the roof of a bus [fall] in under the weight of people trying to see the body” (188). She feels physically weakened by the scenes on the screen and thinks of them as “an injury to the idea that the dead are protected” (190). She realizes that even in death, the crowd can still pose a threat. But the tenor of the scene shifts dramatically in a moment that echoes her earlier realization in Yankee Stadium that she watched one crowd while helping comprise another. Karen realizes that as one of many witnesses to this event via television, she’s

also part of a crowd, created by the medium of television itself. The implication of this state of affairs is that mass reproduction and the ubiquity of electronic media can enable not just reproduction of an artwork, but reproduction of audiences. This shift deconstructs the basic understanding most of us have of crowds, as millions of people viewing the same thing on TV can now constitute a crowd. The same crowd psychology exists, but the actual proximity is no longer required. By that logic, Bill's readers also constitute a crowd. Should a group no longer need to be physically together in order to count as a crowd—and if crowds remain largely a threatening force in DeLillo's world—then Bill's sense of being threatened by his readership is valid, even if the readers don't share a locale.

### **The Determinism of the Celebrity Image**

Widespread mechanical reproduction of Bill's work, not a shared location, creates his audience, at least in the sense that reproduction makes it possible to talk about Bill's audience as a discrete group with a vital shared interest. Bill understands, even as he delays completion and publication of his latest work, that publication and an eventual readership are part of what he signed up for when he chose to author books. He does not embrace, though, the idea of being a public literary figure. Aware that he's already become a discursive idea through the cottage industry of Bill Gray criticism which Scott has collected for him (31), Bill has long resisted being further changed from person to literary celebrity image.<sup>33</sup> His decision to be photographed for the first time in decades—a choice that sets all of the book's later action into motion—comes less out of obligation than exhaustion. Bill tells the photographer, Brita, that “it's a weariness really, to know

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<sup>33</sup>Of course, by the time the novel's action begins, it's too late to resist this tendency of cultural discourse to turn celebrities into ideas. Halldorson notes, “For the first thirty pages [of *Mao II*], Bill Gray is discussed only as an object, through books, gossip, letters, and files” (152).

that people make so much of this” (36). He suspects that the public views his lack of visibility as both “an awful sort of arrogance” and a case of a writer “playing God’s own trick” (36, 37).

Ironically, Bill feels trapped by his own image as “reclusive writer” even as the point of reclusiveness is to avoid having a widely reproduced image. It worked the same way for Bucky in *Great Jones Street*: a retreat from the spotlight winds up being just another way to win the spotlight, desired or not. DeCordova asserts that the continued rearticulation of a celebrity persona necessarily calls for either an affirmation of or an intentional swerve away from the existing star image (113). An actor, for instance, either accepts typecasting to some degree, or he consciously and publicly resists perpetuating his existing image. As DeLillo puts it, “When you look at your own photograph you can react in two ways: you can either decide that your life should follow the direction of that image or you can alienate yourself from it” (*Conversations* 117). Brita understands this. On meeting Bill, her initial impulse goes, “wait a minute, no, this can’t be him. [...] But Bill was slowly beginning to make sense to her, to look reasonably like his work” (39). She tells Bill, “Don’t forget, from the moment your picture appears you’ll be expected to look just like it. And if you meet people somewhere, they will absolutely question your right to look different from your picture” (43). Scott agrees, thinking that Bill’s photo “would be a means of transformation. It would show him how he looked to the world and give him a fixed point from which to depart. Pictures with our likeness make us choose. We travel into or away from our photographs” (141). Celebrities like Bill, even reclusive ones, must either perpetuate or rage against the personae represented by their images.

As a result, being photographed at all is a major shift in Bill's image, and at first, his active decision to have his image captured on film is an assertion of agency. His desire is not to reemerge as a public literary figure, DeLillo tells us, but instead he wants "to revise the terms of his seclusion" (140). In a sense, he's taking control of his own image by letting an artist capture it. But he cannot take *full* control of it even if he consents to involve Brita in this remaking of his persona. When Brita tells him, "We make pictures together after all" (45), DeLillo emphasizes that Bill's image, like that of all celebrities, is an inescapably collaborative fabrication.<sup>34</sup> He can't form himself in his own image all by himself. Marc Schuster reads this situation through Jean Baudrillard's idea of "fatal strategy," a tactic by which "what was once considered the subject [here, Bill] concedes the supremacy of the object [the commodified image of "Bill Gray, reclusive writer] and adopts its strategies in order to thrive within the system of objects" (121). Bill is ultimately powerless to renegotiate his image entirely, since both rejection and embrace of publicity can only result in more publicity. Schuster asserts that the more commerce-minded Scott understands all of this in ways that Bill does not.

So there's still an implied threat in photography, even when it's Bill's idea, since Bill surrenders great control over his own self-presentation by letting someone else mediate his image. To publish a picture of Bill is another way to throw him to a crowd, potentially to be destroyed. He recognizes affinities between photography and death: "Something about the occasion makes me think I'm at my own wake. Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is

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<sup>34</sup>"Bill Gray" himself always was a fabrication, readers soon learn, since the author's birth name is Willard Skansy, Jr. (144). This rather nondescript pen name suggests other meanings: "with its neutrally colored surname and common first name, ["Bill Gray"] inscribes his position as a commodity or medium of exchange: he is just a 'bill,' a universal equivalent, a blank counter upon which others can write and from whom others profit" (Osteen 197).

dead. [...] Isn't this why picture-taking is so ceremonial? It's like a wake. And I'm the actor made up for the laying-out" (42).<sup>35</sup> Keesey asserts another metaphorical affinity between the photographs of Bill and Bill's own death, again using the language of mortality. An image may win fame for its subject, he claims, but that photo "still mortifies it in the sense of eliminating a subject's control over his own representation" (179). In other words, a photograph doesn't just result in a physically static image. It also will turn Bill's potentially dynamic and plastic persona into something as static as the photo itself.

### **The Image, the Product, and the Audience**

But proliferation of Bill's image won't immediately lead to his literal death, he realizes, though it will lead to instant commodification of his image alongside continued commodification of his work. Well before the photo shoot scene, *Mao II* is already deeply concerned with this transformation of art into product. When Scott visits a bookstore, in part to look for Bill's books on the shelves, he looks "at the covers of mass-market books, running his fingertips erotically over the raised lettering. [...] He could hear them shrieking *Buy me*." (19) Even just as objects, these books are commodified, even sensualized, put on display in what David Cowart calls "the bookstore as Disneyfied simulacrum" (122). Later, as Brita photographs him, Bill acknowledges, "I've become someone's material. Yours, Brita. There's the life and there's the consumer event" (43). At least he's self-aware about becoming a kind of human product. When Bill visits Charles Everson, his publisher, Everson insists that Bill is in good hands professionally

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<sup>35</sup>Compare Bill's dialogue to Susan Sontag's claim that "[a]ll photographs are *memento mori*," as well as her observation that the language of photography is the language of violence: "it is named without subtlety," she writes, "whenever we talk about 'loading' and 'aiming' a camera, about 'shooting' a film" (15, 14).

since Everson represents a publishing house that has “a memory,” “a solid responsible thoughtful list,” and “the launching power of our mass-market capabilities” (127).

Everson makes a good case here, but Bill’s nervousness in the scene is palpable, a continued anxiety over having his art turned into a mere object of commerce. True, we find a kinder, gentler capitalist enterprise here than we do in *Great Jones Street*. *Mao II* includes no figure like the hack writer Ed Fenig, cravenly beholden to the market, or a Globke, who remains interested only in the profit motive. Everson emphasizes his commitment to making sure his publishing house is invested in quality work, but the way he couches his claims here, that emphasis on quality sounds like just another bullet point in an easily digestible business plan.

After the photo shoot with Brita, Bill remarks, “Got what she came for, didn’t she? I’m a picture now, flat as birdshit on a Buick” (55). At that point, he’s not even considering himself as a commodity but as a thoroughly undesirable object. For him, the two ideas—mass-produced object and undesirable object—are basically synonymous. In fact, when Bill recalls the most joyful and innocent acts of creation he has ever known, the possibility of mass reproduction is essentially absent. He remembers announcing imaginary ballgames to himself as a child, noting, “There hasn’t been a moment since those days when I’ve felt nearly so good” (46). These are not games that he based on existing statistics or attempts to outdo actual radio announcers—they are complete fabrications. His earliest creation involved acts of complete invention that are not and cannot be mechanically reproduced. It seems no coincidence that under those conditions Bill found his greatest happiness. Notably, this is also creation that lacks an audience,

implying that for Bill, creation itself is the joyful act. Publication is the problem, since it necessitates an audience, enabling potential critique, rejection, and crucially, the crowd.

Of course, Brita never mandates publication of her photographs of Bill. She tells Bill that he retains full control of the pictures, and she will send copies to media outlets only with Bill's approval (26). It's a move that wins Brita some sympathy from readers because she's willing to return to Bill some control over his image. Her partial surrender of control to Bill complicates her character and her project considerably, as it suggests that she may not be turning Bill's image into a commodity at all. Could one, after all, commodify a celebrity if photos of that famous person were never made public? Brita leaves room for those photos to remain art, outside the realm of commerce.

Brita has no easy answer either for what she plans to do with the thousands of photographs she has taken of dozens of other writers. Though acquaintances have suggested turning them into a single large-scale gallery piece, she ultimately rejects that idea, viewing her work as "a basic reference work [...] just for storing" (26). There's another kind of disregard for audience—not for an audience's feelings or for the effects of the work on viewers, but a disregard for whether they find an audience at all. It's oddly akin to the young Bill Gray's play-by-plays of imaginary ballgames. Ultimately, DeLillo will suggest that Brita's work needs no audience to be effective. For now, though, DeLillo presents Brita's photographs of writers, intended for no market or viewer at all, as simultaneously a purer artwork than Bill's commodified books and as a more conceptually empty one.

As already implied in his recollection of calling ballgames to himself, Bill's relationship with his readers is fraught to say the least. DeLillo tells us that the



occasional pieces of fan mail that trickle into the Gray mailbox make the writer uncomfortable. “Most mail made Bill uneasy,” in fact. “It cut into his isolation and made him feel he was responsible for the soul of the sender” (184). Bill’s sense of his own bond (nonexistent as it is) with his readers seems oddly pathological, especially since there is no indication that his reader mail requests anything other than a polite reply or an autograph. Still, the mail suggests a crowd of readers. This makes it odder still that the most pathological audience member of all—Scott—is the one that Bill accepts and even brings into his home. At one point Scott helped comprise that readerly crowd as just another member of Bill’s audience. Scott cannot fully articulate the excitement he felt on first reading Bill’s work, but he does describe an intense sense of identification with the author. “That book was about me somehow,” Scott says. “I saw myself. It was my book” (51). Scott’s revelatory sensation of seeing his own worldview reflected in fiction is a powerful experience, one that all frequent readers know. The statement “It was my book,” however, suggests a conflation in Scott’s mind of reader and author. If Scott’s dual status as obsessive fan and personal assistant didn’t already seem ominous, Scott’s comparison threatens to draw Bill *into* the crowd of audience members. Scott asserts he doesn’t just read Bill, but he channels him. That’s a violation of the boundary between author and audience that Bill would surely not welcome.

Or would he? Scott’s initial attempts to get in touch with Bill through his publisher involved “nine or ten letters, ambitious and self-searching” (58). Scott interprets Bill’s polite but cursory reply as encouragement simply because it’s not overtly discouraging. In that interaction, Bill moves from disregarding publicity to disregarding, for the most part, his audience, though it remains unclear whether he does so because he

doesn't want to interact with his readers or because he just doesn't know how. Stalker-like, Scott eventually finds Bill and near-mystically recognizes him without ever having seen a photo of the author (60). With that, Scott breaks down the first barrier separating Bill from his readers.

Scott's recollections aside, Bill reveals his own attitude toward his audience after the photo shoot, when he leaves a rambling message on Brita's answering machine. He asks, "Do you know how strange it is for me to sit here talking to a machine? I feel like a TV set left on in an empty room. I'm playing to an empty room. This is a new kind of loneliness you're getting me into, Brita" (91). Literally, he means he's not accustomed to talking to an answering machine—a still fairly novel device at this time, after all. He's also talking about his own position as a writer who hasn't published in years, and even more so, about the plight of the writer in a culture where, Bill and DeLillo agree, the primacy of images has supplanted the primacy of the printed word in mass media. Bill sees his audience as not just uninterested, but in this scene, nonexistent, and as such, the scene can work as a microcosm for Bill's relationship with his audience in a wider sense. Bill acknowledges that his unintentionally revealing musings will be just one of many messages on Brita's machine, explaining, "The machine makes everything a message, which narrows the range of discourse and destroys the poetry of nobody home" (92). If we extend this metaphor, then "the poetry of nobody home"—of which Bill evidently approves—is equal to a similar poetry of *no audience*. Here Bill embraces, in some small way, the romance of the image of the underappreciated author.

Except Bill is not underappreciated. On the contrary, Scott tells us: "Bill is at the height of his fame. Ask me why. Because he hasn't published in years and years and

years. [...] Bill gained celebrity by doing nothing” (52). Bill’s decision not to publish shapes the magnitude and the texture of Bill’s celebrity dramatically. It’s also important to remember that Bill has *decided* not to publish. This is not some conventional case of writer’s block, Scott takes care to point out as he shows Brita the basement full of drafts that amounts to Bill’s work in progress. The room is filled with binders of manuscripts and “two large dehumidifiers,” making it a site of preservation of static archival material, not a place of active creation (31). Bill has been revising his unpublished novel for quite a while and has a publisher and an audience ready for new work (or new product, as the case may be), so the definitive action he keeps deferring is publication, not composition. Scott knows, though, that the day Bill’s novel gets published “would be the end of Bill as a myth, a force. Bill gets bigger as his distance from the scene deepens” (52). As Bill’s handler, Scott has a vested interest in keeping the myth of Bill Gray alive and well.<sup>36</sup> He understands that fame isn’t directly related to achievement or to talent. Bill is a fine writer, but the mystique of his persona does the real work in making him seem larger than life.

Scott’s attitudes toward Bill’s decision not to publish are often strategic. He says that keeping the new book under wraps would help it “take on heat and light” and let Bill extend “his claim to wide attention (68). At other points, his justification for not publishing turns abstract, as he argues that “the withheld work of art is the only eloquence left” (67). Bill obliquely agrees, as he asserts his own abstract reason to stay out of the marketplace. “The more books they publish, the weaker we become,” he says.

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<sup>36</sup>Scott is equally invested in keeping stabilized the “fragile dynamic [he] sustains in the household,” Joseph Dewey argues in interpreting one scene in which Scott commands Bill to go do some more writing, “like some delinquent child sent off to attend to overdue homework” (108). Suffice to say that once Scott’s transformation from fan to assistant is complete, he might no longer be Bill’s best audience.

“The secret force that drives the industry is the compulsion to make writers harmless” (47). The publishing industry, he claims, turns authors into purveyors of products instead of stories or ideas. He too turns to strategic reasoning, though, as he reveals the real purpose behind his continued revision of a book he says has “been done for two years”: “I write to survive now, to keep my heart beating” (48). Bill contrasts creation, as an act of self-preservation, with publication, an act of self-destruction. Brita objects, “You have to show people what you’ve done” (52), an odd comment from the artist who doesn’t even want to display her photos. Scott’s response is telling: “But for Bill, the only thing worse than writing is publishing. When the book comes out. When people buy it and read it. He feels totally and horribly exposed. They are taking the book home and turning the pages. They are reading the actual words” (53). What is naturally an intimate act, the interplay between author and reader, becomes in Bill’s mind an act of violation, a tossing of his words to a crowd that is all-consuming, in all senses of the word.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, DeLillo faults Bill not for refusing to publish, but for hiding from the world so fully. The problem isn’t reclusiveness so much as a kind of isolationist solipsism.<sup>38</sup> Bill doesn’t just fear publication, though; he also has grave doubts about publication’s very efficacy. As he tells Brita during the photo shoot, he senses that

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<sup>37</sup>Following Bill’s death, Scott will decide that the manuscript will not be published, though some of Brita’s photos will, “one time only.” The book, though, “would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly” (224). What’s amazing here is how clearly Scott’s decision conveys that the pictures really matter more than the manuscript in terms of market value and actual potential for consumption.

<sup>38</sup>True, DeLillo gets frequently called reclusive himself, though never solipsistic. The accusation of reclusiveness is usually exaggerated and originates almost entirely in a 1979 incident in which Tom LeClair traveled to Athens to interview DeLillo, who greeted LeClair with an engraved calling card reading, “I don’t want to talk about it” (*Conversations* 3). Many who level the charge of reclusiveness overlook some or all of these three things: 1) the dryly arch humor of the gesture, since saying “I don’t want to talk about it,” especially via an engraved card(!), still amounts to talking about it; 2) the fact that LeClair got and published his interview; and 3) DeLillo’s numerous, if not overly frequent, interviews and public appearances in the years since.

literature's cultural power has already been grievously weakened by more violent political forces. Bill explains:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask your writers how they feel about this? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)<sup>39</sup>

Bill's assertion there foreshadows his later complaint that publishers, in commodifying books, steal their power. This contrast of novelists with terrorists, though, is a "zero-sum game" (156), transferring the power of the writer to politically motivated criminals like those holding the poet hostage in Lebanon. Scott recounts later Bill's conviction that novels "used to feed our search for meaning," but instead we now look "to the news, which provides an unrelenting mood of catastrophe" (72). All of those formulations are on the pessimistic side, but the latter, quite notably, replaces a search that once bore the potential for revelatory truth with the inevitability of certain disaster.

Surprisingly, Bill's publisher attacks this perspective immediately before trying to convince Bill to publicly support the poet-hostage. "You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society," Everson says. "You think the writer belongs at the far margin, doing dangerous things" (97). Everson indicates that he thinks of this scheme more as a publicity stunt for a writer he wants to reintroduce to the market than as a humanitarian mission. When Bill travels to London to meet George Haddad, the spokesperson for the group holding the hostage and the mediator between them and Bill, Haddad welcomes

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<sup>39</sup>A common critique of *Mao II* is based in doubt that novelists ever bore that kind of power at all. It's an understandable misgiving, but one which must be considered in light of DeLillo's active and outspoken support of Salman Rushdie following the Ayatollah Khomeini's proclamation of a fatwa against Rushdie after the publication of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). See Scanlan for a useful reading of *Mao II* alongside the Rushdie novel and incident.

this contrast. He asks Bill to side with either the terrorist or “the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government, the militaristic state,” claiming that novelists, more than anyone else feel “affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark” (130). Unsurprisingly, George embraces the dichotomy Bill has established, but he frames it as an ultimatum that Bill can’t easily accept.

Then the conversation turns to ideas of audience and commodity culture, and more immediately, to the meaning of the frightening but non-fatal bombing the men have just witnessed. George insists the bombing had no spectacle to it and would have been widely noticed only if someone had been killed. “A few years ago a neo-Nazi group in Germany devised the slogan ‘The worse the better.’ This is also the slogan of Western media. You are nonpersons for the moment, victims without an audience. Get killed and maybe they will notice you” (130). George argues that large-scale displays of political violence work because spectacle gets noticed. It results in major coverage from traditional media outlets. Audiences, in this formulation, become passive, lack agency, and are prone to be entertained by shiny things (or exploding things, as it were). They’re audiences to what Mark Osteen calls “‘spectacular authorship’: the power to use photographic or televised images to manufacture, as if by magic, spectacular events that profoundly mold public consciousness” (Osteen 193). As George signals in reference to neo-Nazi activity, this all recalls a kind of fascism, and a kind that audiences are powerless to resist, at that. That’s not a pretty picture of individual audience agency, as it ascribes great power not only to the terrorist, but to the unquestioningly conformist crowd.

George goes on to insist that terrorists, more so than artists, have escaped the cycle of commodification that Bill, the celebrity author, cannot. (157). He asserts that violent acts are the only acts that can't be commodified, perhaps, I would add, because they shut down consumer desire instead of activating it. Bill rejects this notion, reminding George that terrorism still requires the exchange of money. It's just that purveyors of political violence exist not to serve consumers and make them powerless, but to serve the powers that be and perpetuate their power. Bill dismisses as "pure myth" the idea of "the terrorist as solitary outlaw" (158), but in attempting to defend the artist's autonomy, it's unclear whether George realizes that in contemporary American consumer culture, the idea of the writer as solitary genius is likely equally a myth.

### **The Resistant Artist, Audience (Maybe) Not Required**

What's most interesting about Bill and George's conversation is not that it attributes huge power to terrorists and lesser power to novelists, but that it outright asserts that terrorists' power comes through a kind of audience acquiescence. If novelists ever did bear the kind of power Bill describes, he at least implies that novelists who "influence[d] mass consciousness" (157) were at least making their readers better thinkers and possibly, better citizens. If terrorists do bear the kind of power Bill describes in the way Bill describes, then it's because they're turning their audiences—those who witness violent acts—into mere viewers, powerless to effect change. Brita resists being incorporated into a powerless crowd and being made a passive viewer. On one level, Brita is a professional viewer by nature of her artistic medium, but she's also deeply self-aware of the implications of her viewership. Brita's search to find an appropriate subject is a poignant subplot of *Mao II*, another narrative of artistic

development that sometimes gets ignored, left in Bill Gray's shadow. Sontag writes, "[T]he act of photographing is more than passive observing. [...] it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening" (12). This impulse leads Brita to reject her initial attempts at art photography. Her photos of New York "city people, slashed men, prostitutes, [and] emergency rooms" are unsatisfying because they all wind up "pretty in the end," unwitting endorsements of the status quo (24-25). Things are different months after Bill's death, when Brita travels to Beirut to meet, interview and photograph Abu Rashid, the terrorist who once held the poet hostage. She finds there an image world unlike New York City. Many who work with Abu Rashid, she notices, wear his image on their clothing. Through an interpreter, the leader explains that this "gives them a vision they will accept and obey. [...] We teach them identity, sense of purpose. They are all children of Abu Rashid. All men one man" (233). There's another destructive crowd that robs individuality. When a young follower of Abu Rashid's enters wearing a hood, the leader claims his followers need "no face or speech. [...] They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great" (234). Disgusted at this point by what DeLillo's narration calls "[e]loquent macho bullshit," Brita takes aggressive action, restoring some small autonomy to this boy while also creating art. Brita's bold act is breathtaking:

She runs through the roll, leaving a single exposure. On an impulse she walks over to the boy at the door and removes his hood. Lifts it off his head and drops it on the floor. Doesn't lift it very gently either. She is smiling all the time. And takes two steps back and snaps his picture. (236)

With only one frame left on the roll of film, this photo is a singular image at this point. Though still technically reproducible in the darkroom, its uniqueness makes it unlike the dozens of photos of Bill and the other writers. Brita cuts through the deindividuating



crowd by resisting Abu Rashid's forced conformity impulse and by preserving—in multiple senses of the word—the individuality of this boy. And crucially, this action bears great power even if no one ever sees this photo. For a moment, audience is entirely beside the point. The resistant and individuating power of Brita's action lies in the creation of this image, exhibition aside.

In the novel's unsettling but moving final scene, Brita watches from her balcony as a wedding party goes by below, led by a tank. She sees flashes in the distance, assumes they must be weapons firing, and only slightly later realizes they are camera flashes. Brita toasts the partygoers, and they acknowledge her well-wishing (241). DeLillo brings together multiple thematic foci here in this: first, art can be mistaken for violence, and as Bill and George discuss, the two do share some vital attributes. In the standoff between Brita and Abu Rashid, though, art is a tool of violence itself, but of a metaphorical violence—the aggressive act of Brita's photography—that helps resist a larger-scale physical violence, and awesomely so.

