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**THE ART AND SCIENCE OF POLITICAL CULTURAL CRITICISM:
TOWARD DEVELOPING A TRANSRATIONAL
PEDAGOGY OF FILM**

A Thesis in

Mass Communications

by

John Carlo Manigaulte

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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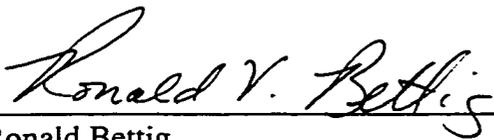
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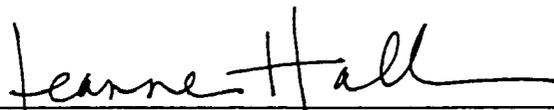
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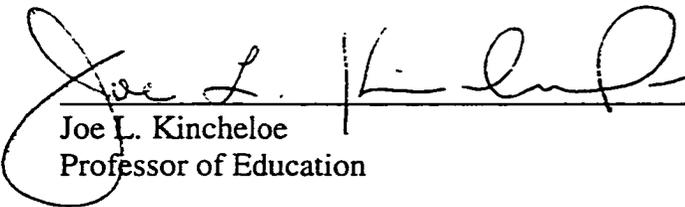
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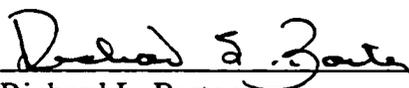
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Abstract

Albert Einstein concluded that we cannot separate what is known from the knower, thus validating postmodern theory from a hard science perspective. This dissertation carries takes up where postmodernism left off. It uses post-formal thinking, developed by Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg, to propose a process of inquiry which transcends subjectivity because it follows the basic principles of Buddhism and Taoism. Such a process might also be called a transrational cultural anthropology. In other words, post-formal thinking transcends rational thought by (re)combining what modernism split apart: reason, spirituality, mysticism, emotion and intuition.

Transrational analysis, which is another way of describing postformal thinking, actually integrates modernist insights with postmodern critical hermeneutics. It accomplishes this by refusing to accept either-or dichotomies that insist upon universal truths. Multiple perspectives, therefore, are embraced and a “middle way” is sought between opposing points of view to eliminate paradox and contradiction. While this project portends to be a “bumpy theoretical road,” it nevertheless offers heretofore untold *explanatory power*. Questions are raised concerning the low-levels of “critical consciousness” in both the academy and the popular press. What constitutes “good film criticism” these days? Must it include moral issues? In the aftermath of the unspeakable crimes against Abner Louima in New York, Rodney King in California, James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas, Matthew Shepard, date rape in every state of the union, a vicious history of serial murders of women, a “glass ceiling” that stretches far and wide across this nation and a growing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” it seems disingenuous

to ignore the politics of morality in *any* research endeavor, particularly one which investigates mediated communication.

The author bases his research on post-formal thinking, based on Eastern philosophy, and critical constructivism, which combines critical theory with cognitive psychology. In particular, he uses issues of ideology, psycho-spirituality, representation and hegemony to define a national psyche, a philosophy of life, that evolves out of the historicity of inherited culture. He suggests a tentative platform from which to interrogate narrative cultural artifacts, a platform which integrates the spiritual, the psychological, the modern, the postmodern and the post-formal.

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CHAPTER 1

PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Immediately after the Nazis came to power on 30 January 1933, the newly established Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda proceeded to take over the film industry. With the creation of the Reich Film Chamber on 22 Sept 1933, the NSDAP assumed complete control of the motion-picture industry.

Hilmar Hoffmann (1996)

The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses.

Adolf Hitler (1924)

Skilled in the uses of psychology, the Third Reich instilled in the hearts and minds of German masses the notion that the Führer was their new messiah. From there Hitler went on to capture the devil's project with the blood, toil, tears and sweat of millions. To this day the tears still flow from those who remember, those who survived the Holocaust, those who saw their loved ones trail away in sad spirals of smoke against the cold metallic backdrop of a modern world of scientific splendor and Machiavellian mystery. Few today would argue that Nazi Germany was indeed an evil nation-state, a nation-state whose barbarous social practices and savage violence left an enduring legacy of the appalling powers of political rhetoric. In addition to this evil legacy, we must face the fact that the Nazi war machine did not arise in a social vacuum nor historical nihilism. It rose up through the cracks of modern communicative practices like an indomitable Grim Reaper the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger's maniacal mechanical killer in *Terminator*. The Nazi war machine was

born in the fledgling practices of modern communication technologies. The “technological sophistication” of Hitler’s “Final Solution” is what we must all squarely come to grips with *before* we can advance a truly political vision of cultural criticism. We need a form of social psychoanalysis to uncover where the world lost sight of its moral North Star.

Historian of German film at the time of World War II, Hilmar Hoffmann (1996), believes that,

compared to the emotional persuasiveness of moving pictures, radio and the press were less successful in conveying and spreading the message of the new ideology. Within the context of Goebbels’s propaganda strategy, however, they were indispensable factors in any concerted and universal campaign of indoctrination, particularly in light of the fact that film lacked the up-to-dateness of radio and the daily paper.¹

Media do indeed have powerful political effects when one considers both the message and the contexts within which messages discover their destiny. World War II is, perhaps, the most terrifying recent example of the vilest war crimes ever committed. The war itself was, arguably, the *pre-eminent event* of the 20th Century. No other event involved so many people, caused so much pain and suffering and inflicted so many casualties on so many nation-states. As a pre-eminent historical event, World War II deserves a great deal of our critical attention, not only because it demonstrates the political power and authority of modern communicative practices but because it provides an incredible spiritual lesson. We cannot simply separate spiritual or moral issues from political or social issues, as some would have us believe.

The horrors of World War II brought into sharp relief the tremendous potential for evil invested in Hitler’s purely “rational” view of social “reality.” The very warped political possibilities of his Spock-like logic carried to its nth degree demonstrated that we can no

longer dismiss emotions as unnecessary baggage for political trips. Social scientist Carroll E. Izard (1991) argues that “emotions are essential to our survival and existence as human beings. Without emotions—without the ability to feel joy and sadness, anger and guilt—we would really not be human beings at all. Emotions help define humanness.”² What we do with our emotions determines how moral we become as a nation. The Nazis dismissed a very important feeling called empathy and so dismissed millions of human beings to be burned in incinerators as trash. My project is to demonstrate that pure logic, of any variety, is inherently evil. I hope to present a rather powerful case that the undefinable aspects of *being* human—our emotions and our intuitions—actually lead us to intersubjective moral “truths”—truths that make sense from multiple points of view. As Chapman said, “Nothing is more injurious to the character and to the intellect than the suppression of generous emotion.”

The fact of the matter is, the Nazis were by no means a primitive culture. In their time, they represented the very latest industrial order. Modern trucks, planes, submarines, even the very first jet aircraft sprung from their sophisticated scientific theories. The Nazis heralded a new age referred to, retrospectively, as **modernity**. Rosenau (1992) summarizes the problems of modernity as follows:

modernity entered history as a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality, but one can readily wonder whether that promise has been sustained. As we in the West approach the end of the twentieth century, the “modern” record—world wars, the rise of Nazism, concentration camps (in both East and West), genocide, world-wide depression, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Persian Gulf, and a widening gap between rich and poor (Kamper and Wulf 1989)—makes any belief in the idea of progress or faith in the future seem questionable.³

World War II fatally wounded the towering promises of modern science. Why did we, as a global entity, cash in the chips of perennial progress for morally unaffordable gravestones of greed? How did we stray so far from righteousness? How could we have become blind to the constant moral dilemmas of history? Part of the answer to these ultimately unanswerable questions lies in the incredible ability of newly evolving communication technologies (such as film) to put specific and intended political spins on social “reality.” Fortunately, we survived modernity. We now traverse **post-modern** terrains, where it is fashionable to question even our own questions. But have we gone too far? Has post-modernity *already* outlived its purpose? Perhaps the real problem lies in the western quest for absolute truths. Post-modern thinking really represents a swing to the ancient and obviously enduring wisdom of Buddhist practice and Taoist “ideology.” Kincheloe & Steinberg’s “post-formal thinking” actually trumpets this return to more existential roots, this return to the political, social, and economic contexts within which a very conscious morality stamps a very tentative approval on social practice. We desperately need to examine the existential roots of our consciousness because we do not want the “eternal recurrence” of Nazism (or something like it).

A Brief Overview of My Approach

Before we can come to grips with the dangerous *apolitical* nature of contemporary film criticism, we must trace the historical evolution of film criticism in America to see where we might have strayed off course. After I have constructed a rather complex philosophical foundation for what I call the “art and science of political cultural criticism”

in Chapters One and Two, I will trek into the mysterious forests of film history to provide an admittedly brief and informal historical backdrop of the political points of view that presently dominate the many forums of American film criticism. Then, I will critique the “racial practices that inform U.S. cinema and film studies,” as Daniel Bernardi puts it in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, and, as bell hooks puts it in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, I will begin to “invent a new, alternative habit of being.”

I draw upon Lao-Tzu’s, *Tao Te Ching*, Thich Nhat Hanh’s writings, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Kincheloe and Steinberg’s *post-formal thinking*. I humbly admit that it takes a lifetime to learn to Tango with the insights of these great minds. When one reads their writings, one feels like a prisoner, just emerging from Plato’s cave. But before we can become truly enlightened, we must recognize that *theory* alone cannot solve all of our problems. Diane Dreher (1990) centers or balances her “philosophies of life” by thinking of life as a *process*. She believes that “truth” and “reality” ultimately defy human reason. Not surprisingly, she quotes one of my favorite philosophers, Lao-Tzu. He tells us, “a word we can define is not the eternal Word (*Tao I*). The Tao (the “way of truth”) cannot be defined, apprehended, or articulated by left brain reasoning. But this doesn’t mean it cannot be known. *We know the Tao intuitively, by transcending rational thought patterns* [my emphasis].

We cannot truly *understand* the politics of culture through fixed patterns of analysis. Because we are sometimes (if not always) *irrational^f*, because we *feel*, because we *emote*, because we live as human beings flexing our free wills—it is not feasible to conclude that

we can be completely understood by left brain reasoning. We need to embrace more than mechanical “sciences” to understand ourselves. We need to embrace intuition because intuition digs a deeper subconscious well than reason. We need to embrace those flashes of insight that take us beyond *ourselves*, our *theories*, our *expectations*, our *suppositions*.

By combining “**post-formal thinking**,” which is a cognitive theory “informed by and extend[ing] critical, feminist, and post-modern thought,”⁵ with Lao-Tzu’s and the Buddha’s “spiritual intuition,” I hope to present the reader with a new form of cultural criticism which I call “transrational analysis.” It utilizes theory but it goes beyond theory in that it allows critics to play a few hunches the way good detectives do when they solves implacable crimes. In a sense, my critical project is **hyper-political** because it (re)connects politics with everything we do as human beings and because it does not turn a deaf ear to the *mystical* or the *spiritual*. Even those films that do not address traditional political concerns are deemed *political* in my project. Musicals and other “non-political” films really are political not only because they present particular points of view but also because they *function* politically—they assuage our psyches, they divert us from the path of meditative reflection.

An “Alternative Habit of Being”

Transrational analysis, therefore, is a form of “hyper-political” cultural criticism that struggles to transcend the values and ideals of inherited culture. In this beginning chapter, I hope to carefully delineate *why* we need to have such a *radical* form of cultural criticism. In Chapter Three I hope to distinguish between popular and scholarly approaches to narrative film criticism by providing a genealogical glimpse of the evolution of film

criticism. I hope to show that film criticism has concerned itself with politics but it has not adequately addressed issues of race, class, age, “sexual orientation” and gender. Chapter Four is a critique of the past practices of film criticism and a discussion of the philosophical and practical difficulties of criticizing cultural artifacts. Chapter Five connects American history with critical practice. Chapters Six through Nine document some of the necessary elements of a *hyper*-political approach to film criticism and offer suggestions for improving social and industry practices regarding the production and distribution of pro-social narrative films.

Chapter One is, of course, crucial in building the epistemological and ontological stadium in which contesting ideas of political cultural criticism will ultimately do battle. I hope that this introductory chapter more than adequately prepares the reader for a truly *radical* look at hyper-political cultural criticism. In very accessible language, I hope to introduce Kincheloe and Steinberg’s “post-formal” thinking, which I believe compliments the psycho-spiritual insights of Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and the Buddha’s *Noble Eightfold Path*. I believe that we *must* begin with epistemological and ontological concerns because the politics of ignoring or assuming where one is coming from cannot be part and parcel of this dissertation since this dissertation is, ostensibly, *about* such politics! In many ways, this dissertation constantly shifts among the innumerable political angles that people adopt to observe “social reality.” I study bias in human perception, the kind of bias that told the Nazis they were right and everybody else was wrong.