DeLillo implies here that a great act of creativity doesn't need an audience in order to bear real and resistant significance. We have no idea what Brita will do with the photograph she has just taken, just as she has no clue what to do with her massive archive of author photos. Is DeLillo saying that audiences are unnecessary, that the unread, unseen masterpiece is equal to the read, seen one? It's tempting to assume that such a direct comparison may be true but ultimately DeLillo draws a more important direct contrast between Brita and Bill. Bill Gray has basically stopped making art. His endless revision is a deferral of creation, not an extension of it, even if he asserts that it ensures his survival. He's become self-reflective to the point of paralyzing solipsism. Brita,

conversely, reconsiders her subject matter and technique not as an exercise in self-satisfaction, but as part of an attempt to create useful art. And we must remember that even if Brita's photograph of Abu Rashid's follower may never be seen, we experience the moment of its creation as powerful because we, as DeLillo's audience, read about it on the page. The picture, then, may or may not reach an audience, but crucially, we know that the act of taking it does.

It's also worth noting that Bill Gray is not Don DeLillo. It's easy to read Bill as a DeLillo analogue, especially given that DeLillo sometimes uses his protagonists as mouthpieces for his perspectives on media, culture, history, and language. To put it simply, though, unlike Bill Gray, DeLillo writes. He writes well, frequently, and for an attentive (if small-ish) audience. As David Cowart puts it, "DeLillo himself embodies the still viable will to create, which his character Bill Gray cannot sustain" (127). Even as he denies whenever asked that Bill is his own fictional doppelganger, DeLillo says he used to tell friends, likely jokingly so, that he desired "to change [his] name to Bill Gray and disappear" (*Conversations* 79),<sup>40</sup> we commit a basic interpretive fallacy if we assume that the dysfunctional, artistically frustrated character and the innovative, relatively prolific novelist are one. Furthermore, Brita, not Bill Gray, is "the most viable source of creative resistance" in the novel, as the interview scene with Abu Rashid demonstrates (Osteen 202). Given DeLillo's frequent assertions that artists, especially writers, should embrace a position in the "margins" of culture (*Conversations* 46, 96,

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<sup>40</sup>In discussing how DeLillo and Bill Gray occasionally use similar language, Philip Nel points out how a pamphlet in support of Salman Rushdie that DeLillo wrote with Paul Auster recycles the phrase "democratic shout," which Bill previously used to describe the novel as a literary form (Nel 24; *Mao* 159). Joe Moran adds that the attempted conflation of DeLillo and his characters is exacerbated by DeLillo's tendency to deal almost exclusively with "publicity outlets which do not intrude into his personal life and allow him to explore similar ideas [to those with which he grapples in his novels] freely in interviews" (130).

130), Brita's bold defiance and seriousness of purpose, taken together, suggest an artistic temperament much more similar to DeLillo's own than Bill Gray's position could ever be.

While Don DeLillo isn't Bill Gray and certainly isn't Bucky Wunderlick, when taken together, *Great Jones Street* and *Mao II* dramatize DeLillo's multiple conceptual misgivings about celebrity. When one ceases to be a private figure but becomes an image, DeLillo argues, he becomes endlessly open to interpretation, less a person and more a discursive idea. For both Bucky Wunderlick and Bill Gray, this is an unsettling turn of events. The literal meaning of the word dehumanization is instructive here: when people's acquaintance with an artist comes not through a personal interaction with him but through a two-dimensional image, audiences respond to a fabricated identity and not to a real person. This problem gets exacerbated when an artist gets hamstrung by that image, which he must choose to either embrace or rail against, neither of which are entirely positive options. And worse, any artist who gains fame finds himself fighting the forces around him that commodify him and seek to use him as a means to selfish, market-driven ends. Fortunately, DeLillo suggests a solution, or at least an ameliorative goal: the search for an expressive language that will contribute to authentic expression, not expression that merely fills a need in the market. When a celebrity artist moves in the direction of achieving expressive language that can reach an audience—as Bucky does in the mountain tapes—he also moves in the direction of artistic and personal redemption. When a celebrity artist stops trying to discover expressive language and to engage his audience—as is the case with Bill Gray—personal and creative failure aren't far behind.

## CHAPTER 4

### IRONY, CELEBRITY, AND AUDIENCE IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

David Foster Wallace has repeatedly acknowledged Don DeLillo as a key influence and an inescapable ancestor for his generation of fiction writers and essayists. A key difference between Wallace and DeLillo, though, shape the former's career-long set of intellectual and societal interests. These two writers' varied personal relationships with the mass media lend both context and content to their work. DeLillo worked in advertising for years but quit to write fulltime and never looked back. He claims the great mid-century European filmmakers—Fellini and Godard in particular—to be more important influences, along with jazz and abstract expressionist painting, on his work than any literary figures (*Conversations* 16, 79, 156). And he emphatically asserts that unlike film, television is not an art form. If DeLillo's perspective as a media consumer is that of the connoisseur of the finest twentieth-century art, then Wallace writes as a fan, with all the positive and negative associations of that term intact. Wallace has written about advertising, perhaps most notably in *Infinite Jest* (1996), set in a near future in which time itself has corporate sponsorship: most of the novel takes place in the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment." He knows his art film too—just read the description of the filmography of avant-garde director James Incandenza (985-993) to be sure. And he doesn't just write insightfully about television and its omnipresence; he admits to watching his fair share of it, enjoying it, but feeling he probably shouldn't. Bret Easton

Ellis, a writer for whose work Wallace has expressed disdain,<sup>41</sup> celebrates “the surface of things” with such ambiguity that he remains open to charges that he doesn’t critique the glamorous life as much as he reifies the power of its tawdry attractions. Wallace is clearer about his relationship to the media he consumes. He likes to watch, as Chance the Gardener would put it, but he knows that television and its culture of celebrity that it displays can exert some mastery over him as an audience member and as a writer alike.

Entertainment isn’t inherently bad, Wallace has spent a career telling his readers, but its consumers do themselves a huge disservice if they don’t work to develop self-awareness about their own relationships with mass media. Put another way, Wallace responds positively to a wide variety of high and low cultural production alike—he even admits to a soft spot for *Baywatch* (Bruni 40)—but he responds negatively to those reactions to pop culture than tend toward the hand-wringing or apocalyptic. He knows that entertainment in any form—literary novel or televised kitsch—can never be as satisfying as we want it to be. Celebrities, then, are ultimately folks like us in Wallace’s work: he demystifies their mystique while remaining a bit beholden to that mystique in his own life and consumption. I’ll demonstrate that reactions to celebrity in Wallace’s fiction and nonfiction represent a useful and recurring point where his interests in entertainment, irony, and audience converge.

### **The Ironic Postmodernist Audience**

Before I discuss Wallace’s career-long focus on irony and what it means for his understandings of both celebrity and audience, it’s instructive to consider the mode of

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<sup>41</sup>Wallace in a 1993 interview: “If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything” (Interview 129). Many now read the title story in *Girl With Curious Hair* as a biting parody of Ellis’s “phony nihilism” (Boswell 79).

consumption that Wallace enacts himself as a viewer of mass media and which he seems to endorse more broadly. Joshua Gamson's taxonomy of types of audiences to celebrity culture begins with "traditionals," consumers who accept as basically authentic the star personae they see in celebrity journalism and entertainment publicity. They view the famous as deserving of their fame, as do "second-order traditionals," who know achievement when they see it, but unlike traditionals, second-order traditionals can identify empty and artificial publicity too. These consumers' faith in the conventional and generic narratives attached to celebrities "is not based on ignorance of the production system but takes it into account; nonetheless, it is a belief in both discernible authenticity and the deserving celebrity" (Gamson 147). For the second-order traditionalist, the dominant story of a celebrity image represents a combination of earned, merited attention (i.e., talent and achievement) and artificially created publicity (i.e., calculated image-making and hype).

In contrast to both of these positions, Wallace frequently takes on what Gamson calls the "postmodernist" audience role. For the postmodernist audience member, "artificial creation" of the star image is in itself the dominant story, and the primary way that such an audience member approaches a celebrity is through "[d]econstruction of [the] techniques" used to create that image (Gamson 146). Gamson's construction of this position captures Wallace's perspective on most pop cultural phenomena: he understands that they're seductions, meant to attract an audience, separate them from their money, steal their time, and alter their worldview in not-altogether positive ways. Still, he can't look away. He's a fan, he admits it, and sometimes he beats himself up over it. Even more problematically, awareness of the falsehoods embedded in these fabricated star

images does not necessarily bring to an end the postmodernist audience member's interest. These consumers "may be entirely skeptical but in fact interested in the techniques of artifice in and of themselves" (Gamson 147). These viewers find themselves in a vicious and ironic circle, as "the revelation of technique feeds rather than damages their interest" (Gamson 147).

Understanding this type of audience position is key to understanding Wallace's body of work, in large part because vicious circles of irony are a motivating force behind his project. Marshall Boswell usefully distills the artistic conundrum with which Wallace wrestled for years. Wallace feels a singularly postmodern spin on the anxiety of influence:

Whereas the postmodern work of his forebears firmly grounds itself in a literary tradition whose grip it feels it cannot shake, Wallace's work demonstrates how the original postmodernists' reliance on self-consciousness, parody, and irony has now become a culture-wide phenomenon: not only is our pop culture equally self-reflexive and self-aware, but so are the people of Wallace's generation, for whom irony is a weapon and a badge of sophistication. (207)

Wallace's first nonfiction meditation on irony's destructive potential is the groundbreaking essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) which now reads as a statement of purpose for all that Wallace would publish after it (and some of what he published before as well). The essay opens, "Fiction writers as a species tend to be ogles. They tend to lurk and to stare [...] They are born watchers. They are viewers" ("E Unibus" 151). He emphasizes that he, like most of his readers, is an audience member by nature. Wallace knows that statistically speaking, at least, his reader probably spends hours a day as an audience to television alone, to say nothing of other media, and he confesses to the same habit. Fiction and television come together, he says, at a locus he calls "self-conscious irony" ("E Unibus" 161). Wallace argues that this is a

problem for the fiction writer because the ironic functions of absurdism and sarcasm that worked so well for mid-century postmodern novelists have now been co-opted by popular culture, television in particular. What once seemed rebellious is now the status quo, as the normal mode of operation for the majority of popular television has become mocking, sardonic, and self-aware of its own generic clichés. The sincere authority and ordered family of *Leave It to Beaver* is out; the joyless barbed wit of *Married... With Children* is in. Furthermore, that rhetorical mode of self-conscious irony hasn't just become more ubiquitous. It's also become more destructive.

This ironic mode succeeds, Wallace grants, at shining a light on hypocrisy, attacking inequality, revealing ineptitude—all those things that good satire has done for centuries. Postmodern self-conscious irony fails grievously, however, in that no matter what it attacks, it never posits an alternative as something preferable. That's because for anyone who indulges in this particular ironic rhetoric, *everything* is worthy of ridicule, and equally so. Wallace asks, “[O]nce the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, *then* what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S has now been done and redone” (qtd. in McCaffery, “Interview” 147). And if everything is equally worthy of snarky sarcasm, then this ironic mode becomes disturbingly omnipresent. To use Wallace's own examples, postmodern irony gets packaged for mass consumption and delivered in media vessels as varied as urban rap stars and Rush Limbaugh (qtd. in McCaffery, “Interview” 146-147). Worst of all, though, the smugness inherent to this type of irony precludes any honest or empathetic connection between writer and audience. The postmodern ironist presents himself as detached from everything, because an unironic alignment with



anything or anyone of value would really be an admission that the ironist has found something *not* worthy of ridicule. This “hip cynicism” is actually better described, Wallace argues, as “a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it’s just kidding” (qtd. in McCaffery, “Interview” 146-147). Or as Boswell puts it, hip cynics are “so preoccupied [...] with *getting the joke* that [they] never allow [them]selves to feel anything directly” (Boswell 14; italics in original).

It’s important to remember that even as Wallace sees these tendencies toward destructive irony in mainstream pop culture, he acknowledges that they originated in fruitfully experimental literary fiction, especially those of the generation preceding his, like Robert Coover, John Barth, and others. For the American black humor writers of the 1960s, for example, farcical irony seemed the only appropriate response to what they saw as the absurdities of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and resistance to civil rights advances. Traditional realism seemed no longer an option for the technically innovative novelist, as reality itself had already gained a technologically-mediated patina of unreality. As an ambivalent heir to that tradition, Wallace feels powerless to rebel any further against realism without going into territory so experimental and borderline-nonverbal that it leaves behind even the most patient of readers. As he put it while reflecting on the mixed success of his self-consciously metafictional novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” part of his first story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), “Metafiction’s real end has always been Armageddon” (qtd. in McCaffery, “Interview” 134). Deconstruct a deconstruction of a deconstruction of a deconstruction, he knows, and all that’s left is a handful of literary dust, a heap of broken images. Wallace wants to give his audience more than that. But he also knows he’s equally

inescapably an inheritor of poststructuralist linguistic theory, so he also feels plain old realism is dead and gone too.<sup>42</sup> As he puts it, he can't hide from the sense that any fiction that isn't upfront to the reader about its own fictionality—its constructedness, its mediatedness, its utter fabrication—is somehow dishonest to its readers, an extreme that he also can't and won't accept.

### Irony and Celebrity Consumption

What does this all have to do with celebrity? To begin, one more thing Wallace shares with Coover and DeLillo: a propensity for incorporating real famous figures into his fictional worlds and nearly getting himself into hot water over the practice. Robert Coover's wicked sad-sack depiction of Richard Nixon as the narrator of *The Public Burning* (1977) led that novel to be shuttled from publisher to publisher like a hot potato; later, Don DeLillo's reimagining of the inner life of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (1988) famously led George Will to call the novel "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" (A25). Similarly, Wallace's imaginative use of David Letterman, jazz musician Keith Jarrett, *Hawaii Five-O* star Jack Lord, and multiple game show hosts as short story characters in *Girl With Curious Hair* led to a publication delay of "a little over a year while lawyers secured copyrights and Wallace made revisions" (Boswell 5). And just as Walker Percy attached to *The Moviegoer*, for both legal and artistic reasons, a disclaimer addressing the artificiality of celebrity images, so Wallace offers on *Girl's* copyright page: "Where the names of corporate, media, or political figures are used here, those names are meant only to denote figures, images, the stuff of collective dreams; they

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<sup>42</sup>Wallace's search for an aesthetic that can both offer empathy to a real human reader and maintain an intellectual and linguistic rigor guides all of this work. Tom LeClair even reads the enormous *Infinite Jest* as "a metafictional allegory of this aesthetic orphanhood" ("Prodigious" 33), with each of the book's three Incandenza brothers representing an aesthetic that Wallace can't fully embrace: Orin as Ellis's brat pack, Mario as flashy image-fiction, and Hal as postmodern metafiction.

do not denote, or pretend to private information about, actual 3-D persons, living, dead, or otherwise.” Needless to say, Wallace’s disclaimer is far cheekier than Percy’s. Its unspoken subtext asks, don’t we all *know* by now that celebrities are basically fictions already? And that acknowledgement, even as it may seem steeped in the smug irony that Wallace so derides, actually is a gesture of honesty toward the reader. We all need to realize together, he tells his audience, what celebrities actually are: they are representations of real human beings, “actual 3-D persons” with real private inner lives, but their images are projections alone. Paradoxically, a shared acknowledgement by writer and reader that fictional things are fictional also functions as a way of sharing a commitment to transmitting truth honestly.

Once we’re all the same page about that (and the lawyers have done their business), Wallace implies, then the fun can begin. *Hawaii Five-O* star Jack Lord *can* be not just a character in a short story like “Westward the Course,” then, but he can also be a character within a short story being written by someone in the same story (*Girl* 364). And for Wallace, such a decision isn’t just metafictional fun and games, there to amuse a reader by playing with the very idea of fictionality. It’s a reflection of how omnipresent electronic media have become in everyday lives and how familiar the people we see on television start to become. If we welcome Jack Lord into our living rooms every week, then why can’t we welcome him into our literary fiction? Boswell is one of countless observers of media culture who reminds us, “Pop culture is our new mythos, the source of our contemporary archetypes” (67). Any celebrity image now tends to “both a real person and an emblem of some archetypal idea shared by the culture, the same way mythic characters like Odysseus and Perseus represent [...] archetypal ideas” (Boswell

67). Theorists of celebrity like Edgar Morin and Richard Dyer would agree: individual celebrities are signifiers with historicized ideological underpinnings.<sup>43</sup> Or as Wallace has a character opine in “Westward the Course,” pop culture “is the *symbolic representation of what people already believe*” (*Girl* 271; italics in original).

But *do* people “believe” in pop culture’s power in Wallace’s era in the same manner they once did? If he’s correct about television’s hyper-familiarity and the omnipresence of vacuous hip irony, then we should have all figured out by now that celebrity is a scam, right? On the contrary: celebrity still bears great influence, but we just know more now as a culture about how it works. As a result of the explosion in celebrity journalism since the 1970s, cable television, and later, endless discussion of celebrity on the Internet, celebrities are both more accessible than ever to audiences and more oddly distant. The sheer volume of images of and reportage about famous people only reinforces the sense that these people are somehow different from their audience. Celebrities, now more than ever, must present themselves as both ordinary and extraordinary, even when the pretension to ordinariness is just a pose. But the postmodernist audience member that Gamson describes (and that Wallace exemplifies) is more aware than mass media audiences have ever been before of the artificiality behind media production.

In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace reveals just how much he knows about how television syndication works, information that most TV-savvy viewers would have now, but that he implies far fewer viewers would have had years before. “I, like millions of other Americans, know this stuff only because I saw a special three-part report about

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<sup>43</sup>Consider as an example Dyer’s excellent reading of the variety of cultural meanings attached to Jane Fonda (*Stars* 63-85).

syndication on *Entertainment Tonight*,” he explains, “itself the first nationally syndicated ‘news’ program and the first infomercial so popular that TV stations were willing to pay for it” (158). With this greater audience awareness of the process of creating television comes a greater awareness of the artificiality of its final product also. None of this, though, alters the medium’s essential familiarity, as it remains in our living rooms, more often than not the focal point of the room’s layout. As a result, Wallace acknowledges, TV characters can become “close friends,” but we maintain an essential distance from their portrayers. These performers are still “strangers, they’re images, demigods, and they move in a different sphere, hang out with and marry only each other, seem even as actors accessible to Audience only via the mediation of tabloids, talk show, EMI signal” (E Unibus 154-155). As a result, celebrities must now present any pretenses to normality with that familiar ironic wink-and-nudge. Gone are the days when fan magazines might unironically publish photos of celebrities partaking in the same daily activities as the unwashed masses—Judy Garland playing baseball and the like. In its place, Wallace reminds us, is a widespread sense that when stars attempt to project ordinariness, they’re either slumming, being intentionally disingenuous, or making a conscious (and likely profit-influenced) manipulation of their personae.<sup>44</sup> Either way, there’s a large gap between what’s performed and what’s meant—the very definition of irony.

Wallace depicts in fiction that sense of an irony gap in the short story “My Appearance,” collected in *Girl With Curious Hair*, except now the gap reveals a

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<sup>44</sup>This recognition of irony’s centrality in mass media entertainment goes as far back as Wallace’s first major published nonfiction, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (1990), co-authored with Mark Costello and now widely considered the first serious book-length study of hip-hop music. Wallace explains, “the hip-hop artist must present himself and his rap to a tough audience as at once *for* and *of* that audience. [...] For the audience, in other words, the rapper must literally be the homeboy next door...except now a neighbor who’s up on stage, rich and famous, via his *entitlement* to speak to, of and for his community” (*Signifying* 115; italics in original).

separation not between statement and intention, but between people who embrace and who reject irony. Edilyn, the story's narrator, is a television actress who, if not thought of as a hugely talented actress, is reasonably successful and comes across as by far the most well-adjusted person associated with mass media in all of Wallace's work. Edilyn describes herself as a hard worker who respects her colleagues and has "few illusions left" about her own level of talent and place in the entertainment industry (*Girl* 177). She thinks of herself as an open book with nothing to be ashamed of, even if she did just appear in a not-terribly-hip commercial for Oscar Mayer wieners. She sees no reason to hide from her audience, no sense that her public and private self should be distinct and separate, no sense that the signifier of the celebrity and the signified of the person-who-happens-to-be-an-actress are different at all. As she tells readers in the story's first sentence, she "appeared in public on 'Late Night with David Letterman' on March 22, 1989" (*Girl* 175), and this singular appearance as a talk show guest animates the story's meditation on how irony affects not only writers and audiences, but personal relationships.

Edilyn's openness does not automatically make her appearance on this show easy, however. Edilyn's husband Rudy, terrified that his wife will be made to look foolish on the notably absurdist and sarcastic program,<sup>45</sup> which he calls an "*anti-show*" (188), insists that the only way she can avoid being savaged and made an object of ridicule is to ridicule herself first, "but in a self-aware and ironic way" (183). When Edilyn insists that Letterman is not a mean person, Rudy responds, "meanness is not the issue. The issue is

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<sup>45</sup>In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace refers to Letterman as "[t]he ironic eighties' true Angel of Death" (180). For his own part, Frank Bruni would later compare Wallace himself to "David Letterman with a postgraduate degree and diction" (39), implying that Wallace really can't get out of the loop of self-conscious irony.

*ridiculousness*. [...] The whole thing feeds off *everybody's* ridiculousness. It's the way the audience can tell he *chooses* to ridicule himself that exempts the clever bastard from real ridicule" (180-181; italics in original). Rudy describes pre-emptive irony at its finest, but Edilyn wants to have nothing of it. Practically channeling Wallace, another character assisting in Edilyn's training in televised insincerity insists, "Sincerity is out [...] The joke is now *on* people who're sincere" (182). Rudy, who works in television production, will eventually insist on letting Edilyn wear an earpiece during the show so that he can coach her as Letterman interviews her. Edilyn gives in to the request but will ignore most of the coaching. Given that she wants to maintain honesty but that every other character in the story refuses to allow honesty in full, she must find a way "to reconcile her real self [...] with her fabricated identity as a celebrity" (Boswell 94), especially since all of these other characters refuse to accept her self-presentation as fully authentic.

Such disregard for Rudy's preparations reveals how consistently Edilyn rejects irony as a coping mechanism throughout the story. She counters Rudy's insistence that the talk show is designed to make its guests look foolish by pointing out that its host himself is a bit foolish: "The man has freckles," she points out. "He used to be a local weatherman" (179). Edilyn remains open to the idea that this interview can be a genuine, sincere, essentially unmediated conversation—it is "supposed to be nothing more than a fun interview" (184)—and in fact she seems to defeat Letterman with sincerity.

Letterman does bring up Edilyn's Oscar Mayer commercials, which Rudy has previously identified as the only thing about Edilyn that can be savaged, and hence must wind up being Letterman's tool of ridicule. In keeping with her air of honesty, Edilyn explains in

her narration, “I thought we had made some good honest attractive commercials for a product that didn’t claim to be anything more than occasional and fun” (183). When the topic comes up on the show, she is typically direct: “I’m not a great actress, David [...] I’m an actress in commercial television. Why not act in television commercials?” (193). After she emphasizes being thoroughly comfortable with her career and personal life and even pointing out that commercials do require some modicum of acting talent, “Letterman appeared suddenly diffident, reluctant about something” (195). In that moment, Edilyn realizes she’s put the host on the defensive, making him realize that the old absurdist irony doesn’t work on everyone. She might make fun of her *decision* to do a hot dog commercial, but she won’t let anyone make fun of *her* for it, as she sees nothing in her life to be ashamed of.