The “Art” of Political Film Criticism

Because hyper-political cultural criticism is self-reflexive, it must become both an art and a science. Part of the problem with Nazi Germany was its inability to monitor its own assumptions. The ability to “self-monitor” is most definitely an art because there can never be any hard and fast scientific rules to follow when we are the ones who shuffle between competing points of view. In other words, I am tentative when I theorize because I do not believe that I have been out of Plato’s cave long enough for my eyes to have adjusted to the bright sunshine of new social “realities.” I do not believe that I have become the penultimate guru of political cultural criticism, even if I may come off sounding like such an ogre from time to time.

From the outset I assume that language, linear thought, communication, even generally agreed upon modes of reasoning, do not adequately define social “reality.” We are more than our theories predict that we are. In other words, social “reality” exists in the minds of those who perceive it relative to the social experiences that inform it. The Nazis had a master plan because their philosophy of life dictated such a plan. We must all consider where our respective philosophies of life take us. Therein lies the *paradox* we face: we cannot simply afford to believe that because theory is an *imperfect* tool it is also a very *ineffective* tool. A knife fashioned from the metal arch of a boot can kill someone just as dead as a sword forged from tempered steel. Throughout this dissertation I utilize both language and “theory” as imperfect tools to suggest a *transcendent* multicultural morality which exists *only* in the negotiated intervals of multiple points of view. To become truly *hyper-political* observers of social “reality” requires a fundamental change in our most basic approach to

life. We need to take a giant step past the narrow assumptions of theory. We need to embrace the mystical ruminations of our intuitions and our emotional IQ.

Embracing Political Issues in Cultural Criticism

A hyper-political cultural critic addresses philosophical issues which others might wish to avoid or even imagine that they can avoid. For example, David Bordwell (1993), in “Film Interpretation Revisited,” an article about his new book, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, writes of a “cluster of philosophical problems” which he identifies as the following questions:

- 1) Can an interpretation be true or false, valid or invalid?
- 2) Are interpretations only plausible or implausible?
- 3) Can an interpretation be invalid?
- 4) Can the text bear an infinity of interpretations?
- 5) If not, how many interpretations are permissible?
- 6) On what grounds can one justify excluding an interpretation?⁶

Bordwell states that, regarding the first two questions, his book *Making Meaning* “remains agnostic on this issue” and, regarding the latter “philosophical” questions, his new book “holds these questions in abeyance.”⁷

The art and science of hyper-political cultural criticism recognizes that interpretations do not come from left field, a place where “truth” or “true objectivity” rests (Harland 1987), somehow philosophically at peace with an ostensibly subjective, political world. In a multicultural universe where there are competing epistemological and ontological politics,

the Grand Narratives of “scientific objectivity” is thoroughly rejected (Hassan 1987: 91; Lyotard 1984). Bordwell’s “cluster of philosophical problems” are of *tremendous* interest to hyper-political cultural critics who assume that theory is always constructed within cultural points-of-view. Can we ever truly claim to be “objective?” Who could ever prove such a thing? As Harman (1988: 121) argues, isn’t theory both ideological and rhetorical? Our ancient guru Lao-Tzu puts it this way, “Those who know they do not know, gain wisdom. Those who pretend they know, remain ignorant.”⁸ As a hyper-political cultural critic, I keep in mind that whatever conclusions I draw are tentative and based on the here and now, not the future and its endless possibilities. I criticize films from a hyper-political angle, but I do so with many reservations. I have not discovered a critical approach for *all* films, *all* TV programs, *all* monographs, etc. I do not claim that others have not produced valid political critiques of narrative films or other cultural artifacts. I simply put forth a project of inquiry that examines the national psyche through which cultural artifacts are created, distributed, appreciated or dismissed with a view toward explicating the ways in which racism, (hetero)sexism, classism and ageism perpetuate prejudice, intolerance and discrimination in America. I hope to propose new insights into the nature and breadth of the American collective unconscious.

Actively Seeking “The Political”

The *hyper-political* film critic openly acknowledges that by looking for “politics” in every narrative film, s/he is likely to find “politics” everywhere. So, why play into such bias? The answer is that by embarking on an *openly acknowledged subjective experience*, we can,

to some extent, transcend some of our *subconscious* biases. Our acknowledged conscious “bias” provides us the opportunity to discover the multiple contexts and the multiple-dimensions within which our subconscious political subjectivity is informed. In other words, a very focused analysis of the political dimensions of narrative films provides us with a view of the heretofore “invisible” connections between the social, economic, moral and historical domains of cultural experience here in America. By *specifically* looking for such connections we open our minds to the interconnectedness of multiple forms of social **praxis** (theory and action combined). Later, we can test our very subjective but broadened conclusions against social “reality.” A holistic search for the *interconnectedness* of social praxis transcends the subjectivity of the ego.

As I said before, the hyper-political film critic needs to be aware, at all times, that his or her perspective is, as all perspectives are, skewed to the side from which s/he observes. By recognizing such bias and keeping it continuously in mind, the hyper-political film critic can become, in a sense, *transrational*. S/he can go beyond the rational into a mode of knowing that includes intuitions and gut reactions which will be tested later against actual social practice. In a book entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1957) alerted many to the tendency of scientists, stuck in what I call the “politics of epistemological privilege,” to defend their viewpoints against rational evidence opposing prevailing paradigms. A good example of this obstinacy or “epistemological privilege” is the blind allegiance that some scientists manifested toward Newtonian physics when other paradigms offered more **explanatory power** (i.e., the capacity to explain more).

Einstein's theories, of course, eventually displaced Newton's mechanistic paradigm of the natural world with a much more mysterious paradigm that ostensibly flooded into the social sciences as post-modern theory and, later, post-formal thinking. Kuhn's thesis ultimately problematized what I call the "politics of epistemological privilege." He implied that people, in general, some scientists, in particular, find it difficult to break free of established points-of-view or prevailing theories. These "privileged perceivers" exclude findings which does not fit prevailing constructs and they are generally close-minded to radical revision of their "philosophies of life." What is needed is an attitude of inquiry that doesn't invest itself with dogma. What is needed is a "free-floating" position of reference which researchers ground in **multiperspectival** (adopting many points-of view) lived experiences.

In summation then, the *hyper-political* cultural critic assumes (1) that there is no "neutral corner" from which to view the world, (2) that each point-of-view imports its own *bias*, and (3) that *prejudice, intolerance and discrimination* are the social locations where diverging or competing politics are best observed and understood. No matter where we stand in the forest of our perceptions, no two eyes will ever gaze out upon anything but a subjective, relative and interpretive social "reality" (Lyotard 1984). We may try to see through the "objective" eyes of an all-knowing modernist God, but as Richardson (1988) puts it, postmodernists expose the gods of modernity as camouflaged first persons who hide in the "passive voice of science."⁹ So, to the philosophical question, "Can the text bear an infinity of interpretations?" the *hyper-political* cultural critic responds, "Theoretically, yes; politically, no."¹⁰

To transcend radical post-modern theory, we must allow ourselves some measure of common sense. We must allow that society does not fall apart at the juncture of every social interaction. We *can* communicate and interact with each other and we *do* communicate and interact with each other, as well as with the environment. In the end, we must seek out a *practical* resolution to the theoretical paradoxes we create, even if it is a temporary or tentative practical “resolution.” We must seek out “resolutions” which go *beyond* the philosophical *possibilities*, beyond the theoretical *possibilities*, to that which combines theory with common *experience*. I argue, therefore, that there is a huge qualitative difference between the uncertainties of cultural values and ideals (which ultimately determine one’s interpretations) and the uncertainties of scientific measurement and ecological “progress.” We can readily see some of the results of our actions on the environment. We cannot so easily imagine the effects of inherited culture on our interpretations of social “reality.” The environment is one thing, our imaginations are another. We can see buildings. We cannot so easily see the psycho-sociological past that governs our eco-political future.

Critical Theory and the Social Dynamics of Narrative Film

That the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany took over the *film industry* speaks to at least three influential political dimensions of narrative film: (1) the **rhetorical power** of the medium, (2) the largely uninterrogated **psycho-spiritual authority** of the medium and, (3) the **emotional resonance** of narrative art. After the First World War, a tradition developed which we now call “critical theory” to combat these rhetorical dimensions of culture. According to Thompson & Held (1982):

“Critical theory” refers to a series of ideas which emerged in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. The critical theorists were concerned, among other things, to interpret the course of twentieth-century history, and especially the effects of the First World War, the defeat of left-wing working-class movements, the rise of fascism and Nazism, and the degeneration of the Russian revolution into Stalinism. While rejecting Marxist-Leninism, the critical theorists nevertheless found in Marx’s thought a powerful tool for the analysis of historical events. Among the questions which became central for them were the following: Why did European radical movements fail to develop into a unified struggle? Why were tendencies towards authoritarianism and the expansion of bureaucracies dominant? How, in spite of these tendencies, could theory preserve hope for the future? In changing historical circumstances, how could the revolutionary ideal be sustained and justified?¹¹

“Political economy, cultural criticism and psychoanalysis were integrated into the framework of critical theory” because the Institute for Social Research (a.k.a. The Frankfurt School) “was committed to a programme of interdisciplinary study in which ‘philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians and psychologists must unite in a lasting working partnership’”¹² to eliminate political domination.

In other words, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and others (of the so-called “Frankfurt School”) attempted to rethink the meaning of human self-direction or emancipation, to develop a theory of non-dogmatic social transformation, to expose the hidden social relationships of the everyday world, and to analyze the problems of social theories that celebrated social harmony without questioning the assumptions of the larger society (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1993, p. 298). During the initial stages of the Second World War, this group of mainly Jewish intellectuals fled Nazi Germany for the United States. Although there have since developed second and third “generations” of their “critical tradition,” it is worth returning to the so-called “first generation critical theorists” for a

genealogical glimpse of **cultural reflexivity**, a term I invented to define (1) the critical practice of examining one's culture from within and without, (2) the practice of utilizing multi-disciplinary and multi-perspective approaches to delineate negotiated points-of-view, and (3) the critical practice of grounding precepts in the lived experiences of the disenfranchised.

The Frankfurt School, from its inception, attempted to understand how science, “sophisticated” social theories and technological progress could lead to the ravages of Nazism. Horkheimer in 1937 defined **critical theory** in the following words:

To put it in broad terms, [critical] theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.¹³

Here, Horkheimer symbolizes *critical theory's ultimate project*—to change the world by first, understanding, and second, eliminating domination. This notion of devising an avowedly political theoretical platform ran counter to traditional social theory which lay claim to a “value-free” perspective. Critical theory evolved throughout the lives of its founders and, indeed, it is still evolving to this day. The first generation, as already implied, criticized Marx's theories of consciousness. They added psychoanalytic and social-psychological dimensions to Marx's rather flat ideas of social consciousness. The Frankfurt School picked up Marx's pigskin of emancipatory human struggle and carried it to a first down on a theoretically useful psycho-social yard line. Kincheloe & Steinberg's post-formal

thinking picked up this pigskin and carried it even further, to a psycho-*spiritual* yard line. They argue in their seminal work on post-formal thinking that, “post-formality is life-affirming as it transcends modernism’s disdain and devaluation of the spiritual.”¹⁴ As such, post-*formal* thinking brushes past the nihilism (the senselessness) of radical post-*modernism* by suggesting a spiritual heaven set above the negotiated horizons of multicultural meaning. We will address more of this insight in another chapter. For now, let us continue with critical theory.

Critical theorists believe that culture becomes a villain when works of art lose their autonomy, which is to say that *in a free society*, culture is created solely for pleasure, not to feed the political or economic machinery that produces it.¹⁵

Horkheimer (1972) puts it this way:

Individuality, the true factor in artistic creation and judgment, consists not in idiosyncrasies and crochets, but in the power to withstand the plastic surgery of the prevailing economic system which carves all men to one pattern. Human beings are free to recognize themselves in works of art in so far as they have not succumbed to the general leveling. The individual’s experience embodied in a work of art has no less validity than the organized experience society brings to bear for the control of nature. Although its criterion lies in itself alone, art is knowledge no less than science is.¹⁶

When the Nazis took over the film industry, they knew they had to control all forms of knowledge production. The Nazis wanted everyone goose-stepping to a march that controlled both art and science. Desire, itself, had to be co-opted by Hitler’s “philosophy of life.” Here in America, the danger was (and still remains) that materialism and greed might become our national furor, if not our national Führer. The gap between the haves and the have-nots widens with glacial abandon.