But it’s not an unqualified victory for Edilyn and the forces of honesty, as she does succumb to insincerity in small ways. Following some mild ribbing about the Oscar Mayer ads, Edilyn she tells Letterman she did the hot dog commercials for free; we sense this is a lie, as Rudy tells her to through the earpiece that it’s okay to divulge something about “back taxes” (196). But this perhaps-fake revelation diffuses any tension that has developed as Edilyn has been defiantly sincere until this point. Everyone has a laugh, and Edilyn says Dave “looked like a very large toy” (197)—not anything terribly real, to be sure, but something basically harmless. Additionally, there’s a notable shift in Edilyn’s narrative tone as she describes the segments that precede hers on the show. She describes a comedy bit in which Letterman points out medications that resemble candies, recalling that “the faddish anti-anxiety medication Xanax [which Edilyn has been consuming throughout the story] was supposed to resemble miniatures of those horrible



soft pink-orange candy peanuts that everyone sees everywhere but no one will admit ever to having tasted” (186). Even if just for a moment, Edilyn gets truly snarky, buying into insincerity and irony even if just for a moment—and even if she’s just quoting Letterman, it’s notable that she doesn’t filter his sarcasm through her otherwise guileless narration.

Small lapses into irony aside, Edilyn and her narration suggest that the real story here is not in her remarkable ability to survive a sardonic talk show by being (almost) entirely honest. More importantly, Edilyn realizes that her husband’s willingness to embrace irony as a coping mechanism strikes her as a character flaw, and it implies deeper problems in their marriage, as the two may have fundamentally incompatible worldviews. In their post-interview conversation, Rudy insists that Edilyn was successful on the show only because she was acting, just as he instructed her to do anything *but* be herself during their pre-show preparations: “Of course that’s not you [...] If a you shows its sweet little bottom anywhere near the set of ‘Late Night,’ it’ll get the hell savaged out of it” (184). Even after her appearance, Edilyn just doesn’t see it that way: “when we cut to that commercial message, David Letterman was still the same way” (197). Sure, the host remained visible to his live audience and on some level, he still had to exude the public image that he’s constructed for himself. But what matters here is that Edilyn is still guileless, on the opposite end of the irony spectrum from Rudy. “I wasn’t acting with David Letterman,” she tells him, adding in her narration, “And I was sincere” (198).

Early in the story, Edilyn reports that Rudy says her “heart’s heart is invisible, and unapproachably hidden. Which is what Rudy thought could save me from all this appearance implied” (175). She agrees here to her own unknowableness, but she does so differently from how Rudy wants to present it. She means that we’re all ultimately alone,

never fully psychologically knowable by another human being—he means that we’re all ultimately pretending. As she tells him at the end of the story, “[I]f no one is really the way we see them [...] that would include me. And you” (200). The line is a fictional reframing of a central question in “E Unibus Pluram”: “All irony is a variation on a sort of existential poker-face. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit ‘I don’t really mean what I say.’ So what *does* irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it’s impossible to mean what you say?” (183-184). Edilyn’s answer implies that indeed it is impossible, and while that subsequent negation of honesty has negative implications for media representation, it has positively ruinous implications for human relationships. What was supposed to be just a fun interview winds up being a positive experience on television, but privately, it has “opened a fatal fissure in their marriage,” as both Edilyn and Rudy realize they are “on irreconcilably opposite ends of the irony spectrum” (Boswell 97).

Ultimately, though, Wallace is less interested in how television views and remakes its audiences and personalities than he is interested in how to build a positive relationship between writer and reader. The hyper-metafictional “Westward the Course” ends with a meditation on metafiction itself, arguing that metafiction like John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968), a key intertext for Wallace’s novella, does not “love” its readers (331). When a writer leaves readers stuck inside a phony textual world that seems more an intellectual exercise than an attempt to speak to readers’ lives, joys, and worries, Wallace argues, that writer reveals that “metafiction is untrue, as a lover” (332). Since insincerity remains Wallace’s least admired characteristic, Wallace aims to write fiction that, even when difficult and opaque, offers actual emotional content onto which a

reader can grasp. Boswell explains that Wallace's understanding of language itself, influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, is instructive here:

the crucial difference between Barth's poststructuralist vision of language and Wallace's Wittgensteinian one [...] lies in the terms 'game' and 'play.' A language-game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant, whereas 'play' in Derrida is a dynamic property of language itself [...] The point here is that for Wittgenstein [and I would add, for Wallace in turn], language does not displace us from the world but rather takes place 'in' that world, specifically among people in language-game situations. Far from alienating us from others, language can only exist as a product of communal agreement between others. (Boswell 30-31)

In other words, language as Wallace understands it requires an audience. This understanding does not lead Wallace to forsake entirely all things metafictional, as he's already concluded that traditional realism that pretends to directly depict reality is basically dishonest. On the contrary, it leads him to write literature that's aware of its own mediatedness as it transmits a story but, crucially, also remembers to whom that information is being transmitted: a reader. In Wallace's work, metafiction "becomes an open system of communication—an elaborate and entertaining game—between author and reader" (Boswell 31). His goal, then, is to write literature meets its reader in the middle. Wallace expects his audiences to do interpretive work in extracting meaning from his words, but he also feels a weighty responsibility to place before them words that transmit information in a simultaneously entertaining and sincere manner.

As a result, Wallace places great faith in audiences, even those who do spend hours a day watching television. It takes great faith in one's readers, after all, to publish a thousand-page novel, and even before *Infinite Jest* Wallace spends large chunks of "E Unibus Pluram" explaining why most alarmist attacks on television—which are really

alarmist attacks on television's viewers—are misguided.<sup>46</sup> First of all, he points out, these attacks on a dynamic and trendsetting medium always fail. Television, “has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day” (“E Unibus” 171). Television’s awareness of its own audience is grounded in its pre-emptive response to any attacks on the medium’s shortcomings themselves. Okay, TV seems to say, I’m shallow, snarky and puerile. I’m also ridiculously popular. What else ya got, critic?

### **The Sincere Artist and the Ironic Audience**

“The problem isn’t that today’s readership is *dumb*, I don’t think,” Wallace explains. “Just that TV and the commercial-art culture’s trained it to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations” (qtd. in McCaffery, “Interview” 128). Here as ever, Wallace refuses to view his audience as second to anyone in terms of intellectual capabilities, but he does place considerable blame on the entertainment-industrial complex. Crucially, though, these “lazy” and “childish” expectations do not get perpetuated by TV alone: fiction (or more to the point, bad fiction) can be complicit too. Two types of fiction that Wallace disdains, coldly unemotional avant-garde fiction and popular genre fiction akin to “television on the page,” may seem in direct opposition to each other, but they both begin, Wallace argues, with “a contempt for the reader, an idea that literature’s current marginalization is the reader’s fault” (*Salon*). Wallace’s goal is fiction that treats its readers more positively: “The reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than

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<sup>46</sup>Note in particular this claim: “I’m not saying that television is vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be really similar in their vulgar and prurient and stupid interests and wildly different in their refined and moral and intelligent interests. It’s all about syncretic diversity: neither medium nor viewers are responsible for quality” (“E Unibus” 163).

striking a number of poses” (*Salon*). He’s emphasizing there that a great writer must keep his audience in mind, but that keeping an audience in mind is not the same thing as giving an audience exactly what they think they want.

Wallace offers an excellent example of an artist who does just that in “David Lynch Keeps His Head” (orig. pub. 1995), his accomplished profile of film director David Lynch, collected in Wallace’s first volume of essays, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997). Wallace clearly respects Lynch’s work, but he also acknowledges his own unusual position as a journalist for hire by *Premiere* magazine, ostensibly reporting from the set of Lynch’s film *Lost Highway* (1997). He knows he’s expected to write something akin to a traditional behind-the-scenes profile even as he knows he’ll do something entirely his own.<sup>47</sup> Wallace’s attitude toward Lynch reveals an admiration for the director’s films and the long shadow of influence he casts over all facets of contemporary American moviemaking. But he also approaches Lynch as celebrity as much as he does Lynch as artist, contrasting the idea of Lynch his audiences and promoters have cultivated—a guy making movies that weird *must* be a weirdo himself, right?—with Lynch’s own affect on the film set, endearingly dorky and given to exclamations like “Golly!” and “Okey-doke” (185-186). In doing so, he reveals an awareness that a considerable disconnect exists between the *idea* of David Lynch the famous director and the *fact* of David Lynch the person. The two are not irreconcilable, though, and keen awareness of audience plays a major role in bridging the gap.

Wallace divides the profile into non-consecutively numbered individually-titled fragments. The first, marked “what David Lynch is really like,” opens, “I have

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<sup>47</sup>Wallace’s perspective here, both admiring of Lynch’s talent and keenly aware of the artificiality of the entire situation, places him, for this essay at least, in the role of the second-order traditional audience member, to use Gamson’s celebrity audience taxonomy.

absolutely no idea. I rarely got closer than five feet away from him and never talked to him. [...] The first time I lay actual eyes on the real David Lynch on the set of his movie, he's peeing on a tree. I am not kidding" (*Supposedly* 147). That "I am not kidding" signals an awareness that this doesn't fit with the projected image that already exists. And so begins a perhaps counter-intuitively literary snapshot of Lynch that reveals how this filmmaker—who's made a career out of unsettling psychological dramas whose characters reveal surprising neuroses—seems utterly comfortable in his own skin and respectful of his audiences, even as he aims to freak them out.

Wallace's discussion of Lynch fixates on a quality in the director that amounts to basic honesty. He uses cheesy slang terms with no "evident irony or disingenuity or even the flattened aspect of somebody who's parodying himself" (185-186). He carries himself as "a sort of geeky person who doesn't especially care whether people think he's geeky or not" (183). He bears an unusual ability to stay "remarkably himself throughout his filmmaking career" (151). It all adds up to a sense that the director's public image is not calculated, not deceptive, and above all, *sincere*, a display of one of Wallace's most cherished qualities. This sincerity goes hand in hand with Lynch's air of stubborn artistic independence: Wallace points out that at the time of the profile, Lynch had been in a slump, at least in terms of commercial success. Many wondered at the time whether *Lost Highway* would turn his career around, but Wallace writes, "a more interesting question ended up being whether David Lynch really gives much of a shit about whether his reputation is rehabilitated or not. [...] This attitude—like Lynch himself, like his work—seems to me to be both admirable and sort of nuts" (*Supposedly* 150). This is not an uncaring disregard for audience, but a blithe disregard for the wider marketplace. If

Lynch's attitude is indeed "sort of nuts," it's not because Wallace disrespects the idea of challenging an audience (or challenging the marketplace). It's because Lynch's art form has a higher overhead than Wallace's, basically, requiring funding and collaboration in a way that literature does not. The craziness in Lynch's artistic purity lies not in the decision to give an audience a difficult piece of art, but in the decision to try to get financial backing for a difficult movie. This apparent comfort with difficult subject matter leads Lynch "to possess the capacity for detachment from response that most artists only pay lip-service to: he does pretty much what he wants and appears not to give much of a shit whether you like it or even *get it*" (*Supposedly* 192).

On first glance, a comment like this one might seem to place Lynch in that category of postmodern experimentalists who disregard their readers and viewers, winding up making hopelessly solipsistic art that offers nothing to a real human reader. Yet a film, by nature of the mechanics of the art form, assumes a reader throughout its production—what is a movie camera if not a temporary stand-in for an eventual real human viewer? To best understand how Lynch in fact has his audience in mind all the time—and to see what Wallace does describe as hopelessly solipsistic art with little to offer—contrast the profile of Lynch with "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart" (orig. pub. 1994), Wallace's review (or perhaps more accurately, evisceration) of former tennis prodigy Tracy Austin's memoir *Beyond Center Court: My Story* (1992), collected in the volume of essays *Consider the Lobster* (2005). Wallace's utter disappointment in the book is fully present in miniature in his reaction to one line of Austin's: "I immediately knew what I had done, which was to win the US Open, and I was thrilled" (qtd. in

*Consider* 141). “This line haunts me,” Wallace writes. “[I]t’s like the whole letdown of the book boiled down into one dead bite” (*Consider* 151).

A former competitive tennis player himself, Wallace has written about tennis frequently, including in his magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, set in part at an elite tennis academy. He admits to a fascination with Austin’s rapid rise to fame and a desire to get the inside story on her achievements, as the memoir’s title promises, but he calls her “breathhtakingly insipid autobiography” emblematic of “both the seduction and the disappointment that seem to be built into the mass-market sports memoir” (142). Wallace experiences the disappointment that it’s easy to encounter in trying to crack what’s behind the façade of constructed persona when talking about certain kinds of famous figures. Though Wallace never implies that Austin’s book deliberately deceives or traffics in the kind of smug irony he so decries, he still finds it alarmingly insincere. Simply put, this book lies to its audience.

“[A]thletes’ stories seem to promise something more than the regular old name-dropping celebrity autobiography,” Wallace explains” (142). They seem to offer some explanation of how these undeniably talented people achieve things of which we mere mortal readers can only dream. When all that an athlete can muster in the way of reflection on her success is “and I was thrilled,” that person’s inability to articulate the sources of their success—or even what they’ve gained from that success, the fruits of their labor—does two things. First, it demystifies the aura of easy success that these celebrities cultivate. Athletes, Wallace realizes, have the ability to make their sports look easy whenever they succeed to their fullest potential. But when an athlete reveals himself or herself to be jaw-droppingly bad at talking about those feats (even with a ghostwriter),



readers realize that these celebrities are human too. Secondly, though, these bad books also reify the specialness of the athletic endeavor. Wallace's whole point is that if we first see famous people whose achievements are all physical, bodily, corporeal, and maybe as close to outside of the realm of language as humans can get and then expect them to be able to articulate the mechanics of those achievements in engaging language, then we're just plain expecting the wrong thing from the wrong people.

Taken together, these two points reveal that same tension that underlies all American celebrity: the need for a famous person to sell one's extraordinariness while maintaining an aura of ordinariness to which a non-famous audience can relate. Wallace notes that athletes' memoirs promise "to let us penetrate the indefinable mystery of what makes some persons geniuses, semidivine, to share with us the secret" (144). These books frustrate by suggesting that good old sense of the all-American democracy attached to celebrity, but they only suggest it. Wallace sees Austin's book and similar ones as promising that identification as a possibility—and then snatching it away through a kind of perverse silence on matters that might actually form a connection with the reader. Wanna hear about my uneventful childhood, my first date, my inner thoughts at my first big tournament win, reader? You're not gonna get it, they invariably say.

That's a denial of connection between reader and writer that Wallace finds just as insidious as the solipsism of bad experimental metafiction. In Austin's case, the denial comes about as the athlete "forgets who it's [the book's] supposed to be for" (145). The problem here: Austin's basically too concerned with speaking positively of seemingly everyone she ever met, with almost no exception, to the point that she disregards the reader, "the person who's spending money and time to access the consciousness of

someone he wishes to know and will never meet” (146). Wallace accepts that Austin is more talented at tennis than he, and he accepts that since her particular talent is performative and not verbal, she will not be able to articulate her gifts and her experiences as well as he might. He concludes, “It may well be that we spectators, who are not divinely gifted as athletes, are the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift we are denied” (155). This is truly revealing, because it reflects the relationship with his audience that Wallace sees himself having—he understands his books as having limited power until read. Only when the reader is available to see and animate the words on the page does the gift present itself.

Unlike Austin, David Lynch could talk about what he does, even though Wallace seems not to have conversed with the director. His art, however visual, is also basically linguistic, so discussing his method or intention would be a task within the same basic realm as his (relatively) normal mode of creative operation. Not so with a top athlete. More to the point, though, the difference between Lynch and Austin in Wallace’s description is that Lynch keeps an audience in mind, while Austin has forgotten who her book is for. True, Lynch basically disregards whether or not his films make money, but his creative process keeps an actual viewer in mind at all times. Austin’s process (or Austin’s and her ghostwriter’s process, rather) clearly did not. Her book and books like it stubbornly refuse to deliver what they promise. Lynch’s films tend to deliver the unexpected, but if by now the promise of a David Lynch film is the promise of a cinematic head trip that audiences enter *expecting* to leave unsettled, then he’s actually delivering just fine. Most perversely of all, then, these two reactions to celebrity, set side by side, reveal that Lynch is the far more honest about his fame.

Film, tennis, and sincerity don't just come together in Wallace's nonfiction, though: there's always *Infinite Jest*, the writer's masterpiece. Commentators on this enormous novel agree that simple plot summary is impossible, but a few starting points present themselves. The novel's central location is an elite tennis academy, run by the Incandenza family. Deceased patriarch James was an avant-garde filmmaker, while his son Hal is a promising young scholar and a tennis prodigy. A halfway house for recovering addicts is nearby, as are a band of Quebecois separatists who want to obtain for their own nefarious purposes a copy of James Incandenza's last film, also titled *Infinite Jest*. The film *Infinite Jest* engrosses to the point of paralysis. Its viewers want nothing else but to keep watching. They eventually die, usually of dehydration or starvation in the most literal sense, but metaphorically speaking, they're entertained to death. I would argue that read alongside Wallace's nonfiction and short fiction, *Infinite Jest* presents itself as a messy but always intriguing miscellany, an attempt to bring together meditations on all of Wallace's pet obsessions—television, addiction, irony, tennis, film, absurdist humor, wry manipulations of history, the ties that bind even dysfunctional families—give adequate time on the page to each, and then let the plotlines that have developed each meditation all smash into each other.

Portions of *Infinite Jest* that deal with fame, irony, and audience will sound familiar to readers already familiar with Wallace's nonfiction work on these same topics. On fame, for instance, the elite young tennis players at Enfield Tennis Academy work toward the goal of making the pro tennis tour, referred to as "The Show," a name that implies these successful athletes become entertainers more than just physical competitors. As one prorektor at the academy explains, players who make The Show lose all sense of a

private life as they “get all they want of being made into statues to be looked at and poked at and discussed, and then some” (*Infinite* 661). Indeed, one tennis student seems to have begun life without a private self due to his name alone: we see this when he gets introduced as “John Wayne. No relation to the real John Wayne” (681).<sup>48</sup> The statement reveals Wallace’s sense that individuals lose their private identities once become famous, also developed in the writer’s celebrity profiles and “My Appearance.”

The novel’s moments of reflection on the smugness of contemporary irony recall nothing else so much as “E Unibus Pluram.” Hal Incandenza spends much of the novel depressed, in part due to withdrawal from marijuana addiction. Wallace’s narration points out, “It’s of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool.” Later on the same page, the narrative voice shifts to free indirect discourse aligned with Hal, who “theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic” (694-695). Just as Doctorow enhances the power of Marxist readings of celebrity in *Ragtime* by placing these readings in the minds and the mouths of actual characters, here Wallace animates and strengthens his arguments about irony’s discontents by showing what it looks like when a character lives under irony’s oppression.

As in Wallace’s nonfiction and interviews, two alternatives to smug, ironic art appear: cold, cerebral metafiction (or in *Infinite Jest*, cold, cerebral conceptual film), or

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<sup>48</sup>Wallace no doubt knows that actor John Wayne was born Marion Morrison, so even “the real John Wayne” isn’t really John Wayne, which means the fictional tennis-playing John Wayne could still be considered “the real John Wayne” were he not a literary character—but discussions like this all amount to exactly why Wallace thinks showy metafiction is just one enormous headache.

sincere and honest art that risks sentiment in an attempt to appeal to an audience. James Incandenza attempts both. Joelle van Dyne, who appears in the fatal *Infinite Jest*, derides most of Incandenza's films as "mordant, sophisticated, campy, hip, cynical, technically mind-bending; but cold, amateurish, hidden: no risk of empathy" (740). Boswell notes, "All of Wallace's characteristic complaints about the postmodernists of the previous generation are lined up here" (163). But *Infinite Jest*, Incandenza's final film, had a different purpose, at least, even if its desired effect is not its actual effect. Late in the book, the "wraith" of Incandenza appears in a dream to the hospitalized recovering alcoholic Don Gately. This ghostly figure explains that *Infinite Jest* was actually an attempt to connect with his son Hal, who—perhaps in the manner of the solipsistic artist—had seemed to shut out all the world. The wraith reports that he spent his final weeks of life "working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau" (838-839). He emphasizes that for all of the scholarly discussions of his own films, most commentators "never saw that his most serious wish was: *to entertain*" (839; italics in original).

If this sounds like Wallace speaking through Incandenza, then fair enough. While most commentators accept that the wraith is a ghostly representation of Hal's filmmaker father, LeClair goes so far as to say the author actually enters the novel here overtly to speak to the reader directly ("Prodigious" 32). And I agree with critics who argue that for all of its narrative complexity and sheer intimidating heft, *Infinite Jest* is a novel that seeks to delight and amuse readers. Of course, this statement is inherently paradoxical, since this book that so entertains is also "both a diagnosis and a critique of the culture's

addiction to pleasure” (Boswell 119). But unlike the passive entertainments—most notably, the film *Infinite Jest*—that Wallace critiques, the novel *Infinite Jest* demands, by virtue of that same narrative complexity, that the reader do inescapable interpretive work, and in so doing, work *with* the author to create meaning. Nearly all readers of the novel share the experience of having to use two bookmarks during their reading—one for the main text, one for the 97 pages of 388 endnotes that supplement the main text and occasionally reveal important plot points. Since Wallace’s audience “take[s] valuable information from the notes and come[s] away with the sense that they have actually participated jointly in the game, instead of being on the receiving end of a barrage of authorial poses,” the book’s very format resists in multiple ways any kind of passive reading in multiple ways (Jacobs 226). The book requires active physical work, frequent flipping back and forth from main text to endnotes, just to make sense of things at all. This transmission of information and narrative from writer to reader is not a simple one, but it’s one with considerable payoff for the active reader.

Wallace asked some of the same questions throughout his career as his predecessors Ellis and DeLillo, interested as they all are in trying to do something creative and countercultural in an age when everything gets turned to product. As Wallace puts it, “What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?” (E Unibus 184). Ellis wonders if literature can still shock in a culture where it seems that anything goes; DeLillo wonders if writers can remain on the margins in a culture that turns everything into a product; and here Wallace wonders if not just tennis players or filmmakers or actresses on talk shows but nearly *anyone at all* can convey any

message with sincerity in a culture that defaults to irony—which, after all, he sometimes reads as plain old dishonesty—as its normal rhetorical mode.

In the first piece in his last book of essays, Wallace conveys sheer exhaustion with how far irony-as-default-mode has gone. He writes of the continued influence of spectacles of celebrity culture like the annual Academy Awards telecast:

We pretty much all tune in [...] we all still seem to watch. To care. [...] But the truth is that there's no more real joy about it all anymore. Worse, there seems to be this enormous unspoken conspiracy where we all pretend that there's still joy. That we think it's funny when Bob Dole does a Visa ad and Gorbachev shills for Pizza Hut. That the whole mainstream celebrity culture is rushing to cash in and all the while congratulating itself on pretending not to cash in. Underneath it all, though, we know the whole thing sucks. (*Consider* 4)

He goes on to “offer an alternative” in the remainder of the essay, a detailed (at times overly-detailed, in more ways than one) report on the annual awards show produced by the American adult-film industry. For all of his sometimes palpable discomfort at the sordidness of the event, Wallace grudgingly acknowledges that he's seeing, maybe for the first time, an industry that is thoroughly honest with itself about profit being its primary motivation. He quotes another attendee who refers to the event as “an Irony-Free Zone” (*Consider* 8), quite possibly the only such perversely honest space in Wallace's entire body of work. Wallace admits this fatalistically, not joyfully. He's finally found a way out of the loop of postmodern irony, but he sees there that getting out of the loop doesn't lead to metafictional Armageddon, but to a pretty darn tawdry celebration of the crassest kind of crass commercialism around. With honesty like this, who needs irony?

Perhaps the most frequently quoted portion of “E Unibus Pluram,” especially by those like myself who read the essay as a manifesto in support of sincerity, is Wallace's

suggestion that many artists may soon reject irony in favor of honesty, and not a crassly commercial brand of honesty that's open only about its own machinery. Wallace proposes, "The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (192-193). This proposal, of course, is dangerous, and won't be amenable to every reader. Greg Carlisle goes so far as to suggest that viewers of the film *Infinite Jest* have been so jaded, so accustomed to hip ennui that their paralysis results from being grievously "unprepared for the intensity and honesty of the experience" (453). The not-so-subtle implication for Wallace's readers: choosing to deal with real emotion, either as writer or audience, breeds discomfort, yes; but it beats by a long shot the widespread and socially acceptable substitutes for it.

Unlike the worst postmodernist ironists, then, David Foster Wallace attacks the status quo *and* suggests an alternative: his new and improved, "untrendy" culture calls for a basic honesty. That cultural shift away from irony to honesty would require writers and celebrities alike to drop the masks of sarcasm and absurdism in an effort to create art that offers a genuine sense of connection to a real human reader. Wallace emphatically rejects the notion that this would require giving readers only what they think they want, or that it means succumbing to the fleeting whims of the mass marketplace. It does call for audiences to build self-awareness, both as readers and media consumers, and to develop a willingness to accept expressions of empathy that some might dismiss as gooey sentiment. Wallace's alternative, which I would argue he fulfills in his own work more



often than not, embraces both intellectual rigor and emotional openness; traditional convictions and artistic innovation; devastating pathos and wild comedy. What Wallace really wants is to have it—to have everything—both ways. And I mean that as a compliment.

## CHAPTER 5

### MORE THAN A VAST AVANT-POP WASTELAND:

### TELEVISION, HISTORICAL FICTION, AND TOM CARSON

I want to shift now from that trio of major postmodern American novelists—DeLillo, Ellis, Wallace—who write so frequently and trenchantly about media, fiction, and postmodernism to writers who use media and celebrity culture as springboards for discussing broader concerns relating to nation, politics, and identity. Tom Carson’s novel *Gilligan’s Wake* (2003) uses one piece of familiar television as a jumping-off point for a complex meditation on the U.S.’s role in Cold War geopolitics. The book recounts key events in twentieth-century American history through the voices of seven characters whose basic traits sound awfully familiar, at least to viewers of a certain perennially syndicated maritime-themed 1960s sitcom. These narrators include, as the title implies, a millionaire (and his wife), a movie star, a professor, and, as luck would have it, a girl by the name of Mary-Ann. While purportedly cluing in readers as to what the seven castaways were doing before that “fateful trip,” Carson has his narrators cross paths with a number of familiar entertainers and political figures. Additionally, the variety of their individual exploits lets them enter into the periphery of major events in Cold War history that reflect the expansion of American global influence in the decades following World War II.

In this chapter I argue that while Carson invades and fleshes out the televised world of *Gilligan's Island* by bringing the seven familiar castaways into strange contact with other familiar events and people, he does not conclude that television or celebrity culture in general is but “a vast wasteland,” to use the phrasing of former FCC chairman Newton Minow which Carson also borrows. *Gilligan's Wake* neither elevates the genre of the kitschy sitcom nor denigrates the historical novel. Rather, it reifies the ability of contemporary U.S. fiction to comment on history by bringing received national myths and shared cultural memory into ironic conflict. Furthermore, the frequent allusions to and riffs on James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others resonate just as deeply throughout the novel, if not more so, as the references to pop culture ephemera. As a result, Carson implies that he is less interested than many other pop-centric postmodern novelists in what the ubiquity of television tells us about American culture than in how that culture and its history can be depicted, questioned, and re-defined in literary fiction.

Furthermore, Carson demonstrates that literature that traffics heavily in pop cultural ephemera need not limit its relevance to the ephemeral. Instead, creative reuse of this content, however kitschy, can be a springboard toward discussion of large conceptual questions. I read *Gilligan's Wake* as a late entry in the 1980s-1990s subgenre of postmodern fiction known as Avant-Pop.<sup>49</sup> But Carson's novel does something that much Avant-Pop doesn't. While many Avant-Pop writers and words use metafictional techniques and pop content to comment on the ubiquity and influence of mass

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<sup>49</sup>For good introductions to Avant-Pop fiction and theory, see the collection *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology* (1995), edited by Larry McCaffery, and the critical volume *In Memoriam to Postmodernism: Essays on the Avant-Pop* (1995), edited by Mark Amerika and Lance Olsen. It's worth pointing out that the McCaffery anthology includes contributions from Ellis, DeLillo, and Wallace.

entertainment and archetypal media representations in American culture, *Gilligan's Wake* uses that same surrealistic and pop-scavenging mode to ask much larger questions about American historical and political realities. As such, it represents one way of incorporating traditionally high literary and kitschy popular material without privileging either of the two. And crucially, *Gilligan's Wake* never sacrifices macropolitical relevance for the limited and timebound charms of a cutesy, self-referential brand of postmodern writing.

### **Just Sit Right Back and You'll Read a Tale...**

So how do these characters take their respective places in American history? The major characters narrate their stories in seven separate chapters, arranged in the order they are mentioned in the *Gilligan's Island* theme song, beginning with a Gilligan-esque figure who speaks in self-consciously Joycean flights of linguistic fancy while in the psychiatric ward of the Mayo Clinic (we will come to find that this character is the shadowy Gil Egan, Jr., an ex-Marine CIA agent to whom each of the seven has some connection). The skipper served in the Navy during World War II on John Kennedy's PT-109 boat, where he also meets Richard Nixon. The millionaire helped accused communist Alger Hiss get his first government job. Mrs. Howell (known here as "L." for "Lovey") had an affair with the equally fictional Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby*. Ginger the movie star, originally from small-town Alabama, met JFK and Frank Sinatra before having a brief fling with Sammy Davis, Jr. The professor worked on the Manhattan Project with Robert Oppenheimer, helped create the CIA, and was a shadowy behind-the-scenes force within the federal government for decades before finally turning into a Godzilla-like devouring giant meant to symbolize American imperialism. And in

contrast, Mary-Ann epitomizes American innocence: she moves from her Kansas hometown to Paris, where she defends the U.S.'s role in the world while romantically involved with New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard. (Whew.)

These castaways are familiar stock characters, of course, but the plots and their implications are not; it is, after all, literary fiction that Carson is aiming to create here. On one level, Carson is up to nothing new by making television so central to a piece of so-called serious fiction. In an article published nearly fifteen years before *Gilligan's Wake*, Cecelia Tichi argues that "TV-generation" writers do not "refuse maturity; they are not a generation of video Peter Pans. Rather, they reject the division between the worlds of television and literature" (113). If this sounds old hat, it's because we ought to be pretty accustomed by now to novelists breaking down walls between popular art and high art. Yet Tichi's analysis of what these writers do, technically and culturally, is largely a survey of 1980s minimalism. Her examples—Bobbie Ann Mason and Bret Easton Ellis, contrasted against one John Updike novel—don't produce works that seem to inhabit television itself as much as they simply accept the omnipresence of the medium in American life. For a study of more recent writing that enacts the shift from television as a source of image in fiction to television as a source of entire fictional worlds that writers can then re-imagine for other purposes, I return to David Foster Wallace's masterful "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." Wallace charts a tradition of writers who recycle pop images, starting with the black-humor writers of the 1960s but including a "movement toward treating of the pop as its own reservoir of mythopeia [that] gathered momentum and quickly transcended both school and genre" ("E Unibus" 168). These works employ "transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in

which to imagine fictions about ‘real,’ albeit pop-mediated, characters” (“E Unibus” 171).

This trend coalesced into a nascent movement dubbed Avant-Pop, defined in terms of the contentious but symbiotic relationship between experimental aesthetics and the mass commercial market. Writers who create Avant-Pop works

have had to resist the avant-garde sensibility that stubbornly denies the existence of a popular media culture and its dominant influence over the way we use our imaginations to process experience. At the same time, A&P artists have had to work hard not to become so enamored by the false consciousness of the mass media itself that they lose sight of their creative directives. (Amerika and Olsen 18)

But even as that tightrope walk between the technically progressive and the disposably popular can result in some exhilarating and entertaining writing, it can also result in works that are, as in Wallace’s description of Mark Leyner’s work, “both amazing and forgettable, wonderful and oddly hollow” (192). Wallace is among those early 1990s authors and critics who, in Stephen Burn’s description, “seemed eager to draw a line under the postmodern era to apparently clear a new imaginative space for fiction” (“End of Postmodernism” 220).

Carson resists forgettability and hollowness by providing a novel that, while undeniably literary and televisual, is eager to assert its relevance far beyond those two media planes. In other words, the book isn’t just about a cheesy sitcom or about a culture that reveres cheesy sitcoms; the author leaves banal observations about the TV show itself (“Hey, ever notice, why *did* Ginger bring so many changes of clothing on a three-hour tour?!”) to any number of less-than-original stand-up comics. *Gilligan’s Island* works within the novel both as a surprisingly rich fictional world to explore in exhaustive

detail and as a jumping-off point for keen observations about both literature and American history.

As the title implies, another key jumping-off point is high modernism, especially as seen in the novel's first chapter, the fragmented thoughts of Gil Egan, Mayo Clinic psychiatric patient. A quick selection of the high modernist allusions in those fifteen pages would begin as our narrator intones, post-electroshock treatment, "Here came everybody but me" (15) recalling the "Here Comes Everybody" of—it had to show up sooner or later, right?—Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939).<sup>50</sup> The Beat poets appear as Gil receives a message reading, "I'm with you in Rochester" (15), adding the Mayo Clinic's location to a salient line from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956). Then Gil recalls a game he played with an old girlfriend that involved purposely misquoting Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)—"In my younger and more vulnerable years [...] my father gave me a dead animal that I've been turning over with a stick ever since," for instance (15).<sup>51</sup> Back in the present, while on laundry duty at the clinic, Gil remembers how "laundry was the cruelest chore—breeding clean clothes out of the dead wash, mixing Tide and Joy, and so on" (16), a parody that directly echoes the opening lines of Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922).

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<sup>50</sup>Where not otherwise noted, parenthetical references in this chapter refer to *Gilligan's Wake*.

<sup>51</sup>Amerika and Olsen begin Avant-Pop's genealogy at the age of high modernism, at *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* (4-5). But Fitzgerald, perhaps even more than Joyce, truth be told, is the central literary predecessor here. In chapter four, Mrs. Howell (or as she's known from the theme song, "his [the millionaire's] wife") recalls her torrid affair with Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby*. She helps Daisy get an illegal abortion (96), witnesses "Tom Buchanan's startling, ghastly death on the polo field" (98), attends Nick Carraway's wedding to Amelia Earhart(!) (99), and is chauffeured around Long Island by Lindbergh baby-kidnapper Bruno Hauptmann (100). She attempts to follow Daisy's interest in avant-garde modernism—they view Dadaist art, a screening of *Un Chien Andalou*—but does not share Daisy's enthusiasm, and eventually she returns to Thurston Howell III (the millionaire), the consistent constant between her flings.

And the chapter ends mid-sentence with the word *the*, another nod to *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>52</sup>

And literary culture of the time is itself prominent: Gil talks with Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in the opening chapter, who is angry that the newly-inaugurated President Kennedy requested for the occasion a poem from Robert Frost, not from a Beat like himself or even, he says with exasperation, William Carlos Williams. (Meanwhile, Gil thinks he sees Jimmy Stewart pull Kim Novak out of the San Francisco Bay a la *Vertigo*—but that’s another story.)

If this sounds dense and exhausting—well, in that surreal and free-associative first chapter, it is. It should be equally clear, though, that literary allusions in Carson’s novel never function solely as mere references to high literary works. They characterize, they establish setting, and they function as elaborate puns; as a result, Carson suggests that even canonized literature constitutes not a separate culture, but a part of one large American (and eventually, global) culture.<sup>53</sup> He breaks down the wall, then, between the pop and the literary by placing them in the same room and ignoring the walls. We as readers are not meant to be stretching upward, so to speak, to reach a high literary allusion or stooping down to catch a reference to a sitcom. We are to find them all on the same shelf and delight in our discoveries.

Being above the ephemera of pop culture seems an act of bad faith in *Gilligan’s Wake*’s world. As Tichi puts it, a writer’s placement of television within a text can either put the reader above it—treating its images as unfamiliar things which we cannot identify

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<sup>52</sup>To be fair, not everyone is buying the allusions Carson is selling. David Kelly’s review in the *New York Times* claims that *Gilligan’s Wake* “is not Joycean—unless ‘Joycean’ refers to [*Three’s Company* star] Joyce DeWitt, [Trixie Norton of *Honeymooners* fame] Joyce Randolph, or [perennial talk-show guest and psychologist] Joyce Brothers” (A7).

<sup>53</sup>It may also be instructive here to consider Carson’s day job—he’s an award-winning film and television critic for *Esquire*, bringing critical writing about pop forms of narrative to a publication that made its name publishing Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Gay Talese, among many others.



without “implicat[ing] ourselves in the crass, the commercial” (116)—or within the flow of images itself, in a place where “[n]o distinction between the mature and the puerile hinges on knowledge or ignorance of commercial television” (118). Carson would likely say that we already are unavoidably implicated in the crass side of television, and readers of his novel if ignorant of the medium will, at least, miss some sophisticated and very funny wordplay. At most, a lack of awareness of television comes to constitute an ignorance in turn of American political history. Yet this particular television world in question is always acknowledged, however influential and instantly recognizable it is, to be fictional—and its characters will later come to self-awareness regarding their own fictionality—thereby freeing the writer to examine other narratives and their fictional qualities.

### **...A Tale of a Televised Trip...**

Yet it’s tough to call *Gilligan’s Wake* a work that’s chiefly interested in high modernism. After all, the novel seeks to flesh out the fictional world of a campy sitcom with an unexplainable perennial appeal and which, in Kelly’s estimation, “jumped the shark before it ever went on the air” (A7). Allusiveness à la Joyce and Eliot and meticulously constructed plots laden with historical research and a dash of paranoia (but with a light touch!) à la Pynchon or DeLillo seem to be the rules here in both tone and mood. Carson’s allusions, though, take as reference points our shared televised and cinematic past just as often as, if not more often than, they riff on high literary print culture. It’s a canny move, one could argue, given that television’s viewership has only increased over the period of time during which *Gilligan’s Wake* is set, while the audience for literary fiction has declined.

Of course, from a reader's perspective, the same essential rule applies whether the writer is alluding to Milton or to Mary Tyler Moore—the device works only if the reference is readily recognizable. For example, take one tour de force of a paragraph from the novel's first chapter:

That's the way it was. Alack and shite gave way to living dolor. Brett Sommers surprised us, in her slack klugmans there I felt free. Bewitched, I dreamed of Suze's eyes, blinking at me from inside a bottle. She was wearing acres of green petticoats, and I called her the hyacinth girl; sometimes we even talked alike. With a wiggle of her nose, she married Sergeant York. But she was mother-naked now, and those were the wrong eyes in the bottle, and I knew that wasn't allowed. She swallowed the eyes and then I fled, I flew like a nun. (Carson 10)

We start with a riff on Walter Cronkite's nightly signoff, which is familiar enough. But then things get denser—there's another Eliotic allusion (see lines 8 and 17 of *The Waste Land*), attached to veiled namechecks of real-life married actors Brett Somers and Jack Klugman. Then come references to two '60s sitcoms of magic-making suburban women, *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. (Suze, whom we will meet as Susan three hundred pages later, was a longtime girlfriend of Gil Egan and roommate of Mary-Ann.) Another set of twin sitcoms follows as Carson references *Green Acres* and *Petticoat Junction*, two rural-themed shows of the same era that shared the same fictional universe. Eliot's *Waste Land* re-appears through the reference to the "hyacinth girl" (line 36), but the "talk[ing] alike" that follows comes straight from the theme song to *The Patty Duke Show*. The intended meaning of "Sergeant York" in the next sentence is one for the real TV trivia geeks—the allusion is not to the Gary Cooper film character (or the historical figure on whom he's based), but to the two actors who played the husband of *Bewitched*'s nose-wiggling Samantha Stevens: Dick Sargent and Dick York. And Carson wraps up this textual crash course in TV history with a nod to one of few sitcoms as high-concept (and

weird-concept) as *Gilligan's Island: The Flying Nun* (and if you were wondering, a *My Mother the Car* reference does show up four pages later). The following paragraph, it's worth noting, keeps the conceit going, cramming in allusions to *Get Smart*, *My Three Sons*, *Combat!*, *Room 222*, *Gunsmoke*, *Dr. Kildare*, and *F-Troop*.

But does this barrage of classic TV references deliver anything of value to the reader beyond the whiz-bang cheap thrills of the more disposable "Image-Fiction" which Wallace seems to disdain? Yes, as it echoes the *modus operandi* of television itself. For Tichi, a defining feature of TV-era fiction is "flow," a sense of fluidity that "enables entry at any point" and creates a narrative that "is continuous, open, apparently without end" (120). That's why many TV-era novels, she argues, seem less than meticulous in their plot construction. Carson's labyrinthine narrative does not fit that description, but passages like those in the first chapter do constitute a literary equivalent of changing channels quickly from network to network. Meaning can be transmitted to the reader, then, not in spite of but because of surprising collisions of images from incongruous spheres of culture. Wallace describes a typical morning of channel-surfing: "Lovable warlocks on *Bewitched* and commercially Satanic heavy-metal videos on *Top Ten Countdown* run opposite air-brushed preachers decrying demonism in U.S. culture" ("E Unibus" 158). Consumption of television by nature requires a willingness to tolerate and interpret serendipitously juxtaposed appearances of unexpected imagery, so while letting Jeannie coexist with Joyce may appear unusual as a pairing of images, it shouldn't seem that unfamiliar as a rhetorical tactic.

The major difference here between Carson's allusions and the classic literary allusions of Eliot is that a separate, extraliterary sphere of knowledge—classic American

television—is required in order to comprehend all the textual meaning available. Or is it? Many literary-minded readers would recognize that Carson’s phrase “Vic Morrow and vic morrow and vicmorrow kept me in this petty place from day to day” (11) is a Shakespearean echo, derived from MacBeth’s reaction to Lady MacBeth’s death. But if in need of a quick and more specific reminder as to what television series Carson is invoking in any given moment, a single trip to an Internet search engine will likely provide an answer. Though it may not be part of Carson’s intended point, such a research question does demonstrate that electronic media has changed allusiveness itself. Eliot provided endnotes to *The Waste Land* not just, as he famously claimed with (perhaps false) modesty, to make his poem book-length, but to give explicators in 1922 a set of starting points. For any reader in 2003 or after, the starting point for decoding unfamiliar allusions may be Wikipedia.<sup>54</sup> That ultra-accessibility of information allows Carson’s allusions to be as esoteric as he wants, now that researching, for instance, who this Thalia Menninger is that keeps getting mentioned in the first chapter, is easier than ever.<sup>55</sup>

Still, a shift in how we may explicate a pop reference does not alter the core reasons that allusions to pop cultural texts seem to resonate in a mass culture-saturated society: “(1) we all recognize such a reference, and (2) we’re all a little uneasy about how we all recognize such a reference” (“E Unibus” 166). Does the mere presence of a pop reference automatically imply mere nostalgia and a concurrent lack of historical consciousness, running history out of the picture instantly? For that matter, does

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<sup>54</sup>Carson still offers Eliot-esque notes in an Afterword, though, in which he matches Eliot’s relationship with Ezra Pound by calling *Gilligan’s Island* creator Sherwood Schwartz “*il miglior fabbro*” (342), the same honorific Eliot bestowed on Pound in *The Waste Land*’s dedication.

<sup>55</sup>Thalia is the materialistic young lady played by Tuesday Weld on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. She would have known Dobie’s friend Maynard G. Krebs, of course, played by Bob Denver, who also played—yep, it’s all connected—Gilligan.

Carson's deft employment of historical material absolve Carson's work of the shallowness for which other pop-heavy literature gets criticized? Is Carson being "reverently ironic" ("E Unibus" 190; italics in original), employing one possible if oxymoronic method to deal with the baggage of a clearly unrealistic pop history that still seems weirdly attractive in its unreality?

### **...That Started from This Historic Port...**

I'd say not exactly, in part because Carson's primary interest in the novel is not, believe it or not, *Gilligan's Island*. A more likely candidate would be the accepted narratives of American history in the Cold War era. The professor perhaps says it best in his chapter when he tells his students, during a brief stint as a high school teacher, that "the true story of history isn't what occurs, which is often perfectly haphazard, but how and by whom its events are turned to advantage" (210). Among Carson's first principles, then, is that revisionist history can be written by re-examining America's past through seemingly disposable pop culture.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, much of this historical re-imagining requires a sense of irreverence. As if Carson's project weren't irreverent enough in itself, he treats American icons with a cheeky impertinence as he argues an interpretation of American history defined by conflict between privileged movers-and-shakers and innocent, occasionally even oblivious outsiders.<sup>57</sup> For one example, consider Carson's treatment of an icon among

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<sup>56</sup>For more insight into the power of so-called "low culture" to comment usefully on the past as usefully as more prestigious art, consider Michael Bérubé's claim that if in the future we want insight into how the 1980s viewed the 1950s, we might do better to look at how cable TV's Nick at Nite repackaged *The Donna Reed Show* than to examine how conceptual artist Cindy Sherman repackaged familiar cinematic images (121). Both are retrospective presentations of pop cultural material, but with widely varying intended audiences.

<sup>57</sup>Examples of Carson's irreverence toward American history abound, mostly in the professor's chapter, in which Nagasaki is chosen as the site for the second atomic bomb through something resembling a game of

icons, President Kennedy.<sup>58</sup> The skipper describes Kennedy as one of “a lot of fancy-pants rich kids in khakis” who “figured Dad could always buy them another [boat] if they cracked this one up” (21). He comments sardonically on Kennedy’s war-hero status and the political clout of his family by continuing, “The way things turned out, I guess you could say Jack’s Dad sure did” (21). Later, in the fifth chapter, Ginger overhears Kennedy talking Middle East politics with Frank Sinatra at the latter’s house just before she goes to bed with Sammy Davis, Jr. Kennedy himself alludes to the open secret of his infidelity when he begins a sentence about the leader of Iran, “Even if the Shah was royalty the way I’m monogamous” (163). Still later, the professor explains in the sixth chapter that the more insidious machinations of the federal government get discussed internally in terms of how they will appear to “Gillies,” “our organization’s odd nickname for the imbecilic citizens not in the know, albeit one whose origin escapes me” (206). Nixon was “that ultimate Gillie” (207) but also “unusually smart for a Gillie” (209). Kennedy, however, was “[f]ar from being a Gillie of any sort,” perhaps due to “a steady diet of amphetamines and starlets” and a “sense of irony, which was marvelously tuned” (210). This capacity for what amounts to hipness leads to the professor’s complete bewilderment as to why the memory of JFK became so revered following the assassination. “[P]icking out *earnestness* as Jack Kennedy’s prime virtue struck us as so farfetched,” the professor explains, “that we feared they’d finally tumbled to the game,

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pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey (187-88). Later, the professor will plant the seed of the CIA in President Truman’s mind by forging FDR’s handwriting into Truman’s copy of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (190-91).