Horkheimer and Adorno never (to my knowledge), I must add, claimed that Nazi values and ideals were necessarily going to wash up on American shores, that swastikas were going to replace the stars on the American flag. The Frankfurt thinkers, instead, struggled to *understand* and formulate a social theory that would prevent future Holocausts. It was a noble project, if not utopian or even impossible. To make such an attempt, they recognized that for individuals to become truly authentic they would have to confront prevailing philosophies of life through an ever-evolving analysis of culture. This is essentially why Marcuse (1968), in an essay titled “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” wrote that “Critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis.”¹⁷

Adorno (1967) maintained that,

the cultural critic can hardly avoid the imputation that he has the culture which culture lacks. His vanity aids that of culture: even in the accusing gesture, the critic clings to the notion of culture, isolated, unquestioned, dogmatic...Where there is despair and measureless misery, he sees only spiritual phenomena, the state of man's consciousness, the decline of norms. By insisting on this, criticism is tempted to forget the unutterable, instead of striving, however, impotently, so that man [sic] may be spared.¹⁸

Adorno points out that the act of cultural criticism is problematic since it presupposes a value-less position from which to criticize cultural artifacts. The critic is unavoidably biased. What makes his (or her) view so accurate? So compelling? So correct? Nothing, at this point in our discussion.

Adorno doesn't seem to offer suggestions how to jump the political hurdles we face as we move away from cultural and political domination. Do we, as critics, just give up? This

would seem absurd. On the other hand, do we plod ahead, blindly flailing away at political and cultural domination? Surely not. Intellectuals, especially German intellectuals, do not blindly flail away at anything. Fortunately, Kincheloe & Steinberg come to Adorno's rescue just before he is face-planted into the meta-theoretical mud of mid-field. Adorno, like other critical theorists, did not demonstrate how cultural critics (or intellectuals) could use the psycho-social past to understand the eco-political present.

Post-Formal Theory

We move from the "practice of cultural criticism" to "critical practice" when we view culture as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes a psycho-social history. Critical practice, for it to be a true and authentic critical practice, must be grounded in the lived experiences of those who are marginalized since *this is the only assurance that such practice is intersubjectively dialectical and/or multiculturally valid*. To be truly *critical or hyper-political*, then, enlightened cultural analysis by definition shifts continuously between multiple points of points of view, never neglecting those which oppose dominant positions of social "reality." In this spirit, Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993) argue,

post-formal teachers begin to look at their lessons from the perspectives of their Asian students, their Black students, their Latino students, their White students, their poor students, their middle- and upper-middle-class students, their traditionally successful students, their unsuccessful students. They examine their teaching from the vantage points of their colleagues or outside lay observers, which helps them reveal the hidden patterns and assumptions that shape their approaches. Thus, they step out of their teacher bodies and look down on themselves and their students as outsiders. As they hover above themselves, they examine their technicist teacher education with its emphasis on bulletin board construction, behavioral objective writing, discussion skill development, and classroom management. They begin to understand that

such technicist training reflects a limited formality, as it assumes that professional actions can be taught as a set of procedures (Nixon, 1981).¹⁹

As political film critics, we must hover above our historically informed selves as we examine the ways in which we were socially constructed by our cultural inheritance.

Kincheloe & Steinberg's post-formal theory, in many ways, picks up the pigskin from the Frankfurt School (and its successors) and carries the epistemological and ontological struggle for emancipation to yet another first down. One could argue that classical Marxism is a weak tool for emancipatory struggles in our present age because it ignores a bit of context that is crucial for emancipatory political praxis—it ignores the flow of consciousness between the ever-evolving state and economic structures and between a constantly changing culture and the subconscious desires it creates. Critical theory similarly “fails” because it ostensibly ignores the complexities of human consciousness. It ignores the evidence that we are *simultaneously* determined by our cultural inheritance and informed by our capacity to bypass, block or even assault this inheritance, i.e., we have agency, we have “free will.” Massive protests against the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the Civil Rights movement—all provide evidence that the “Culture Industry” does not quite have the formidable grip on our consciousness that critical theorists hypothesized. Some how, some way, we seemed to assert our will to power. None of these approaches—Marxism, critical theory or any other critical mode of inquiry—should be tossed out the window. Each brings its own insights to the discussion table and since no theory is above reproach, post-formal thinking does not “cast the first stone.”

Kincheloe & Steinberg's post-formal theory rounds out the sharp edges of a multicultural discussion table because it takes cultural inheritance, political domination, consciousness formation and free will into consideration as it constructs an epistemology of emancipation. Post-formal thinking, not unlike Buddhism, is *a mode of inquiry*:

If knowledge and consciousness are social constructions, then so is post-formal thinking—for it also emerges from a particular historical and social location. Recognizing post-formal thinking as historically situated, we in no way intend for it to be portrayed as an essential list of what constitutes higher order thinking. We offer it simply as a heuristic, an aid to further one's thinking about cognition. Post-formal thinking always includes an elastic clause—a rider that denies any claim of the objective existence of a post-formal way of thinking. It is one perspective from a particular point in the web of reality; a mere starting point in our search for what constitutes a higher level of understanding.²⁰

It must be stated that neither Buddhism nor post-formal thinking are nihilistic. Neither argues that it is pointless to debate political, moral, or socio-economic issues, that we should just let the world unfold any which way. To the contrary, Kincheloe & Steinberg are *primarily* interested in political debate because politics exert tremendous influence on the possibility of effecting emancipatory social progress. Buddhists, likewise, engage in political debate, as Thich Nhat Hahn and The Dalai Lama adequately prove.

Both post-formal thinking and Buddhism *lay claim to no particular doctrine*.

Snelling (1991) observes that,

Buddhism is not a fundamentalist religion. Its teachings are not dogmas or articles of faith that have to be blindly accepted at the cost of suspending reason, critical judgment, common sense, or experience. Quite the contrary, in fact; their basic aim is to help us gain direct insight into the truth for ourselves. We are therefore invited to try these teachings out in our everyday lives. If they work, then we will naturally want to take them on board. If they don't work for us, we can cast them aside with no qualms.²¹

Zen priest, Steve Hagen (1999), adds that the observations and insights of the Buddha can be appreciated as a “raft” that helps one to get from one shore to another—once one pulls himself onto the shore of his destination, he discards the raft because it is no longer needed.²² Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) reminds us that “the Buddha said many times, ‘My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon.’”²³ And so, neither Buddhism nor post-formal thinking picks up the mantle of doctrine. Instead, both are tools to be used to open one’s eyes to the greater historical “realities” of life—we might call this **enlightenment** since it points to an attitude of perpetual inquiry.

Being Deeply Hermeneutical

By employing Kincheloe & Steinberg’s (1993) “post-formal thinking,” we carefully draw ourselves into a heightened “critical consciousness” from which we can examine certain aspects of inherited culture. According to Kincheloe & Steinberg,

formal thinking à la Piaget implies an acceptance of a Cartesian-Newtonian mechanistic worldview that is caught in a cause-effect, hypothetico-deductive system of reasoning. *Unconcerned with questions of power relations and the way they structure our consciousness, formal operational thinkers accept an objective, unpoliticized way of knowing* (my emphasis).²⁴

Post-formal thinkers know that they construe social “reality” through very particular political lenses. They embrace a highly politicized “self-reflexivity” because it expands the contexts within which they are capable of grasping the effects of political praxis. When they draw conclusions, they do so within a much wider contextual base than formalist thinkers.

Therefore, they are, in a sense, *more* correct than formalist thinkers. They see more of the “truth” than formalist thinkers.

As for the *truth* claims of any given interpretation—Yes!—the art and science of political cultural criticism reserves the right to claim a continuum along which political “truth” and political “validity” may be staked. That is to say that some interpretations, particularly those which do *not* consider the political economy nor human rights, are *politically* “invalid,” perhaps even *politically* “untruthful.” In fact, I would go far out on a philosophical limb and suggest that **aesthetic criticism** is immoral given Dewey’s (1934) assumption that the *moral function* of the critic is to assist art in “removing prejudice, doing away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tearing away the veils due to wont and custom, and perfecting the power to perceive.”

If we agree that life is, as the major religions of the world put it, a struggle to do God’s Will, or a struggle to differentiate a spiritual sense of “right” from “wrong,” or a struggle to learn from our earthly experiences and prove ourselves worthy of extra-worldly redemption, then, from a *moral* perspective, Bordwell’s “knotty philosophical problems”²⁵ become crucial *political* issues. If we cannot truly separate politics from science, politics from religion (or morality), politics from the economy, politics from virtually anything that we do collectively, then the *moral* responsibility of the cultural critic *is* to explicitly acknowledge his or her subjective “politics” as s/he writes a particular “critique” and to discuss whatever “politics” s/he believes incurs in the cultural artifact being critiqued.

The “knotty problem” of differentiating between “right and wrong” or “true and false” is a *moral* issue, an issue which social scientists generally seek to avoid at all costs

because the spiritual realm supposedly doesn't exist in the academy. Yet, those who truly accept their *spirituality* cannot separate their "politics" from any aspect of their lives. Put another way, "politics" and "morality" are inseparable when one refuses to "play dead" to moral issues. Most, if not *all*, ministers, priests or rabbis will tell their followers to adhere to a particular way of conducting themselves, a way which implicitly if not explicitly suggests certain politics. That Bordwell and others find it difficult to render "philosophical" judgment *as they actually go about rendering such judgment* just illustrates my point that there is no truly "neutral political position" from which to dismiss one's spiritual views. In one breath Bordwell says that interpretations can be neither "true" nor "false" and in another he states that, "What interested me was how even *far-fetched* [my emphasis] interpretations could be produced and promulgated within a disciplinary field."²⁶ How does an interpretation get to be "far-fetched" if it does not lie along a continuum of valid and invalid, true and false? We simply cannot play dead to issues of right and wrong, true and false, valid and invalid—in short, anything that hints of a spiritual or moral conclusion.

Bordwell and others like him simply refuse to recognize *their own politics*, their own very hypocritical dismissals of specific philosophical issues. Is Bordwell (and others like him) conscious of this epistemological/ontological hypocrisy? Apparently not. He and others like him pass philosophical judgment each and every day, never truly acknowledging their judgments. They are like the prisoners of Plato's cave in that they do not realize that there is a world of context out there that offers a better explanation of lived experiences than the constricted consciousness through which they view their worlds. Bordwell throws out the following very *subjective* epistemological "bone," assuming all the while that there is an

absolute “objective truth” out there and that most film critics will bury his bone in their epistemological back yards:

Few critics will, I think, quarrel with the claim that an interpretation is not necessarily an evaluation (although the relation of interpretation to value is not by any means clear). More people will object to separating analysis from interpretation.²⁷

If one questions, as postmodernists do, any individual’s claim to an “absolute truth,” then life, itself, becomes, as Nietzsche suggests, an “interpretation” and every “interpretation,” it follows, *is* both an evaluation *and* an analysis. This transrational mixing of definitions (and theoretical concepts) necessarily occurs when one assumes that it is not possible to separate, as even modern science has shown us, the knower from what is known. In a sense, postmodernism has (re)politicized the production, distribution and reception of knowledge! Hyper-political cultural critics, therefore, recognize the epistemological and ontological politics within which they construe their social worlds.

Meaning is Half-Created, Half-Discovered

Fortunately, not everyone in the academy swallows Bordwell’s epistemological “bone.” David A. Cook (1993), responding to Bordwell’s cognitive approach to film studies, writes:

My first thought on reading *Making Meaning* was how to prevent the book from falling into the hands of my Dean, since it suggest the essential uselessness of everything Film Studies has accomplished as a discipline in the past thirty years. Bordwell’s argument, it bears repeating, is that academic film criticism has evolved as a self-referential, self-perpetuating, and ultimately, self-serving mechanism for the production of meaning and that meaning is itself predetermined by a fundamental interpretive logic and

rhetoric shared by nearly everyone in the field, regardless of their theoretical commitments. His remedy is to “dislocate” interpretation-dominated criticism from its position of centrality within the academy and to reinvigorate film scholarship with a “historical poetics” grounded in cognitive psychology and rational-agent social theory.²⁸

Cook objects to Bordwell’s approach because Cook believes that “meaning is, as Woodsworth tells us, something that we “half-discover, half create” and that neither process implies the lack of rigor, expertise, and energy Professor Bordwell assigns to the current state of interpretive criticism.”²⁹ I wholeheartedly agree with Cook because it seems far too simplistic to suggest that hyper-political cultural criticism is simply an acquired “skill.”