<sup>58</sup>President Nixon actually has just as much time on Carson’s stage as Kennedy, if not more. Treating Nixon as an object of satire, though, feels overly familiar by 2003, I’d argue, while approaching Kennedy so ironically feels more audacious—in fact, the popular reverence toward Kennedy seems to spur Carson’s interest in him—hence I spend more time with the Kennedy than the Nixon material here.

and were pulling our legs in turn. However, it turned out that they meant it” (210).<sup>59</sup>

Taken together, Carson seems not so much to castigate Kennedy personally as to point out that he lived a privileged life, far removed from the likes of Mary-Anns both real and fictional.<sup>60</sup>

But even if we can establish affinities between the 1960s and the 2000s—and who can’t?—does Carson’s fast-and-loose play with our political past really amount to an ahistorical, cutesy postmodernism, blurring the lines between history and fiction to the point of obliterating history in favor of Hollywood history? Are we to marvel at the idea of Sinatra and JFK discussing politics, dismiss that as impossible, or feel uneasy at the president’s choice of advisers? Or are we just getting nostalgic about how *meaningful* this enduring older throwaway culture seems, in contrast to some genuinely disposable contemporary pop culture? Fredric Jameson claims that the nostalgic mode in the historical novel “can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about the past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’)” (25). As a result, the intentional embrace of a particular narrative by choice can reveal much about a historical moment’s continual reinterpretation of the past. In other words, if we retrospectively venerate *Gilligan’s Island* by enjoying *Gilligan’s*

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<sup>59</sup>The professor continues to explain that while he and his colleagues are not responsible for the JFK assassination—“pure Gillie work”—they are responsible for Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), “a movie about the assassination so ridiculous that no one in American ever took the topic seriously again” (210). They also, the professor explains, installed Ronald Reagan in power within the Republican party (212-13)—the list of their claimed achievements could go on.

<sup>60</sup>Yet it still sounds like a nationwide, decades-long gym class rivalry—jocks like Kennedy vs. nerds like Nixon and those who follow them—until one considers Carson’s own context and the amount of political trench warfare circa 2003 that can be included under the rubric “the culture wars.” Replace “Gillie” with “red stater,” and the professor’s words highlight both the extent to which American politics still operates under these cultural assumptions and the essential arbitrariness and insidiousness of such divisions when manufactured solely for political gain.

*Wake*, we border on retrospectively venerating the ideology that gave us 1960s television as a whole, warts and all.

Television itself in the era of *Gilligan's Island* was largely ahistorical to begin with, one could easily argue, so perhaps historicizing it critically is a fruitful enterprise after all. Wallace explains that a historically-minded present-day viewer of early 1960s television could be shocked at what the most popular shows weren't addressing—racial injustice, political assassination, the growth of government bureaucracy. They championed in its stead, Wallace claims, “lone-gunman westerns, paternalistic sitcoms, and jut-jawed law enforcement [...] a deeply hypocritical American self-image” (“E Unibus” 182). As a result, the ironic mode, rather than the soapboxing jeremiad or the earnest confessional, becomes the perfect way to critique American culture at that time since irony by definition seeks to point out the disconnect between reality and perception (“E Unibus” 183). “Early television,” after all, “helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world” (“E Unibus” 182).

But Wallace repeatedly refers to the ironic mode of TV-watching (and TV production, for that matter) as an attitude of hip smugness through which viewers feel privileged to flaunt their superiority to the insipidity of popular media. That self-satisfaction can have undesirable side effects: if everyone's an ironist, sniping at authority, then who wants to be in charge? “To the extent that TV can ridicule old-fashioned conventions right off the map,” Wallace claims, “it can create an authority vacuum” (“E Unibus” 180). Irony, in its purest form, though remains a fruitful and potentially oppositional rhetorical device. Mark Crispin Miller, a cultural critic influential on Wallace's thought about television, explains it thusly: “[i]rony can be an



invaluable rhetorical means toward real enlightenment: the televisual irony [i.e., the smug ironic mode that Miller also disdains] is a sort of commercial antibody against just such a possibility” (15).

If we accept Miller’s characterization of irony *per se* being a positive, then, then we must also accept its usefulness in highlighting when and where American realities (and even fabricated images of America) fall short of American ideals. Through his deft employment of this ironic mode and his recognition that historical narratives are crafted objects that do not simply appear in one agreed-upon form, Carson provides an intensely historically conscious novel. The book can be understood as a piece of historiographic metafiction, to borrow Linda Hutcheon’s term, in which “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5).

Carson emphasizes this in *Gilligan’s Wake* via an incident in which comic books start inexplicably showing up at the door of millionaire castaway-to-be Thurston Howell. A comic series called *Two-Fisted U.S. Adventures* tells of American militarism in Vietnam and opposition to civil rights legislation from a particularly nationalistic perspective, and Howell devours these stories. Only after his son explains to him that the (nonfictional) comics have replaced the daily newspaper, though, does Howell begin to understand the problems with journalism (i.e., history in its infancy) that gets packaged as entertainment, complete with a narrative defined by the familiar conventions of an accepted genre. Howell’s son explains, “It’s so you won’t be completely uninformed

about what's going on, but won't take any of it seriously,"<sup>61</sup> to which Howell replies, "if everything in there is *true*—*all* of it, from VJ Day on—then this is a *nightmare*, what we're living through" (80).

Carson's idea here is that the most negative actions on the part of American authority figures can become exciting adventure tales if their reality is skewed into an identifiably escapist genre: history is created by the storyteller, not the historical player. Umberto Eco argues that the past can be narrated as romance, swashbuckling tale, or historical novel (74-75)—here Carson implies that *the same event* in U.S. history can be any of the three, depending on the telling. Jameson is right that successful historical novels must "involve a mobilization of previous historical knowledge generally acquired through the schoolbook history manuals devised for whatever legitimizing purpose by this or that national tradition" (23), but Carson, like the writers championed by Hutcheon, is up to something more here, and it can be summed up in his rejection, at least in part, of the legitimizing purpose many see behind the grand narratives of postwar American history.

### **...Aboard This American Ship.**

I have aimed to demonstrate that *Gilligan's Wake* is far more than a trifle. Its concept may sound like breezy, nostalgic fun, and while the book is occasionally all three of those things, Carson spends much of the novel wrestling with what may be the single most important and controversial theme in all of American literature: the idea of *America* itself. There are multiple suggestions within the book that the seven castaways represent archetypal American figures or qualities—anytime there's a list of seven, like the

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<sup>61</sup>For more on the unintended political effects of journalism that also seeks to entertain, compare Howell's son's statement to Neil Postman's claims about the effects of the brevity of the average TV news report in the "Now...This" chapter of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985).

professor's set of ideal qualities for a president (211-12) or the seven chapters of Mary-Ann's roommates master's "antithesis" (323-24), each element corresponds to a castaway, in theme song order. By novel's end, readers find two contrasting perspectives on America's place in the world toward the end of the twentieth century, both deriving from the most surrealistic traits of major characters. The shadowy and sinister professor becomes the embodiment of an American imperialist tendency, culminating in a physical transformation into a Godzilla-esque, Japan-destroying monster. Mary-Ann discovers she is physiologically unable to lose her virginity and realizes subsequently that she represents the personification of American innocence. The professor's chapter is audacious and historically-minded, claiming as it does the guiding hand of a shadowy band of government insiders in everything from the Suez crisis of 1956 (205) and Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (224) to the contrivance of a fake accent for Henry Kissinger (207) and the creation of the L.A. Lakers (221).<sup>62</sup> Yet the narrative voice of the professor exhibits a remarkable lack of reflection due to the character's egotism; indeed, as Mary-Ann later claims, if the castaways were characters in "a medieval morality play," the professor would be Self-Love (333). Mary-Ann's chapter, though more personal than the professor's, admits historical reflection and hence reads as a nuanced self-interrogation, letting Carson question with greater incisiveness—and eventual ambivalence—than elsewhere in the novel just what America has come to mean near millennium's end.

"I, Mary-Ann, was most definitely a good girl, and meant to remain one," our seventh and final narrator tells us early in her chapter (257). This ambitious Kansas

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<sup>62</sup>Indeed, the professor claims *Gilligan's Island* itself was his idea too, a project "to conclusively prove the breed's [i.e., Gillies'] stupidity." He personally foiled all escape attempts, he says, and "the only way they could have gotten off the island was to kill me" (208-09).

native lands in Paris, a student in a summer program at the Sorbonne, and she quickly becomes romantically involved with a young Jean-Luc Godard, who asks her with a mix of wonderment and derision, “Are you the personification of the United States, Mayr-ree-Ann?” (259). Carson’s decision to link Mary-Ann with Godard is no accident here, given that the young cineaste was at the time writing for the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* (a title that Mary-Ann can never seem to get right), a major force in auteurist film criticism that took its inspiration from the work of a handful of studio-era Hollywood directors. During an argument between Mary-Ann and a friend of Godard’s over “the true meaning of the Second World War” in which Mary-Ann rejects the argument that “[i]t had all been about America acquiring an empire,” Mary-Ann notices that Godard “had begun writing a monograph on Howard Hawks on his cocktail napkin so as to disoblige himself from taking an attitude” (261-62). It’s not just a throwaway joke—it’s a character-based reference to the continued disconnect between American political reality (Mary-Ann’s concern in the scene) and American mass-media entertainment (the subject of Godard’s work-in-progress in the scene). Wallace argues that this same disconnect creates a place for fruitful forms of irony in cultural commentary, even within pop entertainment.

Yet these characters also demonstrate that a fascination with American myth does not constitute an acceptance of it by any means. When Mary-Ann attempts to convince Godard that the defining feature of the United States is the national character’s essential *sweetness*—“no matter how many dumb mistakes we ever made [...] the sweetness always makes it so easy to forget them” (286)—Godard isn’t having it. “Any country whose personification has the nerve to stand before me and call it *sweet* [...] is *always*

going to end up mistaken,” he responds, concluding, “[a]nd the world will suffer for it, as worlds tend to do” (287). Political differences aside, the two can come to a consensus regarding their attraction to each other, though, and they do eventually consummate their relationship. The next day, Mary-Ann awakens to find she has magically regained her virginity.

Mary-Ann’s reappearing innocence—and the lag time between its disappearance and return—begin to coincide with American metaphorical losses of innocence, the longest of which, she says, “began on a date in late November, 1963” and ended “while watching *The Ed Sullivan Show*” a few months later (297). Readers are only left to assume that when the national sense of incorruptibility swept away by the JFK assassination returns during a TV variety show, the evening’s guests must be a certain Liverpudlian quartet.<sup>63</sup> Five pages later, a series of Vietnam-related subsequent losses of innocence are foreshadowed (302).<sup>64</sup>

As her chapter draws to an end, Mary-Ann becomes gradually more self-aware of being a television character, and an iconic one at that. She suddenly notices that she’s inexplicably “wearing a red-and-white checked top and blue denim short-shorts, as if I were already on my vacation” (311). Soon after, she sees her apartment has only three substantial walls—the fourth “wall became slightly concave” as “the room was now

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<sup>63</sup>As if to leave no doubt, there Mary-Ann also makes the desultory remark, “Yesterday never knows,” a Beatles reference that also gives her chapter its title.

<sup>64</sup>Mary-Ann’s personal history as a fictional character coincides with her allegorical status as a representation of a nation. Mary-Ann was born August 7, 1945, she claims, between the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about the same time, then, that the professor’s career begins. Here Carson’s chronology gets a bit questionable. Mary-Ann spends her twentieth birthday going to the top of the Eiffel Tower with Godard (279), yet in two different places she reminds readers that she wound up on the island in 1964 (298, 332). So given the era of her birth, she may not represent American innocence so much as the emergence of the U.S. as a modern global superpower—Mary-Ann’s not perfectly guileless, after all, if she fibbed to Godard about her age.

virtually two-dimensional” (327).<sup>65</sup> Living in a television set leads Mary-Ann to speculation about the purpose—in a rather existential sense, really—of the three-hour tour and all that came after it. Ginger, our narrator tells us, has theorized that the group of seven are “some kind of refuge from the century,” each one “equipped with histories that would make us instead, in however incomplete and veiled a way, that century’s incarnation” (330-31). But that raises a chicken-or-egg question. Ginger also wonders “whether we’re an incarnation that became a refuge, or a refuge that became an incarnation” (331). It’s a dilemma akin to the one Jameson foregrounds: does a nostalgic pop history supplant a more authentic history—though what constitutes an authentic history is now more up for grabs than ever—or is history reflected, and poorly at that, in pop culture already?

Smart as Mary-Ann claims her friend is, Ginger can’t provide an answer to that question, and, for that matter, nor can Carson. Mary-Ann’s final analysis argues that the U.S. in the twentieth century “fought some horrors and inflicted others, while being spared most of the worst [...] But I can’t shake a hunch it wasn’t the whole story, which means that there’s another one we could tell” (335). The first half of that statement seems true enough and might even border on stating the obvious, but Mary-Ann still holds out the possibility of a useful revisionist history, which she charges readers with helping create. Speaking to the citizen of the early twenty-first century directly, she offers advice on how to deal with both the past and future: “carry along a map of where you started from” (336), Mary-Ann suggests, encouraging readers to value history—but in the form of *a* map, not *the* map—and looking forward to a brighter future, prophesying

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<sup>65</sup>She won’t quite get it entirely for a little while longer, though. Mary-Ann reveals that Ginger—“the smartest of us by miles”—was the first castaway to figure out they were all fictional (330).

with cautious hope, “But with any luck, before we washed up here [...] we glimpsed the birth of your saviors” (337).<sup>66</sup>

The interpretations of the U.S.’s role in the world represented by the professor and Mary-Ann are both exaggerations, Carson implies, though there seems to be a kernel of truth at the center of each. If these truths can’t easily be reconciled, that seems okay too—paradox has long been central to the American identity. Mary-Ann says of this paradox during her argument about the war, “I even granted the point that, in the eyes of the world, the role of the United States might well seem at once naïve and sinister, and that any apparent paradox in this characterization dissolved on the point that naïveté in today’s world might well qualify as sinister by definition” (261). Ultimately, Mary-Ann comes across as more convincing than the professor, I’d argue, not because she contends that the U.S. is entirely blameless after World War II—clearly not the case—but because she, unlike the jingoistic professor, is at least willing to acknowledge doubts about America’s blamelessness, even if they remain doubts only.

Plus, Carson gives Mary-Ann the last word, and not just to keep everything in theme song order either. After the professor winds up his chapter a literally monstrous character, it seems easier for readers to break bad on America at that point than at any other point in the novel—the nation’s moral failings have been enumerated and dramatized pretty clearly. But it’s the bright-eyed Mary-Ann, not the cerebral professor, whom Carson tells us *embodies* the nation. It’s not a statement that excuses the moral failings of the professor, but it does counterbalance them, reminding us that each

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<sup>66</sup>In its hope for a sense of reconciliation that the narrative voice itself seems not thoroughly convinced is a possibility, Carson’s ending recalls the end of another Cold War-obsessed American historical novel near millennium’s end, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997). That novel ends with the word *peace* appearing on a computer screen. Of course, both of these attempts at a final tranquility recall the “Shantih shantih shantih” ending of another major intertext in Carson’s novel, *The Waste Land*.

chapter—like all grand narratives, and especially those official and “legitimizing” schoolbook historical narratives mentioned by Jameson—represents only one side of the American story.

**(And the Rest...)**

So in the end, what’s a historically-minded but pop-savvy reader to do with this bizarre novel, the potential dream (or nightmare?) of a couch potato who falls asleep somewhere between The History Channel and TV Land? Is it a dense and allusive literary novel, or an entertaining but shallow novelization of television? Is it historical fiction, or weirdly ahistorical due to its embrace of the pop-as-history? It may well be all of these. Reviewers seemed stumped: Kelly offers fairly unhelpfully, “‘Gilligan’s Wake’ is not as good as ‘Finnegans Wake’, but it’s better than ‘Gilligan’s Island’” (A7), a ranking that would be equally true of hundreds of novels in the English language alone. Without doubt the novel could be placed squarely in the high modernist tradition of montage, given its interest in juxtaposition of prior artistic material for expressive and political ends—but that seems an anachronistic move.

Neither am I comfortable calling *Gilligan’s Wake* fully Avant-Pop, even by the definitions provided by those who coined the term. From one of the earliest attempts at defining Avant-Pop in contrast to mere metafiction comes the assertion:

Sure, if you define metafiction very narrowly as being fiction-about-fiction—as opposed, I suppose, to fiction-about-reality—then it seems tautological and largely irrelevant to the ‘real world.’ But broaden metafiction just slightly to include fictions’-relationship-to-reality, then metafiction becomes inevitably and centrally concerned with matters of meaning, power, language, semiology, metaphor, lies, model-making, realism, illusion, truth interpretation, insanity, solipsism, world building—in short, the concerns of metafiction begin to overlap increasingly with *issues associated with postmodernism* itself [...] In this sense, Avant-Pop turns out to be a radical, ideological critique of *what the avant-garde*



*and pop culture are*—and what they can and should be during the age of po-mo and hyperconsumption. (Tatsumi and McCaffery 45, 49; italics mine)

I quote these claims at such length in order to demonstrate that Avant-Pop, even as it claims to oppose the insularity of cerebral metafiction, still frequently defines itself in terms of commentary 1) not about the postmodern world, but about postmodernism, still in the most abstract sense; and 2) not about the ethics of the hyperconsumptive world, but about what the best mode of representing that culture might be. If Avant-Pop's true content remains primarily aesthetic—about the philosophy of culture and artistic representation itself—instead of potentially political or historical, then I would argue that *Gilligan's Wake* uses Avant-Pop techniques to comment on issues of non-aesthetic importance far more often and more effectively than most Avant-Pop ever does.

Maybe one alternate reading of the novel's title provides a clue to a fruitful interpretation: what if we understand the word *wake* to refer to the period of remembrance and watchful attention following a death, an ending that is also celebration, a heartfelt tribute that effectively closes the book on something? As interest in yet another Gilligan reunion TV movie (and, for that matter, the flop of a *Gilligan*-based reality series) dries up, Carson's novel may be a definitive *post mortem* on the idea of this sitcom—or maybe even *any* sitcom, or maybe even any single narrative at all—serving as an archetypal American story that can speak to the idea of America in a meaningful way. And *Gilligan's Wake* might also represent a kind of logical extreme as to how far a piece of historiographic metafiction so firmly rooted in pop culture can go, in its complete co-opting of an existing narrative, its fearless dismantling and attempted reconstruction of an American grand narrative, and its encyclopedic employment of literary, television, and cinematic history. And maybe—hopefully—it's also putting to bed the idea that pop-

centric American postmodern fiction can't also be deeply, essentially, and most of all, challengingly historical.

## CHAPTER 6

### RECONTEXTUALIZING CELEBRITY AND RESISTING PASSIVE SPECTATORSHIP IN ADRIENNE KENNEDY

Like *Gilligan's Wake*, Adrienne Kennedy's play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) is unconventional to say the least. Intensely personal while symbolically political, Kennedy's play uses identification with familiar Hollywood celebrities as a starting point for a complex set of meditations on identity, cinematic spectatorship, and eventually, the trials and joys of literary creation. Like Carson's novel, *A Movie Star* uses celebrity culture as a starting point, but Kennedy is less interested than Carson in broad definitions of American identity and history. Kennedy reflects on the nature of the medium of film and the act of film viewership, but her ultimate focus is on a deeply individual and personal story. The play's protagonist, an autobiographical Kennedy stand-in named Clara, begins as a consumer only, viewing classic American films and identifying with their stars. By play's end, Clara and Kennedy alike have found creative ways to imaginatively and argumentatively recontextualize these cinematic images. In doing so, she demonstrates that fandom and engagement with celebrity culture need not shut down the possibility of intellectual critique of both celebrity culture and American culture more broadly defined.

Criticism of this play has focused primarily on questions of race, and understandably so. The play's title foregrounds racial difference as much as it does

monochromatic film stock, many have claimed, and Kennedy's dialogue discusses Jim Crow-era segregation and Kennedy's own early struggles to be taken seriously as a writer who is African-American. Additionally, Kennedy is part of an African-American dramatic tradition that occasionally uses images of white entertainment figures to comment on American culture more broadly. Consider as both a precursor and a contrast Amiri Baraka's play *JELLO* (1970), written during Baraka's black nationalist period, in which a "postuncletom" version of Jack Benny's servant Rochester robs Benny and the rest of his show's cast. To say the least, Kennedy's play approaches the politics of celebrity with far more subtlety, in part due to *A Movie Star*'s extensive and discursive production notes, which make reading the play more akin to reading prose than to seeing the play performed onstage.

While I do not dispute the importance of race as a site of entry into discussion of this play, I will focus here on gender. Kennedy destabilizes in this play established practices of film spectatorship that feminist film criticism has associated with a dominant and patriarchal male gaze. Kennedy does not critique this typically male subject position merely to make an academic argument about the shortcomings of imagining film and literature from a male perspective alone. Instead, Kennedy models, through Clara's position in *A Movie Star* and her own autobiographical recollections in her literary memoir *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987), a way to merge passive viewership and active creation into a new kind of literary art by audaciously recontextualizing familiar Hollywood images.

A bit of explanation is in order of the concept governing this unusual piece of theater. Kennedy divides the stage into three zones, each of which reproduces the set of a

famous American romantic drama. The production notes call for “actors who look exactly like” the stars of those movies (80).<sup>67</sup> Kennedy’s first scene recalls Bette Davis and Paul Henreid on the deck of a ship in Irving Rapper’s *Now, Voyager* (1942); the second depicts Jean Peters teaching Marlon Brando to read in Elia Kazan’s *Viva Zapata!* (1952); and the third recreates Montgomery Clift’s scene in a small boat with Shelley Winters from George Stevens’s *A Place in the Sun* (1951), at the end of which Winters will drown. Each zone also includes a non-cinematically-inspired location relevant to Clara’s story: respectively, they are the lobby of the hospital where Clara recovers from a miscarriage, the hospital room where Clara’s brother Wally recovers from a car accident, and “Clara’s old room” (81). Clara, along with her mother, father, and husband, move from scene to scene, violating the invisible borders that separate the three scenes. The movie stars, conversely, stay in their movie scenes, though they will speak Clara’s thoughts, not their actual lines. The story they tell together recalls family suffering and eventual hard-won personal triumph. In addition to her miscarriage and her brother’s car accident, Clara recalls, with the help of her celebrity psychological counterparts, the end of her marriage and her parents’ marriage. Alongside these tragedies is Clara’s determination to be a writer despite the doubts of family and friends, culminating in her eventual success at getting plays produced and published.

### **Gender, Viewership, and Hollywood Film**

Notably for anyone reading this play through a gender-centric lens, of the play’s movie stars, only the women—Davis, Peters, and Winters—do the talking. Their male counterparts—Henreid, Brando, and Clift—remain silent. Marc Robinson calls this

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<sup>67</sup>Where not otherwise noted, parenthetical citations in this chapter refer to the text of *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, collected in *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act* (1988).

decision to keep the male film stars silent a “further testament to Clara’s success at devising space for her own expression” (141). It also functions as a successful attempt at resisting the common spectatorial position that conceives of female actors and characters primarily as objects of a male gaze. As Laura Mulvey writes in her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (orig. pub. 1975), “The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (16). In other words, Hollywood film was calculated to please audiences and invested in promoting normative stories that nearly always ended with order restored via a conventional narrative denouement. Female characters—especially when the romantic counterpart of a male lead—were then more often sights to be seen than agents of action. Mulvey further argues that female characters, as objects more than agents, actually prevent forward-moving narrative action: the woman’s “visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (19). Mary Ann Doane adds to Mulvey a sense of the different ways in which men and women are configured spatially onscreen: “While all the resources of the cinematic apparatus—including framing, lighting, camera movement, and angle—are brought to bear in the alignment of the woman with the surface of the image, the male character is allowed to inhabit and actively control its illusory depths, its constructed three-dimensional space” (5). Mulvey’s essay exhorts readers to resist the normative, eroticized, and patriarchal relationship between film viewer and cinematic woman.