First of all, Bordwell does not center his meta-theorizing on politics the way I do. He comes to the following conclusions about film interpretation:

Making Meaning [his new book] assumes that film interpretation, considered as a practice, requires a characteristic set of skills. For example, critics compare a film’s beginning with it’s ending; they ascribe themes to films; they find patterns and motifs and fill in gaps. At least some of these skills are likely to be learned, though not necessarily in formal teaching situations. Moreover, they can be present in greater or lessor degrees of adequacy. *One can be more or less skillful in interpreting films, hammering nails, or making things disappear.* [my emphasis] I suppose that this premise could be denied, but I cannot presently see any grounds for it.³⁰

My argument is that the art and science of *political* cultural criticism is far from an acquired “skill.” A carpenter cannot adequately critique culture, unless that carpenter is multiculturally enlightened. Political film criticism requires an *altered consciousness*. It requires the self-reflexive capacity to transcend the so-called “rational” patterns of one’s culture. This, in itself, is a transformative *process*, not simply a skill! Political film criticism recognizes that an ever-evolving multi-cultural perspective is the *only* position that even *approximates*

“absolute objectivity.” All other positions, Bordwell’s included, *implicitly* claim to do that which is impossible—they claim to hold “philosophical questions in abeyance.” To his credit, however, Bordwell (1989) does acknowledge that “cinema studies has lacked a strong tradition of historical scholarship” and he concludes that “it is time for critics to make the knight’s move” (defined as “a sidestepped dislocation of interpretation itself”), which he suggests might become something of an “historical poetics.”³¹ Still, his approach is much too stilted with form for it to be called a post-formal approach.

Negotiated Politics

With this in mind, I propose certain transrational “truths” which critical multiculturalists use to transcend the biases and the “absolute certainties” of an ordinary consciousness (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997).³² These “truths” are, of course, tentative (for the here and now), and represent a reasonable ever-evolving consensus of the multi-perspectival points-of-view I have so far encountered: (1) Through continuous dialogue (Freire, 1995) “truth” is, in a sense, negotiated, just as each day represents an implied negotiation of “social reality.” The old argument goes: Can we be sure of anything? No, if we think philosophically. Yes, if we must find our next meal. In the end, we live by faith that the patterns of our lived experiences will be repeated. While we argue infinite “knots of philosophical” *possibilities* in the academy, people in the “real” world go about locating food and procreating as human beings have done for millennia. (2) Clearly, what we do in our minds often does not measure up to what we do in our social worlds (Gilovich, 1991). Philosophy, therefore, is a big part of *hyper-political* cultural criticism, even if “knotty

philosophical problems” are laid by the wayside by unsuspecting prisoners of Plato’s cave, even if some in the academy might even avoid philosophical issues for the sinister purpose of maintaining an uneven status quo.

Not to lay a tentative philosophical foundation for what comes next in a dissertation about political cultural criticism is, perhaps, a luxury for those who are capable of separating their social worlds into neat theoretical cubbyholes which efface both moral issues and the political economy from their ensuing logic. I cannot do such in this dissertation, not if I wish to address the issue of my own political subjectivity. An epistemological court of law would demand such blatant honesty, why doesn’t the academy? I consider myself lucky, perhaps even blessed, that my committee insisted that I lay an epistemological and ontological foundation for my argument. By thinking about the “politics” of my own subjectivity, I came face to face with the truism that philosophy is, no matter what others might claim, a crucial part of *any* type of cultural criticism, indeed a crucial part of any form of social science research.

In later chapters, I will address the politics of “aesthetic uniqueness,” the untenable (in my view) argument that each film is unique unto itself and the *very absurd* and *very dangerous* position that “art has no political bias.” I will argue that film criticism that presupposes the “aesthetic uniqueness” of each film is a(n) (un)critical point of view which denies politics its day in court. Those critics who remove each film from its economic, political and social context(s) by their modus operandi commit a political act which, essentially, disembowels both ideology and culture. My argument is that both ideology and culture are best observed through the intertextuality of symbolic social interaction. Too many

mainstream film critics and academics do not recognize that their fragmented views of social “reality” keep them from seeing the treacherous powers of divisive political rhetoric.

In Chapter Two, I will expand upon the moral foundations of the art and science of political cultural criticism by reconnecting the spiritual realm to the political realm. I will do so by examining in more detail the false dichotomy between science and mysticism. I will end my discussion with Cornel West’s “politics of conversion” and Richard Moss’ psychoanalytical “awakening to higher energies through unconditional love” as the epistemological and ontological foundation for a transrational approach to cultural criticism. I will argue that both science and mysticism are crucial to developing a balanced moral view of social “reality.”

Footnotes

¹Hoffmann, Hilmar (1996). The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism 1933 – 1945, United Kingdom: Berghahn Books, The Preface.

²Izard, Carroll E. (1991). The Psychology of Emotions, New York: Plenum Publishing Corporation, p. 8.

³Rosenau, Pauline Marie (1992). Post-modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, p. 5.

⁴Are we not biased even when we assume that human beings behave rationally? Social psychologist Thomas Gilovich (1991), in *How We Know What Isn't So*, points out that “people rarely think that they hold a particular belief simply because they want to hold it, the evidence be damned. This sense of *objectivity* [my emphasis] can nevertheless be illusory: Although people consider their beliefs to be closely tied to relevant evidence, they are generally unaware that the same evidence could be looked at differently, or that there is other, equally pertinent evidence to consider. As Kunda describes it, ‘...people do not realize that the [inferential] process is biased by their goals, that they are only accessing a subset of their relevant knowledge, that they would probably access different beliefs and [inferential] rules in the presence of differing goals, and that they might even be capable of justifying opposite conclusions on different occasions.’ Our motivations thus influence our beliefs through the subtle ways we *choose* [my emphasis] a comforting pattern from the fabric of evidence. One of the simplest and yet most powerful ways we do so lies in how we frame the very question we ask of the evidence. When we prefer to believe something, we may approach the relevant evidence by asking ourselves, ‘what evidence is there to support this belief?’ If we prefer to believe that a political assassination was not the work of a lone gunman, we may ask ourselves about the evidence that supports a conspiracy theory. Note that this question is not unbiased: It directs our attention to supportive evidence and away from information that might contradict the desired conclusion. Because it is almost always possible to uncover *some* supportive evidence, the asymmetrical way we frame the question makes us overly likely to become convinced of what we hope to be true.” By “what we hope to be true,” Gilovich seems to be saying that we are unconsciously guided by our *expectations*. If we *expect* that only *some* narrative films will contain “political” elements, then we will look for evidence to support this view. We are essentially motivated perceivers, armchair empiricists as George Kelly (1955) proposes—who probably could not survive without both implicit and explicit theories of how the social world works.

⁵Kincheloe, Joe and Shirley Steinberg (1993). “A Tentative Description of Post-Formal Thinking: The Critical Confrontation with Cognitive Theory,” in Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 63 No. 3 Fall 1993, p. 296.

⁶Bordwell, David (1993). "Film Interpretation Revisited," in Film Criticism, Vol. XVII, Nos. 2-3, Winter-Spring, p. 94.

⁷Bordwell, David (1993). *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁸Dreher, Diane, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹Richardson, Laurel (1988), "The Collective Story: Postmodernism and the Writing of Sociology." Sociological Focus 21 (3): Page 203.

¹⁰ In theory, there may be infinite points-of-view. Or, as Derrida (1976) has argued, each reader "write[s] the text." For Derrida, a radical post-modernist, there are as many texts as there are readers. However, thinking transrationally (i.e., trying to transcend paradox), one realizes that although there may be, *theoretically* speaking, an infinite number of perspectives; *practically* speaking, there are a finite number of political groups and, again, practically speaking, few readers or spectators see a bullfight when they are at a football game! Giddens (1984) formulated structuration analysis which decenters the subject but, fortunately, does not dissipate it in the nihilism of radical post-modern theory. Giddens argues for a balance where the spectator freely interprets a film but is restrained somewhat by the structures of conventional movie-reading. The social structures which taught us how to construe our social worlds, in a sense, teach us how to make sense of movies. By watching movies we gradually learned how to "read" them as though they were, for the most part, simple puzzles easily solved. When we combine social convention with the effective relationships people have with and in the world, we narrowly limit the possible "realities" that define human existence. The world inexorably limits our wild theoretical imaginations.

¹¹Thompson, John B. and David Held (1982). Habermas: Critical Debates, Massachusetts: THE MIT Press, Introduction.

¹²Thompson & Held (1982). *Ibid.*, Introduction.

¹³Horkheimer, Max (1972). "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 227. Originally appeared in the Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung 6 (1937).

¹⁴Kincheloe, Joe and Shirley Steinberg (1993) "A Tentative Description of Post-Formal Thinking: The Critical Confrontation with Cognitive Theory," in Harvard Educational Review Vol. 63 No. 3 Fall 1993, p. 309.

¹⁵In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that the "space" for **autonomous art**, that is, *art produced outside of the workplace* was being purchased

wholesale to serve the interests of capital. Horkheimer and Adorno in no way claimed that the “culture industry” produced mindless automatons. This would have, of course, denied critical theory its dialectical conception of the audience. Instead, critical theorists suggested that art was *potentially* a “space” for negativity. Like the opposites *Yin* and *Yang*, art was the other side of the cultural coin, it was yet another *possibility* of resisting social conformity. But art *is* not the *only* space for such negativity, of course, and it is certainly not the only space that determines one’s subjectivity. It *is*, rather, a *crucial* space where countercultural ideas may be simultaneously produced and disseminated. In the age of “art for *money’s* sake,” as opposed to “art for *art’s* sake,” negativity is exchanged for another positivity, another positive moment for the prevailing order, it would seem. When art became commodified, in other words, it lost its autonomy, it lost its radical visions, it lost its potential to enlighten us. In their own words, Horkheimer and Adorno state that, “The less the culture industry has to promise, the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life, and the emptier is the ideology it disseminates. Even the abstracted ideals of the harmony and beneficence of society are too concrete in this age of universal publicity. We have even learned how to identify abstract concepts as sales propaganda. Language based entirely on truth simply arouses impatience to get on with the business deal it is probably advancing. The words that are not means appear senseless; the others seem to be fiction, untrue. Value judgments are taken either as advertising or as empty talk. Accordingly ideology has been made vague and noncommittal, and thus neither clearer nor weaker. Its very vagueness, its almost scientific aversion from committing itself to anything which cannot be verified, acts as an instrument of domination. It becomes vigorous and prearranged promulgation of the status quo. The culture industry tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order. It skillfully steers a winding course between the cliffs of demonstrable misinformation and manifest truth, faithfully reproducing the phenomenon whose opaqueness blocks any insight and installs the ubiquitous and intact phenomenon as ideal. Ideology is split into the photograph of stubborn life and the naked lie about its meaning—which is not expressed but suggested and yet drummed in . . . Anyone who doubts the power of monotony is a fool. The culture industry refutes the objection made against it just as well as that against the world which it impartially duplicates. The only choice is either to join in or to be left behind.” This excerpt was taken from: Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W Adorno (1972) Dialectic of Enlightenment. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Seabury Press, p. 147-148. When art became commodified, it became the “authoritative voice,” the prophet of the prevailing social order. And so, today, the overwhelming trend might be to goose-step to the artificial pleasures of the marketplace. We march to the beat of inherited obsessions, inculcated drives cemented in our minds by greedy advertisers. Yet, we have within us the seeds of discontent which might at any moment flower and overthrow these dry hedonistic obsessions. Like the Buddha, enlightenment swells within our breasts. We just don’t recognize it until we shake loose the fetters of form and exhale our pasty subjective illusions. When we become truly enlightened, we recognize that we know little about

anything that we could call an absolute “Truth.” And, with this knowledge, we live in the moment, observing the many contexts that inform our perceptions, recognizing, for once, the plurality of forces that play the tunes we call social and technological progress.

¹⁶Horkheimer, Max (1972). “Art and Mass Culture” in Critical Theory: Selected Essays, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and Others. New York: Seabury Press, p. 286.

¹⁷Marcuse, Herbert (1968). Negations: Essays in Critical Theory, Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 156-7.

¹⁸Adorno, Theodor W. (1967). Prisms, Translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, p. 19.

¹⁹Kincheloe, J., and S. Steinberg (1993). “A tentative description of post-formal thinking: The critical confrontation with cognitive theory.” Harvard Educational Review, 63, p. 308.

²⁰Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993). *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²¹Snelling, John (1991). The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Teaching, Practice, and History, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, p. 42.

²²Hagen, Steve (1999). Buddhism: Plain & Simple, New York: Harper Audio, A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, (Audio-cassette tapes digitally recorded Oct 26,7, 1998 in St. Paul, MN).

²³Thich Nhat Hanh (1998). The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy & Liberation, Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, p. 16.

²⁴Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993), *Ibid*, p. 297.

²⁵Bordwell, David (1993). *Ibid*, p. 94.

²⁶Bordwell, David (1993). *Ibid*, p. 94.

²⁷Bordwell, David (1993). *Ibid*, p. 96.