Kennedy, of course, resists this first by putting representations of male and female stars on the same stage, quite literally replacing the surface images of onscreen leading ladies with live actors recreating these images by fully embodying them. Deborah R. Geis explains that one implication of this recontextualization of movie stars as theatrical characters is that audience members may no longer engage in “the same specular relationships as they would with characters visible on a screen” (176). In other words, neither Clara nor the play’s audience is allowed to interact with these stars or these cinematic images on this stage in the same way they may passively interact with these images from a seat in a movie theater. More active interpretive work is required on the audience’s part, and through such an imperative, Kennedy has successfully severed the “normal” (and normative) relationship between viewer and object as theorized by Mulvey.

What’s more, Kennedy rewrites the play’s three central cinematic sources not only to make Clara’s voice dominate all three, but to make their male movie stars “emblematic and peripheral. They are there to light Bette Davis’s cigarette, to change Jean Peters’s bed sheets, to observe Shelley Winters drowning. They take no active role” (McDonough 66). This is, McDonough acknowledges, no big shift in the Bette Davis scenes—her character was already the protagonist of *Now, Voyager*—but it’s a bold move indeed to shift focus from Brando and Clift, the central figures of their movies and legendary actors in their own rights, to Peters and Winters. Kennedy’s production notes attest to the male stars’ peripheral status: “Montgomery Clift, as was Henreid and Brando, is mute. If they did speak they would speak lines from their actual movies” (98). Kennedy liberates her female characters from the limitations of their cinematic images by

letting them speak someone else's thoughts. But not only does she keep the male stars silent, she asserts that even if they had the power of speech in this play, they would maintain the predefined character, thoughts, and presumably, even interiority of the characters created for them decades ago. This is no simple strict reversal of the state of affairs of which Mulvey disapproves; that is, the male gaze at the female body as spectacle hasn't been simply replaced with a female gaze at the male body as spectacle. It is clear, though, that the female stars in this play have gained three-dimensionality and a sense of rounded character. The men have not. Put another way, while Kennedy's production notes insist that the play's sole "bit part" is played by Clara, the bit parts are really being played by the leading men.

It's not just that Kennedy suggests that these three movies might be more interesting from a female-centric perspective, though. *A Movie Star* also aims to disrupt the conventional stability of classical Hollywood narrative and content. Rare is the studio-era film that lets disorder reign over order in the end or that allows wrongdoing to go unpunished. A fairly traditional morality is inscribed into Hollywood from the 1930s to the 1960s, after all, by the Motion Picture Production Code. Audaciously, though, Kennedy uses this familiar and popular medium as a vehicle to talk about content conspicuously absent from studio-era film. Kennedy highlights experiences that get deleted from what Linda Kintz calls the "sanitized spectacle" (72) of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. For instance, the play begins and ends with images of the "Columbia Pictures Lady," a character who parodies the familiar studio logo that preceded Columbia films in movie theaters. But her appearance is no mere evocation of the nostalgia of moviegoing: she also recalls Hollywood's tendency to elevate



“abstracted, pure femininity” (Kintz 82), just as objectified female characters are frequently denied the agency to act independently within their own narratives. Additionally, this elevation of an idealized cinematic femininity means that the Hollywood film to which Kennedy responds can’t, for instance, depict or discuss directly Clara’s miscarriage in the same way it can acknowledge Wally’s car accident.

In fact, Kennedy seems to take a perverse delight in peppering these stars’ speech with references to images and items that would be strictly verboten in actual Hollywood film. For example, Jean Peters speaks Clara’s thoughts as she works on a new play: “It’s going to be called a Lesson in Dead Language. The main image is a girl in a white organdy dress covered with menstrual blood” (94). Even the less personal, more cultural traumas referenced by Clara’s family seem unapproachable to the film medium of that era. As Carol Dawn Allen writes, “film, as it stands during this era, cannot contain the overflowing domestic heartbreaks” in Clara’s family, especially those, like Clara’s mother’s recollection of Jim Crow-era injustice, that are particular to the African-American family (198). And while Philip C. Kolin usefully compares Kennedy’s plays to film noir, due to their frequent uses of “flashbacks, blackouts, dissolves, [and] voice-overs, all of which heighten [the plays’] nightmarish, ghoulish quality” (19), even that darkest of mainstream genres is too conventional for Kennedy. Even the most convoluted film noir plots still move toward resolution; and like nearly all studio-era American films, those films rely on continuity editing to contain their stories, keeping them fairly close to a realistic mode. Kennedy, conversely, is comfortable with unresolved narratives and leaves behind the realistic mode as she deems necessary.

Of course, Kennedy's personal recollections through the lens of American film disrupt not only the content standards of Hollywood, but also Hollywood formal conventions too. A production note commands, "There is no real separation from the hospital room and *Viva Zapata* and the ship lights as there should have been none in *Now Voyager*" (90). Emblematic of a bold production decision in an already conceptually bold play, these recreated film sets are not hermetically sealed theatrical spaces. They exist in recognizable forms, to audience members who know the movies, but the boundaries around these familiar spaces are made to be broken. Similarly, no clear and consistent lines demarcate a separation between Clara's cinematic memory and her personal memory. What she sees onscreen is personal to her.

### **Celebrity and Identification**

That personal space's interaction with the culture of American art and entertainment is essential to this play. As Clara speculates early in the play, "Each day I wonder with what or with whom can I co-exist in a true union?" (82). From the first scene Clara desires companionship and identification but isn't sure where to find that union or what deserves that kind of focused attention. It's clear, though, that Clara and Kennedy both identify deeply with the movie stars with whom Clara shares the stage. In fact, Elin Diamond asserts that "Kennedy's identifications *are* her history" and calls Kennedy's plays representative of "a theater of identification" (91, 92). He recalls Kennedy remarking in a lecture, "As long as I can remember I've wanted to be Bette Davis [...] I still want to be Bette Davis" (qtd. in Diamond 90). As he explains further, though, identification with a celebrity or an actress's role does not imply any inherent similarity or consistent desire; instead, identification is performative, "pure act—an

unconscious doing that only afterwards can be described and understood” (86). Nor is identification with a media image necessarily an endorsement of all of the ideological baggage that image may carry. Indeed, readings of *A Movie Star* that focus on the visible racial difference between Clara and the white movie stars foreground ways that Clara uncomfortably balances the pleasure of moviegoing with the constant awareness of Hollywood film’s underrepresentation of minority voices.<sup>68</sup> As a result, identification for Kennedy and her characters is never a pure desire to be just like the stars. If it were, then Clara may well be speaking Bette Davis’s thoughts, not the reverse. Relating to stars via moviegoing winds up being an opportunity for both enjoyment and resistance, “psychic pleasure and cultural question, an occasion for dreaming as well as critique” (Diamond 98).<sup>69</sup> In other words, we misread Kennedy if we understand her use of Bette Davis in this play to be purely an appreciation of the screen legend or purely an attack on the white movie star.

While remembering her childhood and young adulthood, Kennedy foregrounds her own position as fan and emerging writer in her literary autobiography, *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987). In the form of a 125-page illustrated list of friends, family, influences, and celebrities who in some manner shaped her art, Kennedy charts a life trajectory not at all unlike Clara’s. She describes an early awareness of celebrity, a search for her own voice as a writer influenced by popular media, and eventually a successful artistic maturity. After reporting that her mother named her for film actress

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<sup>68</sup>See Geis in particular, who focuses on the “ambivalent spectatorial status” of Clara as she takes so seriously the exclusionary cultural apparatus” of film (171).

<sup>69</sup>Compare to the conclusion of Richard Dyer’s *Stars*. The author of this groundbreaking volume of semiotic and cultural interpretation of the idea of the movie star ends the book by noting the beauty of Marilyn Monroe, the strength of Barbara Stanwyck, and—perhaps significantly for Kennedy’s play—the attractiveness of Montgomery Clift. (162). Dyer, like Diamond and, for that matter, Kennedy, does not downplay the value of pleasure in consuming celebrity culture.

Adrienne Ames, Kennedy suggests that “my name was responsible for inspiring in me a curiosity about celebrity and glamour” (*People* 10). One of the first plays Kennedy loved, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), taught her that writing about her own experience could be fruitful even if she’d never seen anyone like her onstage before: “The passions of the average person have glory and importance, and what I felt as I walked to school each morning along the streets with maple trees might even be significant. [...] Was what our family did important enough to write about? To read about?” (*People* 60). And throughout her childhood, movie stars maintain a hold on her imagination, seeming to demand that Kennedy attempt identification with them. After seeing *A Place in the Sun*, she remembers, “I asked the hairdresser to try to cut my hair like [Elizabeth] Taylor’s. We all wanted a formal dress like the one she wore when she danced with Montgomery Clift” (*People* 71).

All the while, even as she imitated the stars outwardly, she was developing a rather sophisticated understanding of what celebrity actually meant. In one beautifully subtle passage, Kennedy identifies Larry Doby as “[t]he Cleveland Indians baseball player [who] lived on our street,” whose familiarity leads her to define a celebrity as “a person who even sometimes in the early afternoon walks to the store to get the newspaper” (*People* 60). Albeit in retrospect, Kennedy demystifies the whole mystique of fame in one understated statement. Doby’s achievement—he was, after Jackie Robinson, the second African-American in Major League Baseball and a Hall of Fame inductee—is no small feat, but in describing him in terms of mundane daily activity, Kennedy reveals real knowledge about how fame works. She understands that celebrity in American culture frequently requires projecting simultaneously airs of ordinariness

and extraordinariness, even as she identifies with the ordinariness in this case. She also gets at the disconnect between the person—the ballplayer who lives on her street—and the image—the star athlete. Star images like those of Davis, Peters, and Winters, usually remain far off and untouchable, but once they get embodied—as in this play—they’re exposed as representative of nearly anyone else and hence become Kennedy’s toys to play with.

### **Rewriting Celebrity Images**

While that realization may be disorienting for Kennedy the movie fan, it’s revelatory and liberating for Kennedy the playwright, who can now treat these stars like any other raw material for literary creation. Ripped from the normal screen context, “these ‘characters’ are returned to us as social not cinematic constructs, as culturally hybrid not transcendently coherent” (Diamond 96). That is to say, Kennedy frees them from their expected roles and lines but still recognizes the power of their iconography. Her reuse of their personae both dilutes and reinforces their cultural power. Of course, seeing Kennedy reframe the image of Bette Davis is a surreal, autobiographical play adds even another layer of mediation between viewer and star. As Diamond puts it, “Watching Clara’s Bette Davis in the theater I am prompted not to identify with her but to *remember* identifying with Bette Davis—who was, of course, not Bette Davis, but sensuous cinematic images manipulated by a specific technology of a female performer of that name” (96). Kennedy’s understandings of how fame works both within the culture industry and of how it works on its consumers are quite sophisticated. The play’s considerable complexity requires its audiences to interpret celebrity images in an equally sophisticated manner.

Again, Clara's story and Kennedy's life bear instructive parallels. Both character and playwright are told in college that literature is an unlikely, even inappropriate career for an African-American woman (99; Kolin 14). Both are told that motherhood ought to supersede any artistic ambition. Eddie asks Clara in the play whether she is sure she "want[s] to go on with this [...] obsession to be a writer" (98-99), while Kennedy recalls friends constantly asking her husband about his graduate work and political opinions but only ever asking her about her children (*People* 81). Clara's typical image onstage—writing while wearing a maternity dress—underlines that tension between motherhood and artistic creation in her life. Yet for Clara and Kennedy alike, writing represents a pathway to self-fulfillment, not an obstacle to it. And as always, celebrity suggests to Kennedy not a mere distraction but evidence of genuine artistic achievement. Kennedy recalls being introduced to the idea of the creative life via the star persona she calls "Marlon Brando as rebel": "These ideas of 'creative people' were affecting me far more deeply than I realized. Often I now thought, how could I be part of this world where people were called 'creative' and became famous?" (*People* 78). Even as she recognizes elsewhere Hollywood as culturally exclusionary and inauthentic, its attractiveness to her as a site of artistic creation spurs her to creation of her own.

Of course my focus here on the meaning of celebrity within Kennedy's play in no way is meant to denote that fame is the primary subject of this play, overriding Clara's own story in importance. A key debate in criticism on *A Movie Star* asks whether Kennedy uses Clara's family life as a vehicle to discuss race, gender, and Hollywood, or she uses familiar Hollywood images as a vehicle to discuss Clara's life and artistic development (Allen 196). I believe it's the latter; as a result, some of Kennedy's

production notes must be taken ironically—or at least not at face value. Kennedy tell us that “[t]he leading roles are played by Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, Jean Peters, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters. Supporting roles are played by the mother, the father, the husband. A bit role is played by Clara” (81). Readers would do well to take that with a grain of salt, though, since Clara speaks far more than her family members and the stars speak only Clara’s thoughts. True, Kennedy writes of Clara, “Her movie stars speak for her. Clara lets her movie stars star in her life” (87). But just as a film that stars Bette Davis is never *solely* about the continued projection of the image of Bette Davis, Clara can include these stars in her life without letting them overshadow her own story. What’s more, the verb “lets” signals an active decision on Clara’s part to permit the stars to share the stage with her.

And active Clara is. Upon one entrance on stage, we are told, she “pays no attention to anyone, only writing in a notebook” (87). She writes throughout the play, occasionally reading from her works in progress—that is, earlier plays by Kennedy—and referencing her determination to succeed as an author: “I’m terribly tired, trying to do a page a day, yet my play is coming together” (82). She recalls using writing as a personal coping mechanism during her marital troubles, as Davis-as-Clara remembers, “In the middle of the night I woke up and wrote in my diary” (87). In fact, Clara’s focus within the play is on the act of writing more frequently than it is on the family drama being acted out around her. When Eddie tries to kiss Clara, “[s]he moves away and walks along the deck and writes in [her] notebook” (88). She admits that writing wins most of her attention, remarking, “Sometimes I hardly hear what people are saying. I’m writing a lot of my play, I don’t want to show it to anyone though” (88).

As Robinson puts it, *A Movie Star* “dramatizes nothing so effectively as the act of writing itself,” and “[i]ts only plot is the story of its composition” (128, 141). The centrality of writing to the drama extends to his reading of the play’s title. “The ‘Black and White’ of the title,” he argues, “is really the black ink on the white typing paper” (Robinson 142). While that explains for the monochromatic imagery, such an interpretation doesn’t account for the imperative mood of the title. Kolin suggests a “radical, alternative interpretation” that also allows for considerable character development in Clara: “Kennedy’s title can be read as suggesting that a movie star has to star in a black woman’s life/script just as she has to do in representing a white woman’s life. Having these stars speak her thoughts, Clara is given a voice that potentially empowers her to star as a woman, a mother, a wife, and, eventually, a writer” (103). Such a reading underscore Clara’s transformation from consumer to creator without denying the importance of race and gender alike within the play

It’s also a reading that emphasizes that the imaginative hold that Hollywood has on Clara’s mind is not a force that shuts down creativity. On the contrary, it engenders invention. In *People Who Led to My Plays* Kennedy describes her frequent moviegoing as a child, but she doesn’t stop at just watching movies. “I kept stacks of *Modern Screen* in the vanity table drawer,” she recalls, “and made a scrapbook of my favorite pictures” (*People* 41). She wrote a fan letter to Orson Welles—a precocious choice, perhaps, of childhood idol—and received a signed photo in response (*People* 44). And most tellingly, she remembers, “I ordered photos every week from the movie studios which I carefully put in scrapbooks, meticulously gluing every corner. One scrapbook had black paper and every star’s name was written under the photograph in white ink. No one was



allowed to touch it” (*People* 46). The color scheme there recalls *A Movie Star*’s title, of course, but more importantly, she reveals the scrapbook to be a site where images are recontextualized, years before *A Movie Star*’s composition. Janet Staiger calls creation of fan scrapbooks one of many acts of participation in movie culture that move “*beyond* presumed normative reception activities” (52). The half-ironic title of the book in which Staiger considers these practices—*Perverse Spectators* (2000)—suggests that since such acts are not the most standard, intended interactions between viewer and star image, we could consider Kennedy’s actions another way to reject the normative conditions of viewership that Mulvey so decries.

These scrapbooks are an unusual kind of precursor text that, perhaps surprisingly, is crucial to an understanding of *A Movie Star*’s aesthetic. Allen writes, “A journal or scrapbook is a way to control, reorder, and own alien imagery. So, the child’s *own* art book resists the cinematic text” (197). Allen even suggests Kennedy’s scrapbook works as an example of a kind of proto-hip-hop aesthetic, a kind of sampling of Hollywood, akin to hip-hop’s later imaginative reuse and rearrangement of earlier musical forms. To reconsider this play as an idiosyncratic act of pastiche, even one bordering on fan fiction, is not, I must add, to aestheticize the work to the point of making it apolitical. Brown calls Kennedy’s decision to make famous white actors speak the thoughts of an African-American woman “a bold gesture of reverse colonization” (Brown 201). She emphasizes that Kennedy colonizes not only a white-dominated form of entertainment, but several particular white bodies as well. In fact, Clara’s thoughts are first spoken not by Davis, but by the Columbia Pictures Lady. As such, the studio logo does not work just as a cinematic frame, reminding audiences they’re watching something based on notable

movies. Instead, the conflation of Kennedy's thoughts with this symbol of the film industry moves the site of Kennedy's imaginative colonization from a handful of famous actors to the film industry as a whole. For all of these reasons, Eddie is wrong when he tells Clara that her "diaries make [her] a spectator watching [her] life like watching a black and white movie" (99). On the contrary, her diaries are a creative act, just as Kennedy's film scrapbooking is a personal act of appropriation in the re-arranging of those photos and clippings.

The first entry in Adrienne Kennedy's *People Who Led to My Plays* reads in full, "People on Old Maid cards (1936, age five): Through make-believe one could control people on a small scale" (3). This is a small revelation, to be sure, but it's one that would shape Kennedy's work for years to come, particularly *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, as she looks to the medium of film for dramatic material that she can imaginatively re-interpret. And while it may well be true, as Allen asserts, that Hollywood "films too often furnish impractical sanctuaries that allow for the deferral of African American (especially female) anger and agency" (198), such a reading commits a logical fallacy by asserting that all viewers, even all African-American female viewers, necessarily experience even the most white-dominated movies in the same way. Allen's claim, essentially a racialized restatement of Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that popular entertainment divorces the masses from awareness of their own oppression, leaves no space for an imaginatively resistant response to Hollywood like Kennedy offers in her work. Furthermore, it leaves no room for enjoyment—especially a qualified, cautious enjoyment—of that same cultural production.

Not only does Kennedy enjoy the movies she uses as inspiration, she interrogates their assumptions and limitations, modeling a positive, individual, and sometimes resistant response to celebrity images. What's more, those star personae are genuinely generative. They become springboards for creation in Kennedy's work, just as early interaction with star images inspired Kennedy herself. In *People Who Led to My Plays* the young Kennedy recalls asking if she would "ever be part of an artistic brotherhood" akin to the collaborations between Elia Kazan and Marlon Brando (95). *A Movie Star* reveals that she doesn't need one—her own life, influences, and interpretive power provide inspiration enough.

## CHAPTER 7

### CELEBRITY AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

#### (POP) CULTURAL HISTORY IN BOBBIE ANN MASON

Bobbie Ann Mason shares with Adrienne Kennedy an interest in demonstrating that being an unabashed fan of popular entertainment—and even of specific celebrities—can contribute to intellectual maturity, if that fandom is tempered by some healthy skepticism. Mason’s novel *In Country* (1985) is equally concerned with its protagonist’s intellectual development and her maturing political consciousness. In the summer of 1984, the teenaged Sam Hughes of Hopewell, Kentucky, has become suddenly curious about the Vietnam War. Her father Dwayne died in Vietnam years before, and she now lives with her uncle Emmett, an unemployed Vietnam veteran who might have been exposed to Agent Orange and maintains silence regarding the war for much of the novel. Sam investigates her family history and that of the Vietnam era more generally despite the objections of her family, who would rather try to forget the past, and her friends, who just seem uninterested in the past. Sam’s investigations yield conflicting opinions both from Emmett’s veteran friends and from more traditional history books. In frustration, Sam will eventually spend a night camping at a local pond in a misguided attempt to recreate the experience of being “in country,” infuriating Emmett, who finally opens up to Sam and then organizes a family trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

As much as *In Country's* protagonist, Sam Hughes, attempts to gain primary-source and academic knowledge of the Vietnam War through history books and conversations with veterans, she acknowledges that the images of war that are most familiar to her come from *M\*A\*S\*H* reruns and Bruce Springsteen lyrics. One important (and largely unremarked upon) narrative thread in the novel is comprised of Sam's move from unquestioning acceptance of these pop cultural and celebrity-based images toward a deeper knowledge of the ideology behind these images and the techniques behind their construction. Joshua Gamson's taxonomy of pop cultural audiences, descriptive of the strategies audiences take in approaching celebrity images, is again relevant here: Sam begins her investigation as a "traditional" pop consumer, mostly believing the surface of what she sees and hears, but gradually becomes a "second-order traditional" one, neither fully rejecting nor embracing these images while gaining a deeper ability to distinguish the real and the artificial within them.

At the same time that Sam's obsession with understanding the past grows, however, she remains firmly rooted in the world of mid-1980s teenage small town life, listening to rock radio and watching syndicated reruns and MTV. Mason's constant references to the popular cultural texts that Sam consumes and thoughtfully considers provide an important counterpoint to the history-seeking plot. It's important to realize, however, that Sam's media consumption actually enables her eventual political awareness instead of impeding it. Sam is an audience to countless pieces of American cultural production of the 1980s, both popular and political. Much of it calls for ideological interpretation of the 1960s, from the commodification of baby-boomer nostalgia as hippies become yuppies, to the conservative impulse toward retrospectively

valorizing a reconstructed good old days. As a result, a full understanding of *In Country* can come only with a full understanding of the historical and political dimensions of the pop intertexts within the novel, including the celebrity images that Sam consumes as she seeks a clearer understanding of both a family and a national past. Sam's experiences in this novel demonstrate a weakness of the Frankfurt School argument that pop cultural consumption encourages only passive viewership and blinds its spectators to the fully political implications of what they see and hear. Sam may begin the novel as an unironic consumer of top-40 pop and televised images of war, but she ends it as a self-aware viewer and interpreter of the culture she inhabits.

Still, much critical writing on *In Country* has focused either on Mason's depictions of small-town New South life or on the employment of the minimalist prose and pop allusions associated with the "K-Mart realists" or "grit lit" writers of the 1980s. The latter impulse is perhaps understandable, given the tendencies of reviewers to group Mason with contemporaries like Raymond Carver or Frederick Barthelme, comparisons based largely on their use of characters who are less than culturally elite and are content to live within suburban culture rather than rail against it. Jim Neilson characterizes these impulses within the body of criticism on *In Country* as smokescreens, if not outright misreadings, that conceal the political in favor of the personal, thereby undervaluing the considerable amount of material in the novel that responds negatively both to Vietnam and the Reagan eighties. "A novel centered on the attempt to understand recent history," he argues, is in much criticism "transformed into an individual's interior struggle, a struggle not to understand the details of U.S. militarism in southeast Asia, the motivation behind U.S. policy, or the connection between class and imperialist war, but to explore

the mysteries of the human heart” (170).<sup>70</sup> A novel in which few characters seem to care about history is not automatically a novel in which history is not an issue; likewise, a novel in which most characters have an uncomplicated relationship with pop culture is not automatically a novel in which pop culture gets employed in an uncomplicated manner. *In Country* complicates cultural memory—and a general tendency to separate political history from the history of pop culture—by linking the popular to the political, and in doing so, the novel also rejects the argument that popular culture is inherently ahistorical.