²⁸Cook, David A. (1993). “Making Sense” in Film Criticism, Vol. XVII, Nos. 2-3, Winter-Spring, p. 31.

²⁹Cook, David A. (1993). *Ibid*, p. 38.

³⁰Bordwell, David (1993). Ibid, p. 97.

³¹Bordwell, David, (1989). Ibid, p. 249-274.

³²Kincheloe, J. and S, Steinberg (eds.), (1997). Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood. Boulder, Colorado: Westview.

CHAPTER TWO

RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF THE FAR EAST AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In *The Tao of Physics*, Fritjof Capra (1991) discusses how “the concepts of modern physics often show surprising parallels to the ideas expressed in the religious philosophies of the Far East.”¹ He offers the following three quotations from contemporary prominent physicists to show how science is indeed returning to the ancient wisdom of the mystics:

The general notions about human understanding, which are illustrated by discoveries in atomic physics are not in the nature of things wholly unfamiliar, wholly unheard of, or new. Even in our own culture they have a history, and in Buddhist and Hindu thought a more considerable and central place. What we shall find is an exemplification, an encouragement, and a refinement of old wisdom.

Julius Robert Oppenheimer

For a parallel to the lesson of atomic theory...[we must turn] to those kinds of epistemological problems with which already thinkers like the Buddha and Lao Tzu have been confronted, when trying to harmonize our position as spectators and actors in the great drama of existence.

Niels Bohr

The great scientific contribution in theoretical physics that has come from Japan since the last war may be an indication of a certain relationship between philosophical ideas in the tradition of the Far East and the philosophical substance of quantum theory.

Werner Heisenberg²

Capra argues that the purpose of his book is to explore the “relationship between the concepts of modern physics and the basic ideas in the philosophical and religious traditions of the Far East.”³ He goes on to state that,

We shall see how the two foundations of twentieth-century physics—quantum theory and relativity theory—both force us to see the world very much the way a Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist sees it, and how this similarity strengthens when we look at the recent attempts to combine these two theories in order to describe the phenomena of the submicroscopic world: the properties and interactions of the subatomic particles of which all matter is made. Here the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism are most striking, and we shall often encounter statements where it is almost impossible to say whether they have been made by physicists or by Eastern mystics.⁴

My project is to redefine cultural criticism. The thrust of my approach is aimed at developing a heightened critical consciousness in film critics, an awareness that transcends the narrow limitations of language, concept and theory, an awareness that returns us to the enduring wisdom of ancient Eastern mysticism.

If cultural criticism is to lead us away from personal and cultural **inauthenticity** (not being “real” to ourselves or our environment), then it must do so from the heights of a conscious awareness of our spiritual obligations to seek greater social “truths.” Say not, “I have found *the* truth,” but rather, “I have found *a* truth”—one reads in Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*. When millions of Tibetans were displaced from their country by the Chinese, The Dali Lama responded, “I speak to you to inform you of the sad situation in my country today and of the aspirations of my people, because in our struggle for freedom, *truth* is the only weapon we possess.”⁵ And so, we turn to Lao tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* for one possible “truth” that might lead us to better cultural criticism and a better social world:

Look at it but you cannot see it!
Its name is *Formless*.
Listen to it but you cannot hear it!
Its name is *Soundless*.

Grasp it but you cannot get it!
 Its name is *Incorporeal*.
 These three attributes are unfathomable;
 Therefore they fuse into one.
 Its upper side is not bright:
 Its underside is not dim.
 Continually the Unnameable moves on,
 Until it returns beyond the realm of things.
 We call it the formless Form⁶
 (Tao 14)

Transrational analysis accepts that “truth” has no discernible *form*, hence Kincheloe & Steinberg call their new mode of knowing *post-formal* thinking. “Truth” is, indeed, a unique blend of form and formlessness. When we look at ourselves in the mirror we see our forms in relationship to formless backgrounds that separate us from everything else in the bathroom. We need to see form to distinguish ourselves from background. We need form to communicate. Language is form. Without form our utterances are meaningless. Yet, to transcend the limitations of form, to get at more holistic social “truths,” to see everything-all-at-once (or to try to do so), post-formal thinkers cannot help but employ theory and all of its co-workers. We are not unlike filmmakers who must engage union workers for each aspect of production. Like Buddhism and Taoism, post-formal thinking uses theory to transcend theory. Post-formal thinking uses theory, language, concepts and certain methodologies as a platform for launching formless “truths.” Post-formal thinking is, paradoxically, a mode of knowing that combines reason with intuition, where reason is substituted for form and intuition for formlessness. Because hyper-political cultural criticism combines both art and science, it is a formless Form.

According to this new critical paradigm, “truth” is not to be discovered in any particular subjectivity or any particular constellation of subjectivities. Kincheloe & Steinberg call this type of thinking “meta-awareness” and argue that,

post-formal thinkers are cognizant of the relationship between the way they themselves and others frame problems and ask questions about the nature of the system of meaning they employ. They possess an understanding of the etymology of frames, even when the individual involved fails to recognize the origin of a question or a problem.⁷

In other words, those who understand the etymology of frames also understand the formless Forms of Taoism. They also know that knowledge cannot be transmitted from one person to another without “frames” of reference.⁸

The Tao suggests that “reality” is always off in the distance, out of view, out of focus. In other words, there is no “absolute reality” that can be put into words or condensed into theory. Theory, therefore, falls far short of ever touching the “truth.” Post-modernists, in many ways, embrace much of Lao-Tzu’s and the Buddha’s venerable insights. According to Rosenau (1992), “radical” or “skeptical” post-modernists argue that,

Theory conceals, distorts, and obfuscates (Nelson 1987: 18); it is “alienated, disparate, dissonant” (Der Derian 1989a: 6); it means to “exclude, order, and control rival powers” (Seidman 1989: 636); it is ideological and rhetorical, although claiming to be scientific (modern science is only a “cultural artifact”) (Harman, 1988: 121). It is overbearing, seeking “stable ground” and aiming to “anchor a sovereign voice” (Ashley 1989a). Theory, said to legitimate a monopoly of power, is thus considered little more than an “authoritarian weapon” by most skeptics (Kellner 1987: 6). Modern theory cannot abide the “radical undecidability” of opposing points of view. It needs to choose. It has no “respect for paradox,” defined as an opposition in which it is never possible to choose one opposition over the other.⁹

Rosenau goes on to add that radical post-modernism feels “no need to be logical, to reconcile opposites, to test, or to choose between theories,” it simply “accepts inconsistency and contradiction” (Ashley 1989a: 271-80). If we agree that Hitler did indeed use modernist concepts as “authoritarian weapons” of mass destruction, then how does one avoid, as various generations of critical theorists had hoped to, the evil proclivities of “rational” thought gone awry? And, if post-modernism refuses, in its most radical permutations, to yield to some sort of consensus, I would argue, then, that it is at the juncture of these two paradoxes that radical post-modernism deviates from the Tao, from Buddhist practice and from post-formal thinking—for all three “ideologies” are like the concept of the trinity in that they become “one” around the spiritual unity of multicultural consensus and ecological responsibility. All three “formless Forms” struggle to maintain a calm and peaceful community that does not vacate the rights of those who are in some way marginal or destroy the ecological balance that Mother Nature works so hard to maintain. Rational thought, in its modernist inflection, is invested with evil possibilities because it has no moral flavor; it is, in other words, spiritually tasteless.

Unlike authoritarian adherents to reason, Buddhists, followers of the Tao, and post-formal thinkers do not throw away “background.” To the contrary, they measure the unthinkable against the morally unspeakable all the while balancing the inordinate contradictions of knowledge. In this respect, transrational analysis does not mean relinquishing a point of view to the vast unending fields of nihilism. For those who seek metaphysical balance, it is important to embrace paradox and test ever-evolving moral points

of view against lived experience. Post-formal thinkers seek tentative “truths” grounded in historical “realities.” They choose one opposition over another when the community, as a whole, benefits. Will it be easy to make such choices? No. Buddhism provides its answer—meditation. Many religions provide a similar answer—informed prayer.

In any event, spiritual *intuition* informs the moral decisions one faces if one embraces transrational analysis. Political decisions are, therefore, not arbitrary, not based upon some lunatic’s assertion that “God” told him to kill inferior races. Post-formal political decisions are connected to the larger moral possibilities of humanity by means of the spiritual threads that tie multiperspectival insights together in a multidimensional tapestry of “truth.” The difference between positivism, science, modernist theorizing, fundamentalist religious practice and transrational analysis such as post-formal thinking, Taoism and Buddhism is that the former are (in varying degrees) closed systems of inquiry and the latter are open-ended systems of inquiry. The fundamentalist ascribes to a never-changing doctrine, which essentially etches ethical limits or moral prescriptions into time-eternal stone tablets. Post formal thought, on the other hand, is ever evolving; it constantly adjusts to fit new knowledge.

In other words, to discern holistic moral “truths,” even if they are tentative “truths,” to, in a sense, “resolve” paradox in higher states of awareness, to, moreover, expand the horizons within which we make meaning—we need to break free of the fetters that chain us to the rational, theoretical and conceptual walls of Plato’s cave. We must, therefore, emerge

from the confines of reflected “reason” into the stark sunlight of multicultural *mysticism* if we are to fully embrace the Tao. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1995) puts it this way:

We can experience the non-born, non-dying, non-beginning, non-ending because it is reality itself. The way to experience it is to abandon our habit of perceiving everything through concepts and representations The ultimate dimension of reality has nothing to do with concepts. It is not just absolute reality that cannot be talked about. *Nothing can be conceived or talked about* [my emphasis]. Take, for instance, a glass of apple juice. You cannot talk about apple juice to someone who has never tasted it. No matter what you say, the other person will not have the true experience of apple juice. The only way is to drink it. It is like a turtle telling a fish about life on dry land. You cannot describe dry land to a fish. He could never understand how one might be able to breathe without water. Things cannot be described by concepts and words. They can only be encountered by direct experience.¹⁰

On one level, “reality” is way too big to encapsulate it in any conceivable “horizon” or any manageable “form.” Everywhere one looks one notices a different landscape, each of which is but a mere snapshot of a “reality” eviscerated by its own photographic edge.

On another level, there is the impossibility of truly understanding anything without having *some sort of direct experience*. Those who suffer from racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, classism or any other kind of prejudice, intolerance or discrimination become frustrated when they have to describe their feelings to those who have not endured such tribulations. Unknowing others simply cannot understand the pain endured because they lack the experiential foundation for such understanding. On an abstract level unknowing others might be able to empathize but on a deeper spiritual level, they haven’t a proverbial clue. They lack mystical awareness of the political and moral dynamics that feed oppression.

On yet a third level, there is insight that we *can and do* relate to each other as human beings and *we can and do* alter aspects of our environment. For the film critic, this means that post-formal political critique is (1) *incapable* of encapsulating the entirety of what a film “means,” which explains why there can be so many interpretations of any given film, (2) perhaps best undertaken by one who has experienced some sort of political hardship, and (3) an endeavor that is not, by any stretch of the imagination, arbitrary and capricious, as some post-modernists seem to suggest.

Hyper-political cultural critics can rely on theory to get them from point A to point B, but they still won't see the deeper spiritual issues in narrative visual art until they transcend an ordinary consciousness. Die hard theorists, of course, will object to a coup d'état that partially dethrones theory. They will argue that intuition is nothing more than multiperspectival hocus pocus, nothing more than groundless, meaningless mysticism. At least the mysteries of science can be tested, they will triumph. And, they will be, of course, partially correct. Even a broken clock is “correct” two times each day. That theory is so incredibly important, I do not deny.

Discussing the role of theory in science, Eysenck and Nias (1978) argue that “a good theory is often more reliable than empirical observations.”¹¹ They use **heliocentric theory** (that the Earth and other planets circle round the Sun) as a poignant example of theory's power over naked observation. They argue that heliocentric theory,

was known to the ancient Greeks, but was rejected because they could not observe any parallax, i.e., the hypothetical alteration in the appearance of the stellar positions which should follow from the fact that today we observe them from one side of the sun, six months later from the other side. The lack

of parallax was used as a criticism of Copernicus and Galileo when they revived the heliocentric theory, and it was not till the nineteenth century that stellar parallax was in fact observed—the stars are much more distant from the Earth than used to be thought, and it needs refined instruments to observe the very tiny changes that take place in stellar positions. Thus a good theory may be rejected because measuring instruments are not refined enough to provide the required evidence.¹²

One might ask how ancient astronomers devised heliocentric theory in the first place. Did it come to them as some sort of philosophical insight? Could we call this insight “intuition?” Theory can indeed be more reliable than empirical observations *when it is based on intuition and there is little else to go on*. It really is a question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? I would argue, from personal experience, that intuitions give birth to theory. Fritjof Capra (1991) backs my view:

For most people, and especially for intellectuals, this mode of consciousness [relying on intuitions] is a completely new experience. Scientists are familiar with direct intuitive insights from their research, because every new discovery originates in such a sudden non-verbal flash. But these are extremely short moments which arise when the mind is filled with information, with concepts and thought patterns. In meditation [for insight], on the other hand, the mind is emptied of all thoughts and concepts and thus prepared to function for long periods through its intuitive mode. Lao-Tzu speaks about this contrast between research and meditation when he says: “He who pursues learning will increase every day; He who pursues *Tao* will decrease every day.” When the rational mind is silenced, the intuitive mode produces an extraordinary awareness; the environment is experienced in a direct way without the filter of conceptual thinking. In the words of Chuang Tzu, “The still mind of the sage is a mirror of heaven and earth—the glass of all things.” The experience of oneness with the surrounding environment is the main characteristic of this meditative state. It is a state of consciousness where every form of fragmentation has ceased, fading away into undifferentiated unity.¹³

All cultural critics, really, utilize conceptual thinking to write comprehensive, well-informed critiques. But to be able to raise their consciousness to a level where they can observe the deeper psycho-spiritual significance of art and powerfully deconstruct inherited culture, cultural critics need to have had certain very valuable existential and meditative experiences. If they are (or were at some time) members of an oppressed group, then they *may* have the basic building blocks for constructing a critical consciousness that tackles the intersubjective morality of multiple perspectives. If they meditate regularly and have reached some level of spiritual enlightenment, then they *may* have developed a hyper-political positionality from which to criticize culture. “In the Buddhist monastic tradition,” writes Thich Nhat Hanh (1995), “A life that is too comfortable will make spiritual growth difficult.”¹⁴ Likewise, hyper-political cultural criticism is spiritually difficult, if not impossible, from the lofty heights of social privilege.

Probable Reactions to Post-Formal “Truths”

There are at least three probable reactions to transrational analysis. We begin with an excerpt from Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*:

When a wise scholar hears the Tao,
 He practices it diligently.
 When a mediocre scholar hears the Tao,
 He wavers between belief and unbelief.
 When a worthless scholar hears the Tao,
 He laughs boisterously at it.
 But if such a one does not laugh at it,

The Tao would not be the Tao!
 The wise men of old have truly said:
 The bright Way looks dim.¹⁵
 (TAO 41)

“Worthless scholars” find holistic concepts such as Kincheloe & Steinberg’s post-formal thinking, Lao-Tzu’s and the Buddha’s insights completely unacceptable because these “scholars” do not honestly try to expand their interpretative horizons to include wide angle vistas and as many conceptual angles as possible. Put differently, if we are ever to transcend the hypnotic rhetoric of dominant discourse, if we are ever to bypass the misery of political mastery, if we are ever to sidestep the will of the few to power the will of the many, we must transcend rational thought.

Wise scholars know that those who ignore their epistemological and ontological moorings always seem to trek through muddy moral territory in search of an ethical clarity they may never locate because each stumbling step only thickens their fragmented views of social “reality.” And so, to become hyper-political cultural critics, we must acknowledge our epistemological and ontological inadequacies. We must learn from The Tao:

To realize that our knowledge is ignorance,
 This is a noble insight.
 To regard our ignorance as knowledge,
 This is mental sickness.
 Only when we are sick of our sickness
 Shall we cease to be sick.
 The Sage is not sick, being sick of
 sickness;
 This is the secret of health.¹⁶
 (TAO 71)

Social “reality” is, to one who embraces the Tao, essentially undefinable. This, however, does not mean, as I indicated earlier, that we should not *try* to discover a political praxis that best serves multicultural interests and harmonizes with the physics of our environment.¹⁷

My political project is to reinvigorate what began as a very noble post-modern project with a spirituality that accepts the unfathomable mysteries of the universe while struggling to find practical social solutions to the political dilemmas of the disenfranchised. Diane Dreher (1990) writes:

Because in the Tao everything is related, the political effects of a simpler life are far-reaching. ‘When we know when enough is enough, there will always be enough’ (*Tao* 46). The more people who choose a simpler lifestyle, the more balance and justice in the world.¹⁸

And so, I seek a somewhat simpler life for all, a life devoid of the materialistic complexities of consumer capitalism, the greed of class warfare, and the psychological angst of what Cornel West referred to in his brilliant book *Race Matters* as the “nihilistic threat” of social narcissism. Soon, we will consider both this “nihilistic threat” and West’s prescription for its demise. But before we do, we need to address a few more of the theoretical inadequacies of rational thought.

Where Did Theorists Go Wrong?

The first generation of critical theorists failed because they imagined that a Vulcan like Spock could become a human like Kirk. They failed because they did not recognize that because we create culture, intersubjective moral questions must have multiconditional

anchors. In other words, critical theorists, as well as many radical post-modernists, have lost their spiritual bearings in the runaway abstractions of narcissistic searches for universal “truths,” even though they may disavow such searches. Their rhetoric, in other words, drifts in the turbulent winds of objectivity as they puff up a head of steam that propels itself in every conceivable direction but behind the train of negotiated intersubjectivity. Unenlightened “cultural critics” do not realize that spiritual enlightenment comes only to those who relinquish the social privilege of objective reason. In contrast, I hope to embark upon a transrational inquiry that lays claim to multiperspectival moral privilege because it adopts ever-evolving attitudes of cultural self-reflection which in turn reconnect strands of history, economics, politics, spirituality, mystery and multicultural sensitivity to the massive tapestry of **multidimensional contextualism** (defined as an emphasis on discovering the multiconditional properties of wholes). This is, of course, a mouthful but in the following pages, I assure you, will we slowly begin to digest it.

When The Academy Excommunicates God

To reach the ever-shifting plateau of this new critical perspective founded on Kincheloe & Steinberg’s post-formal thinking, one needs to examine the history of the relationship between religion and science. Nowhere have I read a more accessible description of this historical relationship than in M. Scott Peck’s *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*:

Some twenty-five hundred years ago, the original relationship between religion and science was one of integration. And this integration had a name—philosophy. So early philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and later ones like Thomas Aquinas, were men of scientific bent. They thought in terms of evidence and they questioned premises, but they also were totally convinced that God was an essential reality. But in the sixteenth century things began to go sour, and they hit rock bottom in 1633 when Galileo was summoned before the Inquisition. The results of that event were decidedly unpleasant. They were unpleasant for Galileo, who was forced to recant his beliefs in Copernican theory—that the planets revolve around the sun—and then was placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life. However, in short order, things got even more unpleasant for the church.¹⁹

Peck goes on to describe, by means of a fictional narrative, how an “unwritten social contract dividing up the territory between government, science, and religion was developed toward the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries.”²⁰ Peck continues his argument with the following observations:

this unwritten social contract has done more than anything else to determine the nature of our science and our religion ever since. Indeed, it might be looked upon as one of the great intellectual happenings of humankind. All manner of good came from it: the Inquisition faded away, religious folk stopped burning witches, the coffers of the church remained full for several centuries, slavery was abolished, democracy was established without anarchy, and, perhaps because it did restrict itself to natural phenomena, science thrived, giving birth to a technological revolution beyond anybody’s wildest expectations, even to the point of paving the way for the development of a planetary culture. The problem is that this unwritten social contract no longer works. Indeed, at this point in time, it is becoming downright diabolic. You may know that the word *diabolic* comes from the Greek *diaballein*, which means “to throw apart or to separate, to compartmentalize.” It is the opposite of *symbolic*, which comes from the word *symballein*, meaning “to throw together, to unify.” This unwritten social contract is tearing us apart.²¹

Peck, a practicing psychoanalyst, admonishes us that “the same kind of compartmentalization can occur within individuals as well. Human beings have a remarkable capacity to take

things that are related to each other and stick them in separate airtight compartments so they don't rub up against each other and cause them much [psychological] pain."²² Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993) prefer to call such reductive rationality "**formal thinking**" and argue that,

formal thinking organizes verified facts into a theory. The facts that do not fit into the theory are eliminated, and the theory developed is the one best suited to limit contradictions in knowledge. Thus, formal thought operates on the assumption that resolution must be found for all contradictions.²³

Formal thinking is what happens to people when they become bigots. In a sense, formal thinking explains experimental cognitive psychologists' findings that individuals with strong negative views tend to "subtype" non-prototypical behavior. Put differently, psychologists have discovered that racist individuals tend to see non-stereotypical behavior as simple "exceptions to the rule" rather than examples that actually *disconfirm* the rule. Racists maintain "formal" ways of thinking even in the face of variability, "formlessness." Which brings to mind Benchley's rather humorous remark: "There may be said to be two classes of people in the world: those who constantly divide the people of the world into two classes, and those who do not." We will address this very important insight in a subsequent chapter that focuses more sharply on stereotypical modes of construing social "reality."

Internationally recognized Freud scholar Robert R. Holt (1989) acknowledges that Pepper (1891-1972) originated the concept "world hypothesis" and notes that it refers to "a conception of philosophical assumptions that underlie, support, and subtly guide many aspects of our conscious thoughts and behavior, though we may not be focally aware of having adopted them."²⁴ Cognitive psychologist George Kelly (1955) preferred the term

“personal constructs” to describe how individuals made sense of their world. Hitler spoke of a regimented “philosophy of life.” Whatever term one chooses to use, it is important to acknowledge that while much of human behavior is probably guided by such conscious or unconscious “formal” thinking, we are human beings that *can* act rather capriciously at times, even though Freud might not have actually ever admitted this. T. H. Huxley once said, “The great tragedy of science [is] the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.” The ugly “fact” of the matter is that human beings are not always predictable, even if we do consider unconscious motives. What we *can* predict rather easily is how one’s “world hypothesis” or one’s “philosophy of life” fits one’s ultimate *political* behavior. Hitler’s views led him to mass murder. It is rather easy to see how this could be so.

Compartmentalization represents a “philosophy of life” or a “world hypothesis” that perpetuates political inequality. To overcome such immoral political practice, society must *integrate* various perspectives. Academics must re-combine the spiritual with the non-spiritual, the normal with the para-normal, the scientific with the spiritual. This is, of course, not to argue for an uncritical acceptance of any particular religion or any set of spiritual or religious beliefs. As The Dalai Lama says, “All of the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical differences, have a similar objective. Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, and respect for others, sharing other peoples’ suffering. On these lines every religion has more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.”²⁵ I would add that while this may be so, too many religious groups compartmentalize who gets “saved” and who doesn’t. The “us versus them” compartmentalization of religious philosophies of life is

detrimental to our collective spiritual evolution as human beings. We need to embrace traditional Buddhist precepts of *unconditional love*.

Holistic Film Criticism—The Spiritual Return

Nazi Germany went to the bank with its “moral superiority.” Today, few would debate that Nazi Germany was indeed morally bankrupt. The Nazis routinely attacked what they called “immoral” behavior (e.g., homosexuality, criminal behavior, adultery, etc.), yet they engaged in behavior that many find utterly repulsive. Capitalists provided support to the Nazis because they initially liked what they were getting: a strong, industrialized Germany. Greed, obviously, knows strange bedfellows. What is morally astounding is that Hitler, in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1934), which, perhaps, represents Nazi propaganda in its most hideous incarnation, actually blessed his political plans with heavenly appeals for God’s guidance. Clearly, a truly *moral* position advances the notion of *unconditional love*. If Hitler had advanced such a position, Jews would have been spared the gas chambers and millions would have lived to hug and kiss their grandchildren. Homosexuals would not have been beaten and imprisoned. Germany would not have gone to war and capitalists would have shared their enormous wealth.

By believing that they can avoid the paradox of Good vs. Evil, by adopting modernist ways of seeing; politicians, theorists and cultural critics avoid developing a heightened “critical consciousness” which might lead them to a deeper understanding of oppressive political practices. Amoral critics are like “prisoners” in Plato’s cave who are fettered to

“philosophies of life” that discern only the shadows of what really goes on in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products.

Spiritual Development & Paradoxical Thinking

M. Scott Peck, M.D. (1993) proposes four stages of “spiritual development” or “critical consciousness” if you prefer, which he borrows and adapts from James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*. Fowler, in turn, references such noted stage theorists as Piaget, Erickson and Kohlberg. Peck’s four stages are:

1. Stage One—Peck labels “chaotic/antisocial and which may be thought of as a stage of lawlessness, absent of spirituality,” which I believe reflects the angry “politics of greed” that informed Hitler’s immoral political ambitions;
2. Stage Two—Peck labels “formal/institutional and which may be thought of as a rigorous adherence to the letter of the law and attachment to forms of religion,” which I believe reflects a “politics of certainty” wherein individuals adopt a world hypothesis without continually and critically questioning their assumptions;
3. Stage Three—Peck labels “skeptic/individual and which is a stage of principled behavior, but one characterized by religious doubt or disinterest,” which I believe corresponds to a “politics of epistemological privilege” characterized by academic research that disavows intuitive ways of knowing and;

4. Stage Four—the most mature of the stages, which Peck labels “mystical/communal and which may be thought of as a state of the spirit of the law,” which I believe corresponds to an ever-evolving critical inquiry that charts a trajectory of deference between competing points-of-view and one’s own institutional understanding of the universe.