Criticism of *In Country* that discusses the presence of pop cultural texts tends to treat “pop culture” or “rock music” either as trashy and unworthy of mention in a serious novel, or as a far less multifaceted phenomenon than it is.<sup>71</sup> But that music, along with other important texts consumed by characters in *In Country*, elicits increasingly politically-informed reactions from the novel’s protagonist, an important fact sometimes overlooked by critics who do not discuss the possibility of the pop culture artifact as

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<sup>70</sup>Neilson’s discussion finds fault with much previous criticism of *In Country*. He calls the Marjorie Winther article, which I also reference herein, the “one sophisticated materialist critique” in the entire body of work on the novel (190).

<sup>71</sup>Robert H. Brinkmeyer’s reading of the role of rock music in the lives of Mason’s characters, for instance, does acknowledge a power in pop music that can be liberating instead of pacifying, but his interpretation still considers rock in rather monolithic terms, rarely considering why certain musicians or songs might resonate with Mason and her readers more than others. Similarly, Joel Connaroe’s review of the novel in the *New York Times Book Review* describes nearly all pop cultural material in the novel as simply unworthy for adult consumption. Instead of considering the possibility that Mason might be saying something valuable about contemporary media culture, Connaroe decries *In Country*’s audiovisual landscape as “a town dump of brand names, horror movie plots, talk show one-liners, and other detritus of a mass culture [...] not altogether distinguished artifacts with which readers who avoid films churned out for juveniles will be unfamiliar” (7). The rock artists referenced therein, he admits, might be important for Mason’s characters, but he rejects their importance to the informed reader, claiming, “that sound will have little reverberation for anyone who prefers Mahler to Madonna” (7). Yet the music of Madonna—who is never mentioned in Mason’s novel—performs far different cultural work from that of Springsteen, whose music appears throughout the novel to great effect. Elsewhere, Leslie White’s discussion of the function of pop culture in Mason’s work takes seriously Mason’s use of pop material, but in asserting the resistant power of rock music in *In Country*, I disagree with White’s reading of *In Country*’s music as primarily “a means of continuity” (79).

symbol of political resistance. The Korean War-set sitcom *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-83), which Sam and Emmett watch repeatedly in reruns, helps Sam begin to wonder to what extent she is capable of understanding the Vietnam experience and how she should weigh the testimony of others. The music of the Beatles, in particular an elusive bootleg recording which Sam hears on the radio a few times but is unable to locate for purchase, comes to represent her attempts to establish a direct link to the Vietnam War era that she only vaguely remembers. The significance of Sam's pop consumption culminates in a vexed relationship with the Bruce Springsteen album *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984), which includes multiple songs that meditate on the aftermath of Vietnam, especially for veterans. Sam's love for the record—and her reflections on the ideological meaning of Springsteen's own image—reflects Sam's awakening to an understanding of history as not just the retelling of past events, but a politically motivated force in itself, represented by a celebrity figure whose image she figures out how to interpret critically. Then the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.—which, while neither “pop” nor “text” in the strictest sense, is just as much a subject of popular media discourse at the time of the novel's events as any song or TV show—becomes the perfect site for the novel's final scene and for expression of the core meaning of *In Country*: like the walls of the memorial itself, Mason's novel resists any interpretation of the Vietnam War that seeks to reduce the war to nostalgia, exploit American history for political purposes, or consider the so-called Vietnam era as effectively over. Sam's interrogation of the ability of those pop texts to speak historically proves not only that pop culture in Mason's novel is far from ahistorical, but that an intelligent and sometimes revelatory relationship with pop culture can lead to an enhanced historical consciousness.



## Historicizing Popular Culture

*In Country* is ultimately a novel about cultural and historical contention, and as such, the book resists both narrative and historical closure. Recognizing the contention embedded within the novel, though, requires readers to consider the aforementioned key popular texts as vital to the novel's meaning—they're not mere details thrown in for period effect. Readers must also be attuned to the wider cultural discourse surrounding those texts—the "noise" around them that can create "resonance," as Wai Chee Dimock explains. Historicizing those pop texts proves not only that pop culture in Mason's novel is far from ahistorical, but that an intelligent and sometimes revelatory relationship with pop culture can lead to an enhanced historical consciousness.

Though the short declarative sentences and relative lack of lyricism that characterize the narrative style of *In Country* may appear effortless and free of calculation, Mason chooses the songs on her characters' radios and shows on their televisions quite deliberately. When Mason tells readers, for instance, that the novel's action takes place in "the summer of the Michael Jackson *Victory* tour and the Bruce Springsteen *Born in the U.S.A.* tour, neither of which Sam got to go to" (23),<sup>72</sup> she does more than place the story in a year filled with unmistakably Orwellian echoes.<sup>73</sup> She also tells us that Sam receives much of her knowledge about the world from television but has little opportunity, feeling trapped in tiny Hopewell, to experience in reality the things she sees on TV. Winther goes so far as to say that Sam, like so many small-town teens, "has

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<sup>72</sup>Where not otherwise noted, parenthetical citations in this chapter refer to Mason's *In Country*.

<sup>73</sup>Mason invokes Orwell only once directly, when Sam mentions Big Brother in "a book I had to read in English" (8). It's only one reference, but its presence proves that Mason is attuned to the idea of 1984 as both setting and symbol, just as Thomas Pynchon questions the legacy of the 1960s in *Vineland* (1990), also set in 1984.

no first hand knowledge of anything” (197). In that way Mason employs the seemingly disposable pop text in order to “tell us more about the characters than they can tell us themselves” (Winther 197). Such a use of pop material, which some read as a replacement of real characterization by a self-consciously hip reference to the current but ephemeral, is far from useless name-dropping. Furthermore, such uses of pop allusions let Mason characterize Sam in subtle ways while prefiguring ways in which the pop text’s association with a particular historical moment can lend it political meaning.

Yet all of this meaning, inextricably linked to the textual sites of memory that Mason incorporates into her novel, remains, as Winther acknowledges, less than transparent to readers who lack familiarity with the full range of discourse surrounding them. The ideal reader of *In Country*, then, brings to the book not only some prior knowledge of pop music and television and the discourse surrounding it, but also some level of familiarity with the discourse surrounding the Vietnam War. Crucially, it need not be firsthand experience of the war, since Sam comes to understand that an emergent historical understanding can be based on—and indeed, likely on nothing but—a tapestry of testimony that includes conflicting interpretations and memories, which come from books, family recollections, and the conflicting stories, so controversial that they culminate in a fistfight, that Sam hears at a veterans’ dance. Barbara T. Ryan’s Derridean reading of the novel emphasizes that the irreconcilable conflicting accounts that Sam uncovers in her amateur historical investigations “lead her to a realization of the poststructuralist, or decentered authority at the heart of her world” (199). Sam has been reading “dull history books” that “didn’t say what it was like to be at war over there,” and she finds herself “bogged down in manifestos and State Department documents” (48, 55).

As a result, Sam develops a distrust of totalizing histories but never fully rejects the truth claims attached to all veteran testimony in the novel.

Sam's problem is not disbelief, then, as much as it is frustration at the prospect of assimilating all that she hears and gaining the support of those who could help her understand. Her best efforts at comprehension of the past are met with resistance, as nearly every other major character in the novel encourages her to give up trying to understand the past. Her mother Irene tells her, "Don't fret too much over this Vietnam thing [...] It had nothing to do with you" (57), to which she objects to her boyfriend Lonnie, "My mom said not to worry about what happened to Emmett back then, because the war had nothing to do with me. But the way I look at it, it had *everything* to do with me" (71). Her veteran friend Tom tells her, "Sam, you might as well just stop asking questions about the war," (79) and "[y]ou shouldn't think about this stuff too much" (95). Another veteran explains, "You don't know how it was, and you never will. There is no way you can ever understand. So just forget it" (136). Lonnie eventually tells her in frustration, "The trouble with you is you read all those war books" (187); Emmett, equally frustrated, claims, "It's something you just want to forget" (189). These efforts are equally informed by a misplaced desire to protect Sam from disturbing truths and a concurrent personal desire to forget a troubling past. Both of these impulses reflect a sense of historical amnesia that Mason seems to associate not only with her characters, but with Hopewell and by extension, the U.S. more generally.

Sam's exhausting attempts at integrating all this history into a smooth narrative culminate in Emmett's exasperated assertion, "You can't learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history is"

(226). Yet historical understanding, like pop cultural understanding, is vital to a full comprehension of the novel. As Fred Hobson puts it, “The reader himself or herself must bring *to* the novel the knowledge that provides such a corrective [to Emmett’s claim], must draw on knowledge or experience *external to the story*” (19; italics in original). Sam will, eventually, like Mason’s readers, understand “that the reader does not (passively) accept but rather *co-produces* significance” (Ryan 201; italics in original). Indeed, *In Country* requires a reader who can decode all the encoded meaning through a historical consciousness, whether or not it comes from an official, institutionalized history like those of the Vietnam history books that Sam takes to reading. The problem is paradoxical: “minimalist fiction requires a nonminimalist reader” (Hobson 19). Yet the Vietnam era remains among the most contentious periods in American history, and no consensus is in sight regarding what went right and what went wrong. Emmett, then, is a primary but far from sole contributor to “a larger network of veteran testimony in the novel, one that includes varying levels of postwar success and debilitation, hope and bitterness” (Myers 424). Other equally valid threads within this tapestry of Vietnam remembrances come from television, pop music, and the more formal and permanent veterans’ memorial.

### **Popular Culture as Resonant and Resistant**

Yet a key debate in criticism of *In Country* still concerns the extent to which those threads of remembrance that comprise pop cultural reflection on war are resistant or reactionary. Do television and pop music conceal the complexities of recent American history, or do they become a site for sophisticated cultural discussion? Stephen doCarmo’s reading of the novel approaches pop culture as a *potential* site of resistance,

focusing on ways that the physical artifacts of mass culture can be physically altered or re-imagined in order to give them new meanings. Mason, he argues, begins with a “recognition that mass culture products are often already contentious,” but in doCarmo’s reading, “mass culture” as understood by characters in *In Country* serves more to comfort the consumer than to resist a totalizing ideology, erasing history from the equation altogether and serving “white-washing, reactionary agendas” (596). But I’m not so sure. In Mason’s novel, nearly all meaning is contentious as long as it’s connected to these pop texts, and that contentious meaning, though sometimes encoded, is key to understanding the book fully. Also, doCarmo’s reading assumes that teenagers like Sam are inherently naïve pop consumers, always blindly accepting and never critiquing the construction or ideology of televised images and claims. Sam does come to the crucial realization that, for instance, “On *M\*A\*S\*H* sometimes, things were too simple” (83), and as such, she develops an awareness of and resistance to the tendency of mass culture to white-wash. Mona Molarsky’s review of the novel in *The Nation* recognizes this vital fact and understands that Mason’s array of pop texts “is not homogeneous. The same airwaves that bring Join-the-Army jingles and easy listening music to Hopewell also bring the reflective and defiant Springsteen” (58). For her, there is no question that the popular can be political and historically aware, and, she tells her readers, don’t you forget it.

Much of this, though, remains a moot point for a large population of Mason’s potential readers if they don’t recognize the allusions to begin with. It is indeed a bold move, though a thematically appropriate one, that Mason makes in simply presenting these allusions without explication, expecting readers to use their own knowledge of the

novel's media landscape in order to make sense of it all,<sup>74</sup> just as she expects readers to bring some knowledge of Vietnam-era history to the novel also. And Mason seeks not to treat her characters condescendingly by ridiculing their love of television;<sup>75</sup> Cecelia Tichi contrasts scenes in *In Country* with others in John Updike's *Roger's Version* (1986) to show how Mason's work is unlike even more culturally elite texts that place readers and characters far above the riffraff of contemporary celebrity culture. Her close reading of the scene in which Sam and Emmett watch *The Tonight Show* explains that there Mason "does not insinuate two classes of readers, those seduced by commercial television and those who stand above it" (117). Mason's ideal reader, she continues:

has to know the specific context of popular culture, from the name of a pest control product to the identities of [Joan] Rivers, Don Rickles, Boy George, and the hard-bitten Willie Nelson. The text presumes the authority of the world of commercial broadcast television. It can be reported, transcript-fashion, because it needs no explication. No distinction between the mature and the puerile hinges on knowledge or ignorance of commercial television. (Tichi 118)<sup>76</sup>

So Mason assumes a certain baseline knowledge of contemporary media that enables a basic comprehension. But as Wai Chee Dimock explains, a broader awareness of the cultural discourse that surrounds a text—"noise," as she calls it—leads to an even fuller awareness as readers can pick up on certain "resonances" that enliven an allusion (1063).

Even the aforementioned Joel Connaroe review contains an admission that Mason is a

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<sup>74</sup>It's the same assumption that Winther has in mind in writing of the conflict between franchise retail and the punk aesthetic, "Mason presents the oxymoron of a punk chainstore without comment. She allows the reader to muse over the absurdity or political/economic analysis at his or her discretion" (199).

<sup>75</sup>"The characters in my world," Mason has said, "don't have the guidance or perspective to know that there might be this *other* view of television or malls. They're in that world and they like television fine, thank you. And they love the malls, and I don't judge them for it" (qtd. in Rothstein 108). She also refuses to condescend in depictions of her characters' relationship with pop music: "It's what they listen to, and it's what reflects their feelings. I think rock music has that function for people. It really speaks very deeply. It says what they can't say" (qtd. in Rothstein 101).

<sup>76</sup>And to counter, albeit implicitly, those readers who might insist that such use of pop material is only a recent phenomenon and dooms a text to ephemerality, Tichi compares Mason's ideal reader to that of John Dos Passos, an equally pop-savvy writer in his own way, in his own time.

savvy writer who makes assumptions about her readers' familiarity with the novel's pop details for a reason. "Every detail, however trivial," has purpose, he writes, "and patterns of considerable sophistication [...] eventually do emerge" (7). In the terms she uses to explain how even a single historicized text has a discourse embedded around it, Dimock might say Connaroe picks up on resonances without hearing the noise.

Dimock's theory of resonance builds on the findings of scientific studies that discovered that at certain frequencies, the existence of background noise can actually enhance the volume and clarity of a radio signal (1063). Dimock then applies this discovery to literary criticism by rethinking "noise" as the cultural baggage that readers might bring to a literary text and also by introducing "resonance" as potential distinct meanings of a text, newly possible in subsequent historical moments, that take into account linguistic and cultural change. "Noise," she writes, "is beneficial [and] enriches the dynamics for interpretation" (1063). She continues:

Noise includes all those circumstances that complicate readers' relations to a text: circumstances that, filling their heads and ringing in their ears, make them uninnocent readers, who encroach on the text with assumptions, expectations, convictions. Noise includes all those circumstances that so quicken the pulse, so sensitize the interpretive faculties, as to call forth unexpected nuances from words composed long ago. An effect of historical change, noise is a necessary feature of a reader's meaning-making process. And even as it impinges on texts, even as it reverberates through them, it thickens their tonality, multiplies their hearable echoes, makes them significant in unexpected ways. (1063)

Not only does the significance of a text change through time in light of the existence of noise and resonance, its meaning also changes from reader to reader. "Every text must put up with readers on different wavelengths, who come at it tangentially and tendentiously, who impose semantic losses as well as gains," Dimock explains (1061). And as a result, readers of *In Country* bring their historical (and pop cultural)

understandings to bear on the novel and create meaning in doing so. Since all readers will bring something new to it, the novel, like the Vietnam War itself, becomes a text that resists totalizing, closure-making interpretation as a result.

I would also add that Dimock's concept of noise can work on both superficial and more significant levels. On the most superficial level, the knowledge of this novel's cultural context that I bring to the act of reading allows me to, say, identify exactly what John Lennon song it is that Sam says Emmett makes her think about at the beginning of Chapter 12 (83).<sup>77</sup> On a more meaningful level, it lets me explore the web of meanings attached to the texts embedded within *In Country* in order to demonstrate that they are not chosen arbitrarily and to highlight that each of them, like *In Country* itself, is a site of contention that lets Mason highlight in her novel the visceral and politically charged disagreements abounding in the 1980s as to how the 1960s and Vietnam in particular should be remembered. Dimock recognizes this slipperiness of history itself: changes in noise, she explains, "also mean that any particular reading is no more than a passing episode in a history of readings" (1061). By extension, this means that the story of the Vietnam War in the U.S. is, to a large degree, the story of continual interpretation of the war, which is precisely what *In Country* enacts, in part through its denial of tidy endings.

A couple of caveats regarding how I rethink noise and resonance within this essay: Dimock is interested in historicizing texts in temporal locations other than the time of the text's original publication. My discussion of the popular texts in Mason's novel does focus largely on the mid-1980s, the time in which *In Country* was published and is set. But I take from Dimock the idea that noise and resonance help create "webs of meaning" that alter our understandings not only of particular words, but also particular

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<sup>77</sup>Just for the record, it's "Watching the Wheels" from *Double Fantasy* (1980).



texts. True, Dimock claims that traditional synchronic historicism “must do violence to [a text's] continuous moving and meshing” (1065), but with a text in mind that is as rich in intertexts as *In Country*, I find the “webs of meaning” already embedded in the novel fruitful even within a synchronic historical reading. But Dimock allows that interdisciplinary readings can transcend that traditional historicism: “Besides locating a text in its original context [...] readers might want to dislocate it, relocate it, and line it up against competing voices—the natural sciences, the visual arts, law, economics—to see how it sounds and resounds” (1065). For her, that interdisciplinarity calls into question the very idea of literature as a special kind of writing, even “a definable field.” But in considering a novel like *In Country*, so invested in questioning history (and music and television, for that matter) within the framework of fiction, questioning the status of literature’s relationship with history, politics, and mass culture seems appropriate.

### **Pop History as Political History**

But this continual interpretation of the past bothers to no end most of the present-minded characters in Mason’s novel, primarily because almost all of the novel’s characters “are trying to forget” (Hobson 15). Sam, the exception, fights historical forgetfulness wherever she finds it in her family, while Emmett, at least until the novel’s end, would prefer to forget his experiences in Vietnam. *M\*A\*S\*H* is by far the most omnipresent piece of television in *In Country*, and Mason employs it, specifically and knowingly, for a particular technical and thematic purpose: to tell us about Emmett’s and Sam’s relationships to history via their reactions to the TV show. Early in the novel, Sam expresses enjoyment of the show, and in at least one crucial respect, it replaces her awareness of Vietnam with an awareness of (and emotional connection to) a fictional

world. “Years ago, when Colonel Blake was killed,” the narration recounts, “Sam was so shocked she went around stunned for days. She was only a child then, and his death on the program was more real to her than the death of her own father” (25). For Emmett, talking about *M\*A\*S\*H* serves as a convenient replacement for talking about Vietnam. While Emmett recalls some more innocuous memories from his time in Vietnam, Sam thinks, “Watching *M\*A\*S\*H* so much must be bringing it out” (36).

The metaphor is appropriate, *M\*A\*S\*H* as Vietnam, because the series was popularly understood to be commentary on the American presence in Vietnam even though it was set in Korea during the Korean War (Rowe, “From Documentary” 454). But as is true of all of Mason’s intertexts in the novel, *M\*A\*S\*H*’s true meaning with regard to the war is up for debate. For Neilson, the idea of *M\*A\*S\*H* as Vietnam is not artistic re-interpretation or metaphor-making; instead, it is mass-produced misrepresentation that impedes Sam’s ability to understand the war era (173). But for Rowe, the “popularly accepted purpose” of the show could only be an attempt at “resisting, if not ending, the Vietnam War and all other Vietnams and Koreas”—a bold and pointed antiwar message (“From Documentary” 454). If the show is misrepresentation, by that reading, any such reductive impulse in the program could be excused, in the minds of many, in light of the show’s political aims. Rowe sees *M\*A\*S\*H* as driving home the series’s politics particularly clearly in the show’s last episode, a 150-minute epic that remains the single most viewed piece of American episodic television ever.

Sam and Emmett were among the estimated fifty-million-plus households who watched that episode, and Sam’s discussion of it in Mason’s novel strongly implies that

its ending, a mix of the comforting and the unsettling, is one cause of her current curiosity. Before mentions of the last episode, Sam exhibits a healthy level of skepticism regarding the constructions of reality she sees on *M\*A\*S\*H*, and she is under no illusion that the program is an accurate representation of military life. For instance, Mason writes of the role of talk therapy on the show as Sam sees it, “she knew very well that on TV, people always had the words to express their feelings, while in real life hardly anyone ever did. On TV, they had script writers” (45). But when she recalls watching that last episode, her reflections on the show turn more thoughtful and more personal. Sam recalls, “Emmett was choked up the whole last half hour, during the farewells among the characters, when the war was over in Korea” (107). The sentimentality of the goodbyes and the earnest discussion of characters’ future plans—which involve continuations in civilian life of the characters’ professions in the military, with just one exception—lead Rowe to dismiss the episode as hardly resistant, mostly comforting, and largely reinforcing an unquestioning passivity in viewers (“From Documentary” 457).

However, the episode has its unsettling moments too. Sam remembers the fate of one *M\*A\*S\*H* character: “Hawkeye had cracked up after seeing a woman smother her own baby to keep it from crying. He had seen so many soldiers die, but he fell apart when he saw a baby die. It seemed appropriate that Hawkeye should crack up at the end of the series. That way, you knew everything didn’t turn out happily. That was too easy” (164). There the show takes the opportunity to challenge viewers and resist militarism more directly; more importantly, Sam recognizes this subversive quality of the series and finds the scene significant but disturbing. After Sam’s escape to Cawood’s Pond and her unsuccessful attempt at recreating Emmett’s Vietnam experience by “humping the

boonies” on her own, Sam compares Emmett, who suddenly reveals the full extent of his experiences, to Hawkeye on this episode (222). She fears a similar sudden breakdown at the pond, especially since the scene takes place at the same location as Emmett’s war flashback earlier in the novel.

So the series and Mason’s use of it, while sometimes maintaining a less resistant stance and always remaining just a simulacrum of war, point to the very real and disruptive effects of war on the people directly involved in it, and in its own way the show resists U.S. militarism, all of which the pop-savvy Mason realizes and incorporates consciously for thematic effect even when no actual viewing of the show is taking place. Consider Emmett’s skirt, a fashion choice inspired by the occasionally cross-dressing Corporal Klinger, another regular *M\*A\*S\*H* character. In light of Sam’s interpretation of American militarism as so much macho posturing, expressed in her statement that “[t]he least little threat and America’s got to put on its cowboy boots and stomp around and show somebody a thing or two” (221), one can read Emmett’s skirt as a corrective to the concept of American military machismo and the image of the aggressively hypermasculine and revenge-minded Vietnam vet exemplified by Rambo, a prominent cultural misrepresentation in the mid-1980s.