Throughout this dissertation I will be arguing that paradox “disappears” when one embraces a more complex understanding of “social reality.”²⁶ According to Fritjof Capra (1991), “Taoists made frequent use of paradoxes in order to expose the inconsistencies arising from verbal communication and to show its limits. They have passed on this technique on to Chinese and Japanese Buddhists who have developed it further. It has reached its extreme in Zen Buddhism with the so-called *koans*, those nonsensical riddles which are used by many Zen masters to transmit the teachings.”²⁷ By focusing on paradox, one is able to embrace life’s inordinate contradictions. A paradox exposes inconsistencies between competing social “realities” and because it does so, it allows the enlightened to transcend dualistic illusions. In other words, paradox dissolves illusions of will. As Oscar Wilde said, “One’s real life is often the life that one does not lead.” As post-formal thinkers, we want to lead authentic lives, lives rich in transrational paradox.

Individuals of an ordinary consciousness are *not* likely to embrace the assumption that “the moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive,” as Dewey states in *Art as Experience*. Such individuals, like “prisoners” in Plato’s

cave, sit, stare, focus and discuss ad nauseum such tangential issues as “Is film legitimately an art?” or “Would certain filmic events ever happen in real life?” while narrative films paradoxically exercise tremendous *political* influence. Individuals of an ordinary consciousness compartmentalize the world, complaining that film is not art or stating that art can never be political because art rarely has anything to do with who gets elected and what legislation gets passed. Their view of “politics” is both narrow and shortsighted. Their inability (or refusal) to see that all of “social reality” is interconnected, I refer to as a “politics of epistemological privilege.” Such privilege is symptomatic of compartmentalized notions of social “reality” and is evidenced in the inability or unwillingness of certain individuals (or societies) to entertain multiperspectival insights. For clarification, in this dissertation, I view “**politics**” as that which deals with “the ‘universal’ relations of people to each other,” vis-à-vis Polan (1985).²⁸

The Technological Inhumanity of Rationality

If the moral function of art is to remove prejudice and the critic’s function is to assist art in this endeavor, then the *immoral* social practice of mainstream film critics and some academics is not to acknowledge the spiritual imperative of humankind to struggle with the knowledge of “Good” and “Evil.” By separating what is “moral” from what is political, modernist thinkers allow themselves to fall into the pit of excessive specialization, which Peck has argued leads to “technological inhumanity.” Nazi Germany is a prime example of this very recent immoral philosophical shift. The proliferation of nuclear arms in our time

period is a contemporary exacerbation of such technological inhumanity. By compartmentalizing social “reality,” unawakened individuals, or individuals manifesting low-levels of critical consciousness, fail to observe how much *choice* there is in the world of narrative art. They fail to realize how choosing a “formal” world hypothesis actually limits emancipatory social praxis. True freedom is the recognition that both form and formlessness exists in multiconditional social “reality.” The Nazis eliminated choice or cultural autonomy to some extent when they assumed command of the film industry. Similarly, certain elements of cultural autonomy evaporated when consumer capitalism’s hot fingers grasped the cold reigns of mediated communication here in these segregated “United” States. First generation critical theorists were the first, perhaps, to discover this important insight.

That film is a “politics of choice,” none should deny. Film makers *choose* what they put on the silver screen, or those who pay them *choose* the scenes we see. In other words, there is nothing “natural” about film, it is penultimately artificial, even when it mimics social “reality.” *Choice*, therefore, defines, in many ways, what is openly available to spectators. *Choice* is crucial in analyzing narrative films from a hyper-political cultural perspective. When the critic recognizes that each and every depiction on the silver screen is *a matter of choice*, when s/he recognizes that the screenwriter or the director or the editor could have made alternative *choices* to advance particular themes, then s/he, as a critic, is on the road to unearthing the “political” features and functions of narrative films. Such a critic begins the long journey toward spiritual enlightenment, a journey which (re)discovers power politics in human relations. But such a journey calls for a transformed consciousness.

The following passage from Plato's *Republic* illustrates the difficulties of achieving such a heightened state of critical awareness:

Socrates' "Parable of the Cave"

[I, Socrates, ask you to:] "Imagine mankind as dwelling in an underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the whole width of the cave; in this they have been from childhood, with necks and legs fettered, so they have to stay where they are. They cannot move their heads round because of the fetters, and they can only look forward, but light comes to them from fire burning behind them higher up at a distance. Between the fire and the prisoners is a road above their level, and along it imagine a low wall has been built, as puppet showmen have screens in front of their people over which they work their puppets."

"I see," he said [Socrates' student].

"See, then, bearers carrying along this wall all sorts of articles which they hold projecting above the wall, statues of men and other living things, made of stone or wood and all kinds of stuff, some of the bearers speaking and some silent, as you might expect."

"What a remarkable image," he said. "For, first of all, tell me this: What do you think such people would have seen of themselves and each other except their shadows, which the fire cast on the opposite wall of the cave?"

"I don't see how they could see anything else," said he, "if they were compelled to keep their heads unmoving all their lives!"

"Very well, what of the things being carried along? Would this be not the same?"

"Of course it would."

"Suppose the prisoners were able to talk together, don't you think that when they named the shadows which they saw passing they would believe they were naming things?"

"Necessarily."

"Then if their prison had an echo from the opposite wall, whenever one of the passing bearers uttered a sound, would they not suppose that the passing shadow must be making the sound? Don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do," he said.

"If so," said I, "such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things."

"So it must be," said he.²⁹

In the “Parable of the Cave,” Socrates sought to illustrate how philosophers could lead prisoners out of the cave of compartmentalized world hypotheses into a universe of expanded interests.

Similarly, multicultural educators must unshackle inherited values and ideals from students’ minds if these prisoners of culture are to glimpse the “real” world of politics in narrative film. Those who remain in Plato’s cave, those who lack a “heightened critical consciousness,” do not see the greater epistemological and ontological contexts within which films locate their latent political destiny. Some cultural critics amuse themselves with fluttering forms of visual “aesthetics.” And so, candle-cast images speak to them of partial social “truths,” but these fluttering silhouettes are nothing more than the subconscious political machinations of mechanistic world hypotheses. Perhaps T. S. Eliot was correct when he said, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

Unconditional Love and Spiritual Transformation

I cannot overemphasize that even though I argue throughout this dissertation that *morality* is inseparable from *politics*, this does not translate to my following any *particular* spiritual mandate, except, perhaps, the politically safest spiritual mandate, that of *unconditional love*. Profoundly homophobic or profoundly racist or profoundly sexist individuals are often profoundly *emotional* in their hatred and they simply “cannot” bring themselves to leave the affective and cognitive comfort of years of enculturated bigotry. They simply “cannot” break free of Plato’s cave. Therein lies their greatest spiritual peril. When

and if they ever do leave Plato's cave, it will surely be because their minds have undergone a truly spiritual **transformation**.

Spiritual *transformation* marks the initial stage of a hyper-political appreciation of cultural artifacts. It begins with unconditional love.

Richard Moss, M.D. (1981), in *The I That is We*, writes that,

Transformation begins with the embrace of love and leads to the first essential step, which is *the transmutation of emotions* [my emphasis]. When you begin to tell yourself that your emotional stance in life is a distortion of your potential to love, the you have invited a flame into your life that will gradually destroy and transform you. Still we have not come to a sufficient expansion on the word *love*. Who is the beloved of Kabir, and of Rumi and Gibran? Who is the lover who came to Whitman? Despite what we think we know about their personal lives, these poets speak of a transcendent lover. The romantics would like to believe that these songs of love are a sanction for personal attachment to another individual, but the lover they truly celebrate is an experience of ecstasy in transcendent consciousness.³⁰

No film should be "politically" analyzed from anywhere but an intersubjective point-of-view that embraces unconditional love. The art and science of *political* cultural criticism, therefore, is to step beyond, as much as is humanly practicable, one's moralistic subjectivity, it is to embrace an *unconditional* acceptance of God's glorious diversity. The art and science of political cultural criticism does not only *tolerate* others but *loves those who practice different social, political or moral prescriptions*. Unfortunately, Dostoevski may have been right when he said, "The best definition of man is the ungrateful biped." Instead of fixating on subjective philosophies of life, we should embrace multicultural moral insights. This will not happen if our love is conditional, if we cannot or will not transcend inherited culture.

This is Richard Moss's definition of "unconditional love:"

I use the word *love* as a koan. The koan is a teaching tool of Zen Buddhism. It presents the rational mind with an unsolvable question, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The answer is a total state of awareness; another dimension of experience. It is not an answer in any ordinary sense at all. Similarly, I use the word *love* not to tell anyone anything, but to evoke a larger relationship to experience. I use it to symbolize and suggest, to invite the experience of a larger harmonious perspective. Love can be discussed only as a tool to expand perspective.³¹

Likewise, I use the word *politics* as a tool to expand the modernist perspectives we inherited from our Eurocentric forefathers. My argument, based on wisdom from the Far East, is that *everything social* is socially political, just as everything spiritual revolves around the effervescent luminosity of “unconditional love.” When consumer capitalism shuffles monies into the hands of an elite group of people, this is as much a *moral* issue as it is a *political* issue. When *Chasing Amy* portrays a “lesbian” having sex with a “straight guy,” this is as much a political indictment of homosexuality as it is a vicious paragraph of heterosexist discourse in the encyclopedia of politically repressive American culture. No wonder Goethe said, “Know thyself? If I knew myself, I’d run away.” The Bill of Rights says one thing, we do another. Sadly, it has always been that way.

Moss believes that “at the heart level, unconditional love, which is an alive, vibrant, *valueless state of awareness* [my emphasis], replaces the varying intensities of mood and uncontrolled emotion and lifts the energy of these states into a finer, more radiant quality.”³² Yet, mainstream film critics, academics and the academy, itself, rarely adopt the “heightened consciousness” of unconditional love. Everywhere one looks one locates social judgment, but the sort of latent social judgment that goes largely uninterrogated. Am I suggesting that

we should learn to unconditionally love what Hitler did to millions of people? Of course not. From an intersubjective point-of-view, what Hitler did was undeniably atrocious. Unconditional love would *forgive* him, unconditional love does not mean that we can never say that something is, indeed, “evil.”³³

Mystic spiritualist James Redfield (1997), author of *The Celestine Prophecy*, *The Tenth Insight* and *The Celestine Vision*, observes that,

love, of course, is the best-known measure of inner transcendence. Yet this is a love different from the human love with which we are familiar. We all have experienced a kind of love that requires an object of focus: a parent, a spouse, child, or friend. The love that is a measure of the transcendent opening is of another kind. It is a love that exists without an intended focus, and it becomes a pervasive constant that keeps our other emotions in perspective.³⁴

Rather than obsessing about formulating unassailable absolute “truths,” the Tao person rejects “competitive hierarchies as unnatural,” s/he builds “networks, realizing we’re all part of the interlocking web of life.”³⁵ She embraces unconditional love for all people and all things and seeks to harmonize with the spiritual wishes of others and the indomitable lessons of nature. Dreher offers this translation of *Tao 2*:

The wisest person
 Trusts the process,
 Without seeking to control;
 Takes everything as it comes,
 Lives not to achieve or possess,
 But simply to be
 All he or she can be
 In harmony with Tao.³⁶

The Tao person, according to Dreher, observes that “progressive leaders in any field never hide behind elitism and hierarchies. They lead through cooperation.”³⁷ Hitler, obviously, did not fit this mold. He knew nothing of unconditional love. He knew nothing of the Tao. He knew nothing of Buddhism because he operated antithetically to the revisited ancient wisdom of post-formal thinking. He knew only his perverted “philosophy of life,” the dogma of Aryan racial superiority. As Chesterton once stated, “Dogma does not mean the absence of thought, but the end of thought.”

The Nihilistic Threat & a Politics of Conversion

Those who enslaved Africans in America certainly did not “lead through cooperation” as delineated in the *Tao Te Ching*. They, not unlike Hitler, knew nothing of unconditional love. They led by injecting nihilism into the blood veins of enslaved black men and women. Cornel West (1993) argues that, “Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.”³⁸ One can easily imagine the nihilism that Hitler injected into the minds of his followers. Least we forget, though, America had its own concentration camps, perhaps without barbed wire and certainly without gas chambers or mass starvation and sinister medical torture; but nevertheless, these United States acted ruthlessly and far from human decency when they tore black families apart, lynched black men, raped black women and threw untold millions into God’s thrashing seas.