At other times, Mason uses reference to *M\*A\*S\*H* to emphasize the show’s status as a mere commercial reconstruction that offers little to the emerging historian like Sam. As a result, she must rethink entirely her efforts to get a handle on how Vietnam veterans actually live in the present and regard their experiences in war. When Emmett arrives at Cawood’s Pond to scold a frightened Sam for her reckless runaway act and her misguided attempt to capture the past, Emmett heralds his entrance by whistling *M\*A\*S\*H*’s theme

song. Two things then dawn on Sam as she recognizes the whistler: she is safe, and her camping trip, like *M\*A\*S\*H*, might be an antiwar statement but ultimately offers little to help her develop a real historical understanding.<sup>78</sup>

Or does it? This beloved TV show, which ended in the 1980s, was set in the 1950s, and was based on a film from the early 1970s, actually seems to give Sam some awareness of, oddly enough, the 1960s, at least when set alongside the rock songs and other popular texts she consumes. Owen Gilman writes of *M\*A\*S\*H*'s countercultural spirit, "Hawkeye's irreverent bantering and basic antagonism to war derived from the nascent ethos of American youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a spirit of rebelliousness that began to appear severely dated by the Reagan 1980s" (52). He claims that watching the sitcom allows Sam and Emmett to "enter a time warp that brings the past into the present" (Gilman 52). The problem here is that only a fine line exists between pop culture that actually engenders a historical awareness (like the Springsteen record I'll discuss soon) and pop culture to which people react with a sentimental sense of ersatz nostalgia—that which makes one aware not of history, but only of time having passed. (In the summer of 1984, they are watching *M\*A\*S\*H* in reruns, after all.) For all the psychological good that Sam thinks *M\*A\*S\*H* might be doing for Emmett, after all, Emmett simply remembers, "I miss *M\*A\*S\*H*. I've been homesick for it since the series ended. *AfterMash* [(1983-84); a short-lived spinoff series] just ain't the same" (33).

Sam is subject to a similar nostalgia when she thinks of music of the Vietnam era, but unlike Emmett, Sam has no firsthand remembrance of the songs with which she tries

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<sup>78</sup>It's worth noting here that in Robert Altman's film *MASH* (1970), on which the TV series is based, the theme song accompanies an elaborately staged but ultimately failed suicide attempt. As Emmett says early in the novel on finding that the evening's *Tonight Show* is a rerun, "Nothing's authentic anymore" indeed (19).

to build a mental and emotional connection to the 1960s. She loves the LPs that comprise her mother's old record collection, but she becomes especially enamored with a "new" Beatles song that she hears on the radio a few times during the novel. She identifies the lyrics "You better leave my kitten all alone" (37) and thinks, "Hearing it was eerie, like voices from the grave" (51). But the song is more than a piece of music for her; it seems to bridge a historical gap that separates her from the Vietnam era. "Hearing it, Sam felt the energy of the sixties" (52), and she thinks of the song as a new clue, "a fresh message from the past, something to go on" (125).

"Leave My Kitten Alone" was one of a few unreleased Beatles songs found at Abbey Road Studio that visitors could hear when the studio was briefly made open to the public during some renovations in the summer of 1983 ("Beatles Fans"). For Sam, this song "is equated [...] with vivacity, community, and, most intriguingly, historical consciousness, as Sam, hearing the Beatles, becomes acutely aware of the difference between their time and hers" (doCarmo 591). Of course, many readers miss the fact that, by associating the song solely with the 1960s, Sam misreads it in some respects. The song is a cover of an older R&B tune by Little Willie John, not a Lennon/McCartney composition, so her attempt to link it—and by extension, her experience of the song—directly to the 1960s is at best, a bit overeager, and at worst, an example of Sam's tendency to assume that all good and lively pieces of pop cultural production must date from that storied decade and that she was just born too late.

Sam's understanding of an earlier time is based on stereotype and a willfully inaccurate reconstruction of the sixties that emphasizes artistic vibrancy but downplays personal loss. American popular culture tends to move in twenty-year cycles of

retrospection and revision—witness the trend of 1950s-set sitcoms appearing in the 1970s, *The Big Chill*-style rebranding of 1960s Motown as baby-boomer nostalgia in the 1980s, or the brief resurgence of interest in disco in the 1990s. Mason reflects larger cultural trends in *In Country* by emphasizing, within the historical moment of the eighties, the question of how to remember the sixties. But unlike Mason, Sam has no direct memory of the sixties, and her self-manufactured “memories” of the decade as oddly idyllic and entirely countercultural are misguided fabrications. While hearing sixties music and reflecting on its power, her thoughts turn to the Vietnamese, a rare event in the novel: “If they had understood English,” she thinks, “maybe the music would have won the war” (111). Another moment of Sam’s reflection seems similarly confused; while listening to the Doors, she thinks, “God. If Jim Morrison were still alive, she would drive this car straight to wherever he was” (10), and readers can assume that in Sam’s ideal meeting with the iconic rocker, they wouldn’t exactly be discussing her history reading. Sam’s attraction to that celebrity image seems less based in historical investigation.

The fairly conservative town of Hopewell, Kentucky, as her family and friends are quick to remind her, never was Haight-Ashbury (23, 79, 197, 234), and Sam is not too far away from seeing the music of her beloved and iconoclastic Beatles appear in Nike commercials, further commodified and drained of countercultural power. Recall Jameson’s claim that historical novels in the postmodern age can only offer “pop history” and nostalgia, not real historical depiction or meditation. “[W]e are condemned,” he writes, “to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (25). Those historical reconstructions, though,

however misguided, can bear ideology—consider the revenge- and revision-minded Rambo—and hence be constructed with *a* history in mind, revealing much about a historical moment’s continual reinterpretation of the past, including both selective memorialization and willful forgetting.

Sam does, however, start to realize how limited her historical perception of the 1960s really is. Emmett’s girlfriend Anita tells her that the Vietnam era “*was* the Dark Ages” (64), and Sam’s mother eventually explains rather directly, “It wasn’t a happy time, Sam. Don’t go making out like it was” (236). Even on the same page on which Sam wonders if rock music could have literally won the war for the U.S., she acknowledges that some of that same music oversimplifies a complex world, dismissing the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love” as naïve (111). Yet music retains an emotional power over her, and music will eventually awaken in her a more appropriate, historically aware, and ideologically consistent understanding of the war, albeit one that is still contentious.

Sam finds this musical champion in one of Mason’s own rock heroes, Bruce Springsteen.<sup>79</sup> Mason foregrounds in the novel’s epigraph the significance of Springsteen and *Born in the U.S.A.* to the book, but as is true with regard to all of the pop intertexts in *In Country*, characters (and outside cultural observers) see reflected in that album whatever they’re looking for: earnest questioning of U.S. military and veterans’ policy (that you can also dance to), or a more blind and flag-waving patriotism. Either way, the record was inescapable in the summer of 1984, and to some listeners, the complexity of

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<sup>79</sup>Mason admits to listening to the radio while working at the time of *In Country*’s composition, and has called Springsteen one of her favorite artists (Rothstein 101). She’s also compared herself to him indirectly by using a Springsteen title to describe herself: “‘Born to run,’ I think, is the technical term [...] That’s my whole history, and my whole psychology, and all my subject matter [...] So my dreams were always to get out. It’s a familiar kind of thing, I think, for anybody in a small town” (qtd. in Rothstein 98).



the title track in particular offered a corrective to the simpler Americanism available elsewhere in mass culture. To Sam, the songs contain a “secret knowledge” (138).

Sam gets the story of the song mostly correct when she explains it to her friend Dawn early in the novel: “the title song’s about a vet [...] his brother gets killed over there, and then the guy gets in a lot of trouble when he gets back home. He can’t get a job” (42). For other less keen-eared listeners, the anthemic chorus, consisting largely of repetitions of the title, was much less problematic. Rock critic and Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh remembers, “No song could have been more wildly misread than ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ Jingoists took its superficial salute to patriotism as an assertion of dumbskull pride and latter-day revisionism; too many on the left, domestically and internationally, grasped at the same straw” (431). And part of the song’s power comes from its willingness, absent in more nostalgic or white-washing pieces of cultural production, to acknowledge that the U.S. didn’t win the war (Marsh 431).

Marsh interprets the album and its significance in terms of its cultural context, and in doing so, he views the record as a welcome alternative to the noise of the dominant (and intensely nationalistic) political cultural and discourse of the time. Sam’s graduation speaker “preached about keeping the country strong, stressing sacrifice” (23), which can be read as “detail[ing] the pervasive jingoism of the year” (Neilson 166). The summer of 1984 also saw the lead-up to “Ronald Reagan’s ‘landslide’ [which] was achieved with the votes of less than a quarter of the eligible electorate” and to some, was “a presidential election being sold as a plebiscite on national virtue” (Marsh 430, 483). Additionally, the novel takes place “less than a year after the invasion of Grenada and only two months before Reagan joked he had ‘signed legislation that [would] outlaw

Russia forever [and that we would] begin bombing in five minutes’” (Neilson 166). For Neilson, the book is primarily about how “with accurate knowledge of the war almost impossible to obtain, an uncritical militarism gained popular favor during the Reagan era” (167).<sup>80</sup> Sam is not unaware of the political climate, and she does question the efficacy of such militarism. She senses that “Reagan wants to go to war” (18) and is beginning to note with disapproval that Lonnie “was just like all the other kids at school. In her history class last year, 90 percent voted in favor of the invasion of Grenada” (88).

For Marsh, in such a political climate, misreading and attempted political misappropriation of the Springsteen song by more irony-challenged politicians was inevitable, and such awkward politicizations of Springsteen are also inextricably part of the discursive noise surrounding the record. In September 1984, Reagan campaigned in Hammonton, New Jersey, adding to the stump speech he had delivered the previous day in Connecticut one vital paragraph: “America’s future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about” (qtd. in Marsh 484). The attempt at appropriation began to fall apart instantly when Reagan’s staff could provide no answer to a reporter’s query about the identity of Reagan’s favorite song by the artist, and it would take several days for Springsteen to formulate an oblique yet disapproving reply (Marsh 484-487). Days later, Reagan’s opponent Walter Mondale stated at a press conference that Springsteen had sent an endorsement letter to the Mondale candidacy. There was no letter fitting that description, and the next day Mondale retracted his statement (Marsh

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<sup>80</sup>Additionally, in May 1984, mere months before the events of the novel, “Dow Chemical and six other manufacturers of Agent Orange established a \$180 million fund for Vietnam War veterans and their families,” news Sam would likely have heard with interest (Neilson 171).

488). Admittedly, those attempted appropriations took place in early autumn 1984, not in the summer, but similar efforts at explicating the politics of the record were appearing in print almost immediately after the album's June 1984 release date. A listener as pop-savvy and as historically curious as Sam would likely be aware of such discourse.

And so after weeks of hearing Springsteen on the radio and a road trip with her grandmother and Emmett to Washington, D.C., Sam buys *Born in the U.S.A.* only when she can't find the elusive Beatles bootleg at any record store near the National Mall. Symbolically, the purchase represents a political coming-of-age: Sam has resisted the impulse toward nostalgia and replaced it with a complex text of the present that seeks a historical understanding in an honest and challenging way. She sees in Springsteen a questioning spirit, noting that on the album cover, "Springsteen is facing the flag, as though studying it, trying to figure out its meaning" (236).<sup>81</sup> And in carrying the record with her to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—even if she claims it's only so the vinyl won't melt in the hot car—she brings to the memorial a representation of the spirit with which she now approaches history: questioning, thoughtful, sometimes angry. Sam has become a more intelligent interpreter of history as she has become a more intelligent consumer of popular culture. The novel's epigraph suggests that "the consumer culture they [the lines from Springsteen] conspicuously invoke can become complicit in the formation of contentious politics" (doCarmo 590).

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<sup>81</sup>The cover art itself, as relatively uncontroversial as it may seem, generated a considerable amount of cultural noise in itself. The iconic artist-facing-flag photo was used after the idea of using a Jasper Johns flag painting was rejected (Marsh 437). A rumor surfaced after the album's release, though, that record buyers weren't seeing all of the artist or the flag in the photo for one reason—because Springsteen was urinating on the flag (Marsh 438). For his own part, Springsteen responded in *Rolling Stone*: "in the end the picture of my *ass* looked better than the picture of my *face*" (qtd. in Marsh 438).

Yet Mason realizes that *Born in the U.S.A.* will remain, to many, primarily a good rock record with charms that are far from political. The same is true, of course, of *M\*A\*S\*H* and of Beatles songs. So Mason ends the novel at the Vietnam memorial, a location and a *lieu de mémoire*, to borrow historian Pierre Nora's term, whose meaning is equally as indeterminate to its visitor-consumers as that of the Springsteen album.<sup>82</sup> To some, the black granite wall, engraved with 58,000 names, is the only possible appropriate memorial to this unpopular war; others, like the veteran character Tom, dismiss it as a "big black hole in the ground" (80); still others, like the schoolchild whom Sam hears ask "What are all these names anyway?", just don't get it, prompting Sam to feel "like punching the girl in the face for being so dumb" (240). Sam surprises herself at the wall in two ways: by finding herself moved to tears, and by finding her name—another Sam Hughes—engraved on the wall. Meanwhile, Emmett finds old friends' names on the wall, and the novel closes with the uncomfortably ambiguous image of Emmett "sitting cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (245). It seems healing at first, but the historically conscious reader can't help but instantly recall, as numerous critics have noted, similar imagery in the familiar war-era photos of self-immolating Buddhist monks.

The ambiguity, though unsettling, is tonally and thematically appropriate in this novel that is ultimately about cultural contention. That final sentence, like the pop intertexts throughout *In Country*, can be read by different readers—who bring to the reading experience varying levels of historical knowledge and, in Dimock's terminology, varying "noise"—as either supporting or resisting certain controversial moments and

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<sup>82</sup>See Grewe-Volpp for a full analysis of the role of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *In Country* that also considers the memorial as *lieu de mémoire*.

decisions in U.S. foreign policy, both contemporary and historical. Readers of *In Country* are sure to notice a pacifist bent at key points in the text, but in the end, the novel resists any form of closure that reduces historical complexities to the platitudinous likes of “War is bad,” “Time to move on,” or for that matter, “All you need is love.” The popular cultural texts throughout the novel, as well as the considerable discursive cultural noise that surrounds them, reinforce this conclusion also. The kind of history that Sam investigates is too complicated and too important to both the individual and the national cultural memory to be reduced to polemic, the text concludes, and while much meaning in *In Country* remains open to interpretation, interpreters should bring to the table both knowledge and openness, just as Sam does. Yet for its teenage protagonist, the novel’s eventual ideal historical tour guide is not an “official” historian from academia or the National Archives, but a rock singer from Asbury Park, New Jersey. But discovery of the right pop intertext with the right level of historical consciousness does not constitute discovery of a definitive history in itself. Instead, it can lead the reader or listener, as Springsteen seems to lead Sam, in the direction of an informed political commitment and a historical understanding that recognizes the discursive noise of conflicting opinion as what it is: a part of a multifaceted history, not a repudiation of the possibility of uncovering historical truth. For Mason, the popular text, easily accessible while chameleon-like in meaning, can transcend entertainment and become not the road to nowhere on which the veteran in Springsteen’s song finds himself, but a path to a more deeply resonant understanding of the past.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

As I attempt to tie together the media-focused first half of this study to the history-focused second half, a comparison of Bobbie Ann Mason to Don DeLillo seems unlikely at first. Mason sets her novels and stories in Southern small towns and features working-class protagonists, allowing her work to focus on private lives and family histories. DeLillo's novels are urban, generally more interested in nation than region, and attempt more expansive pronouncements about public history and culture, broadly speaking. Yet both writers exhibit a talent for directing readers' attention to the most important details, some mundane and some trenchant, of contemporary daily life while demonstrating an understanding of how readers in the present benefit from an understanding of the past. And upon reflecting a bit further on Mason's work, especially *Feather Crowns* (1993), it becomes impossible to ignore the surprising parallels between Mason's crowds and DeLillo's crowds. These are both threatening audiences, drawn to the image and story of a celebrity but with little regard for what effects their viewership might actually have on that famous figure.

Most of *Feather Crowns* takes place in 1900, when the idea of an American mass culture is still in relative infancy. Harriet Pollack describes the novel's setting as a time when "[w]ith the modern period, an age of spectacle is surfacing" (103). After giving birth to quintuplets, Christie Wheeler becomes locally famous first, then regionally, and

eventually nationally, even though none of the babies lives longer than five weeks. Christie and her husband accept an offer to be part of a lecture tour during which the preserved bodies of the deceased children will be shown in a display case. Though the tour begins with pretensions to respectability, asserting some ill-defined scientific value to public display of the babies' bodies, Christie soon finds herself on a traveling carnival circuit, seen by her audience as little different from the freakish sideshow attractions nearby.

Christie first realizes that her fame has grown beyond her small Kentucky town when the passenger train whose route is visible from her family home adds a stop for the sole purpose of allowing people to see the Wheeler quintuplets—uninvited, of course. Like crowds in DeLillo, surprisingly enough, this crowd is a threat, “an enormous throng of people,” capable of making Christie feel violated, “naked, like a picked chicken” (165-166). She senses not only the crowd's sheer number, but their judgment, aware that “they took her for an ignorant country woman, and her cheeks flamed at the thought of her powerlessness against them. More of them were coming across the field, like an army advancing” (167). Their remarks upon seeing the children are not intentionally offensive but mostly inconsiderate as they marvel at the babies' smallness and make winking allusions to her husband's alleged potency. Suffice to say, though, that Christie feels overwhelmed by this unstoppable force, and who could blame her.

However, when a lone couple stops—notably, in their own transportation, not as part of the crowd on the train—and actually converses with Christie instead of just staring at her and her children, the narration's tone toward the spectators softens. The couple compliments their homemade furniture, unlike previous visitors who called it “tacky,”

and they exchange addresses with Christie. They are “polite and considerate. They seemed to have time to think about how to treat people” (203). Just as in DeLillo, an individuated viewer who exists outside of the consuming flow of the crowd comes across much more positively than a less independent member of a crowd. And Christie’s refusal to accept money in exchange for gingerbread, which the family has begun selling to their visitors, further emphasizes that this visit, however unlikely, is genuine, turning no party into a mere consumer.

Following the babies’ deaths, Christie places some responsibility for her family’s loss on the crowd’s presence. “People like that come in my house,” she says, “and just wooled my babies to death” (297). She begins to envision the lecture tour as an act of revenge, in part because she pictures herself taking control of the situation in a way she couldn’t at home, when she found herself assaulted by visitors while still resting in bed. On the tour, she envisions “curious faces staring hard enough to bore a hole through her. But she would be ready. She would be master of the scene. She imagined the spectators being unable to depart until each of them had heard the full story” (311-312). The exhibitor remains in charge of their appearances, though, and she becomes a mere attraction, symptomatic of “a twentieth-century hunger that relishes others’ lives as entertainment” (Pollack 103) instead of an active agent capable of recounting her own life experiences. The audience does interact briefly with Christie when people file by the display case to see the babies after the lecture. She reports that in these moments, she “lost track of time, and the people blurred together” as “a mob of strangers bunched around the glass box” (329, 338). Again the crowd acts as one, not as differentiated



individuals, and Christie is still, just as much as the dead children, an object to be seen, not a person with whom one must interact.

When they wind up at a carnival instead of a lecture hall, Christie goes to see the “snake woman” and realizes her own status has shifted from that of audience member to that of attraction:

She had never expected to sit in a tent while people tromped through to gawk at her babies. She had always enjoyed traveling shows when they came to Dundee or Hopewell, but being in one seemed wrong, like drinking liquor at church. It made her heartsick. Some people had giggled and pointed at her babies, and when she spoke to them they ignored her. She didn’t know now what to do with all the spite she had brought with her on the trip. Her resolution to get even with the public seemed futile. People didn’t really want to know about her babies.  
(345)

She now understands that though once a viewer, she is now an object in the minds of her own audience. Her plan to “get even with the public” doesn’t succeed because, she has come to realize, a change in her attitude toward her audience alone will not change any audience’s attitude toward her.

Again, Christie finds relief only when she can escape the crowd and be seen as a complete person, not an attraction or a famous name. She meets a singing trio on the same traveling show circuit, finds she enjoys their company, and begins spending more time with her new friends. She calls them “genuine people emerging from the crushing crowds of faceless strangers who made Christie feel so exposed,” in part because they exhibit “a lively interest in everything Christie could tell them about her babies and the attention they had attracted back in the spring” (356). In other words, they take interest in Christie as a human being, not as an object to be viewed and discussed by an anonymous crowd.

I offer this close reading of a few scenes of *Feather Crowns* in order to demonstrate that similar images, descriptions, and representations of power dynamics appear in novels by writers as disparate as Mason and DeLillo. The threatening, faceless crowds that bother Christie Wheeler look and behave a lot like the audiences at Bucky Wunderlick's concerts or at the mass wedding in the prologue of *Mao II*. When novels set ninety years apart—one rural, others urban; one centered on a family, others centered on professional acquaintances—envision the relationships between celebrity and audience and the potential pitfalls of fame so similarly, it's easy to conclude that contemporary fiction's fascination with celebrity is well-founded and that interpreting depictions of audience is essential to interpreting depictions of fame.

I have demonstrated earlier, particularly through reference to multiple definitions of celebrity, that frequently, to pass judgment on media culture is to pass judgment on media consumers. Perhaps this is inescapable—celebrity by definition, after all, requires an audience, and some fruitful methods of interpreting celebrity images take into account empirically the way an audience interacts with famous people. Edgar Morin's understanding of celebrity as reflection of sublimated audience desire and Richard Dyer's interpretation of notable celebrity personae as complex semiotic signs assume an active audience from the start. On the other hand, Daniel Boorstin's cynical definition of the celebrity as "a person who is known for his well-knownness" denies both the famous figure's possible talent and the audience member's possible taste; and Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of the culture industry reduces audience members to the status of puppets. The biggest difference between these schools of thought comes down to a simple distinction: Morin and Dyer imagine audience members as independent people

acting alone; for Boorstin, Horkheimer, and Adorno, audiences are crowds acting as a mass, often irresponsibly or ignorantly.

Still, writers like Don DeLillo and Bobbie Ann Mason demonstrate that even the most potentially destructive crowd can be overcome if the individual celebrity takes ownership of his or her own fame and re-interprets it himself or herself. The famous person, both DeLillo and Mason imply, succumbs to the crowd's threat only by choice. If the celebrity resists being understood only as an object to be viewed or as a creator of product, then the celebrity reasserts control of his or her own destiny. Ultimately, that argument about how celebrities can resist fame's most deleterious effects is roughly akin to the argument that DeLillo and Mason (and other authors previously discussed) make about how audiences can avoid being similarly exploited by refusing to allow themselves to be viewed as consumers only. Mason's Christie Wheeler (like Kennedy's Clara, and Carson's Mary-Ann, and Wallace's Edilyn) starts to understand that she must interpret media images and representations for herself, sometimes resisting their intended messages in order to access the meaning she needs in order to help make sense of her own experiences.

Even as their approaches to celebrity are varied and as they come to differing conclusions regarding fame's advantages and disadvantages, the writers I've discussed here can be reasonably categorized as ambivalent toward celebrity culture. Fame destroys Ellis's Victor Ward and indirectly contributes to Bill Gray's death in DeLillo, but it hardly seems to hurt David Lynch, as represented by Wallace, and it becomes strangely revelatory for Kennedy's Clara and Mason's Sam Hughes. In fact, all of these writers suggest something potentially paradoxical and slightly perverse, as they

simultaneously acknowledge the vast power of contemporary media, imply that electronic media has become ubiquitous to the point of inescapability, and then suggest ways that individuals—yes, single people operating alone—can resist that power. It's a tall order to be sure, but these authors consistently package this imperative to consume images of celebrity intelligently and responsibly alongside a healthy dose of faith in their readers.

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