Cornel West identifies an evil world hypothesis that ruled the minds of men in days of old:

Nihilism is not new in black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle.³⁹

Clearly, we need an approach to cultural criticism that identifies how the nihilistic threat is perpetuated through consumer capitalism and one which simultaneously calls for cultural artifacts to reflect the eternal wisdom of the Tao. We can explore such an approach through post-formal thinking because post-formal thinking transcends subjective social “reality.”

Cornel West observes that in the past our black foremothers and forefathers created, powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. In other words, traditions for black surviving and thriving under unusually adverse New World conditions were major barriers against the nihilistic threat. These traditions consist primarily of black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support.⁴⁰

Most interesting to my argument for the reintegration of spirituality and rationality is the fact that spirituality (or religiosity) seems to have played an integral part in warding off the

nihilistic threat for blacks throughout the savage years of slavery until our very present and bleak post-modern condition. West argues that “corporate market institutions” have “weakened” black cultural institutions in our day and the nihilistic threat once again looms large.⁴¹ It must be noted of course, that these “market moralities,” as West implies, have weakened much of our nation’s moral fabric, not just the economic plight of disenfranchised blacks. In a later chapter, I will propose pedagogical strategies which film studies teachers might use to deal with this “nihilistic threat.” For now, I mean to argue, along with Cornel West, that “market moralities” are so deeply entrenched in our national psyche that we, as a nation, need a profoundly psychological *transformation* to occur before we can evolve into a spiritually unity of one.

“Like alcoholism and drug addiction,” observes Cornel West, “nihilism is a disease of the soul.”⁴² He adds that, “If one begins with the threat of concrete nihilism, then one must talk about some kind of *politics of conversion*.”⁴³ I would rather it be called a “*politics of transformation*” since I believe that this speaks of a more radical change in our collective consciousness. Still, I suspect that Cornel West fully *agrees* with me because he states that,

any disease of the soul must be conquered by *a turning of one’s soul* [my emphasis]. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.⁴⁴

Cultural critics, therefore, must continually keep in mind their spiritual function—to remove prejudice, to perfect the powers to perceive. As “mystics” of a potentially transformative political social “reality,” critics need to weigh their perceptions of and reactions to cultural

artifacts so that their apperception of such artifacts reaches into the unity of opposites—form and formlessness. Once they do this, they will become enlightened—transformed or “converted” into post-formal thinkers.

Cornel West observes that,

Like liberal structuralists, the advocates of a politics of conversion never lose sight of the structural conditions that shape the sufferings and lives of people. Yet, unlike liberal structuralism, the politics of conversion meets the nihilistic threat head-on. Like conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people. Unlike conservative behaviorists, the politics of conversion situates these actions within inhumane circumstances (but does not thereby exonerate them). The politics of conversion shuns the limelight—a limelight that solicits status seekers and ingratiates egomaniacs. Instead, it stays on the ground among the toiling everyday people, ushering forth humble freedom fighters—both followers and leaders—who have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults.⁴⁵

A transrational approach to cultural criticism is needed because “reason” has proven itself to be both spiritually invalid and morally bankrupt. Film critics need to become Cornel West’s “humble freedom fighters.” They need to jump into the political fray and mix it up with moral and spiritual issues. They need to thoroughly examine the spiritual politics of each and every film they review.

Resistance to Transrational Analysis

What I have come to learn over time is that too many critics observe “social reality” through dogmatic “philosophies of life.” Too many critics stare at the shadows in “Plato’s cave” believing that they are seeing everything there is of social “reality.” They do not

honestly try to transcend subjectivity, to embrace ever-evolving *inter*-subjectivities—our closest and only approximation of “true objectivity.” For example, most dissertations begin with a literature search, which is usually a review of what has been written by those in the academy, not those who lie in the margins of academic respectability. As such, M. Scott Peck, M.D. and Richard Moss, M.D., even though they were both graduated from the academy, are unquestionably “eccentric” from the perspective of mainstream academia. They are “radical” thinkers like Karl Marx or the late great Paulo Freire. Radical thinkers stir up animosity and the “political” climate is to challenge their views, to dismiss their arguments as though only some views ring true and others simply cannot be respected. Admittedly, today Marx has some respectability in the academy, but generally speaking not much. Again, probably not more than a small percentage of scholars in the academy (primarily those who have tenure, eh?) openly embrace or even know of the radical views that Peck, Moss, Freire, Kincheloe and Steinberg bring to a discussion of human consciousness.

This unwillingness to examine transrational phenomena, to embrace both the scientific and the spiritual, I call a “politics of epistemological privilege.” It references or privileges mechanistic philosophies of life. As such, the “politics of epistemological privilege,” to a certain extent, continuously reinvigorates the status quo. The so-called “cult of the expert,” which again demonstrates how compartmentalized the academy has become, is a prime example of hidden “politics” at work.⁴⁶ Only “experts” within the political structure of the academy, only those who teach or conduct research in the academy, are *generally* deemed reliable substantive sources for scholarly writing on any number of

subjects (Gibson, 1986)⁴⁷. Kuhn addressed philosophical inertia in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, as I mentioned earlier.

Recognizing Freire's "Oppressor Consciousness"

Bell hooks (1996) in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* observes that,

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues.⁴⁸

And so, the art and science of political film criticism is to *choose* to see films with counterhegemonic themes, to *choose* to discuss films from a truly "political" (intersubjective) point-of-view, and to *choose* to examine the political economy within which films are produced.

But not all proclaimed counterhegemonic texts are, indeed, counterhegemonic. Bell hooks analyzed Spike Lee's work and discovered Paulo Freire's "oppressor consciousness" living in a self-proclaimed radical filmmaker. Spike, an oppressed black man who makes films for a living, ironically makes films that oppress both black women and those who are gay. Spike not only lives in Plato's cave, he films it!⁴⁹ He may capture *some* critical reflections of prejudice in the walls of Plato's cave, which is a tribute to his perseverance,

perception and love of humankind, but he is not sufficiently critically conscious to have escaped the cave to create more powerfully emancipatory pro-social art.

A Moral Mandate For Hyper-Political Film Criticism

Hoffmann (1996) states that “film was doubtless the most influential among the mass media in the Third Reich. It was also the means of artistic communication that Hitler used to greatest effect in bringing about his political ideas to a mass audience.”⁵⁰ If this is true, then film studies instructors are *morally* compelled to unearth the politics of the films they present to their students. Granted, students are not likely to see *documentary films* the likes of which German audiences were exposed to during Hitler’s reign of terror. However, Hoffman (1996) adds that, film was never considered “mere entertainment” by the Third Reich. That the Third Reich fully recognized that *he who controls mass communication controls valuable aspects of the nation’s psyche*.

Hoffmann quotes Goebbels, who in 1941 stated: “Even entertainment sometimes has the task of arming the nation to fight for its existence, of providing it with the requisite *spiritual uplift* [my emphasis].”⁵¹ If the Third Reich consciously understood the psychospiritual significance of film, why don’t many contemporary film critics struggle to understand the latent “political” values in narrative film? My argument is that contemporary mainstream film critics and unenlightened academics don’t understand the psychospiritual significance of films because over the years *politics* has been extracted from the art of critiquing films. In the following chapter, I will review the history of film criticism in these

United States. Sadly, too many film critics all across this great nation talk and write about narrative films as though they existed in a political vacuum. They employ “humanist,” “poststructuralist,” “psychoanalytical” or other forms of film theory without ever acknowledging or recognizing the political economy within which films suggest world hypotheses.

Clearly, many in the Nazi Party knew that they had to commandeer *the consciousness of the nation* to realize their political goals. But such is, arguably, the case with *every* regime. Hoffman, in analyzing the film industry of Nazi Germany, observes that “besides their important function as a diversion, entertainment films were a particularly effective means for disseminating certain topics among the population *in a seemingly neutral fashion* [my emphasis] and without being too heavy-handed.”⁵² Indeed, it is my argument throughout this dissertation (1) that “neutrality” is indeed an ontological illusion and (2) that those in power wish to maintain a “politics of false neutrality” to achieve Machiavellian political ends, whether their philosophy of life is conscious or not.

The Moral & Practical Function of the Cultural Critic

David Sterrit, film critic at the *Christian Science Monitor*, at a recent “Meet the Critics” forum at the New Community Cinema (summer of 1998) in Huntington, NY, stated that most critics he knows would agree that “the moral and practical function” of the film critic is “improving the art of film by encouraging that which is best in it, and by best, they would probably mean sort of most thoughtful and most constructive.” He adds that critics

should help “audiences to expand their horizon’s as well,” encouraging audiences “to see more different kinds of movies, to take risks, to venture beyond the things that are thrust under our noses so vigorously by Hollywood.” He, as I understand him, suggests that the moral and practical function of the film critic is encourage “film makers to make and audiences to see films that in some way enlarge and enrich our lives in some meaningful way.” Sterrit, obviously, believes that media effects are quite substantial, or at least that media have the potential to be quite persuasive.⁵³

The Paradoxical Politics of Discernment

In summary, then, let me address the paradoxes of transrational analysis. M. Scot Peck, renowned spiritual psychiatrist and best-selling author of *The Road Less Traveled* and *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, makes the following *postmodern* observation:

I cannot stress enough how important *thinking paradoxically* [my emphasis] is to me. I am very much like the professor of philosophy who was asked by one of his students, “Professor, it is said that you believe that the core of all truth is paradox. Is that correct?” And the professor answered, “Yes and no.”⁵⁴

Thinking with integrity is *paradoxical thinking* [my emphasis]. And it is not only necessary that we think with integrity, it’s also necessary that we act with integrity. Behaving with integrity is “praxis,” a term that was popularized initially by Marxists, and since then has been picked up by liberation theologians. Praxis refers to the integration of your practice with your belief system. As Gandhi said: “What is faith worth if it is no translated into action?” Obviously, we have to integrate our behavior with our theology in order to become people of integrity. Too often that is not done, whatever the religious belief.⁵⁵

One of the many paradoxes I hope to embrace in this dissertation is that every narrative film is paradoxically “political” and “*non-political*.”⁵⁶ This transrational observation allows me to shift into a new realm of consciousness, one which offers more *concrete* explanations to the problems we face as we plow into the next millennium.

In the end, if we accept Dewey’s intersubjective proclamation that “the moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice,” every “non-political” film becomes a cradle of *latent* politics in a world where mass communication is the norm and the Nazis have proven that attitude is everything. In the end, we must ask ourselves: Which values and ideals lie hidden in society’s mediated messages? Which “philosophy of life” does a film profess as it fits into an unending flow of social discourse? In the very next chapter we will examine the twin silhouettes of culture and ideology as they salute the historical evolution of narrative American film.

Footnotes

¹Capra, Fritjof (1991). The Tao of Physics, Boston: Shambala Publications, p. 17-8.

²Capra, Fritjof (1991). *Ibid*, p. 18.

³Capra, Fritjof (1991). *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴Capra, Fritjof (1991). *Ibid*, p. 18-19.

⁵Piburn, Sidney (ed.) (1990). The Dalai Lama, A Policy of Kindness, New York: Snow Lion Publications, p. 16.

⁶Lao-Tzu (1990). Tao Te Ching, Translated by John C. H. Wu, Boston: Shambala Publications, p. 19-20.

⁷Kinchloe, Joe & Shirley Steinberg (1993). "A Tentative Description of Post-Formal Thinking: The Critical Confrontation with Cognitive Theory," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 63, No. 3 Fall 1993, p. 305.

⁸These "frames" encapsulate what might be called *horizons of meaning* which exclude everything "out of view," i.e., everything behind the person and everything beyond the person's central focus. As such, these "frames" are never without bias, which is not to argue that the *process of attempting to "know"* something, anything, is without merit. If it were, all schools would shut down tomorrow. To the contrary, my argument is that one ought to be conscious of the fact that one utilizes imperfect tools when one thinks—which is what one does when one evaluates, theorizes, interprets or even communicates, for that matter. Actually, all of these concepts flow into each other like successive waves in a vast ocean of ideas. To theorize is to evaluate, which is to interpret and to communicate. When one reaches the stage where formless ideas flood into one's mind from every direction, one has discovered intuition. Then, the thinking part begins. Intuitions are inaccurately converted into thought and communication begins.

⁹Rosenau, Pauline Marie (1992). Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 81-2.

¹⁰Thich Nhat Hahn (1995). Living Buddha, Living Christ, New York: Riverhead Books, p. 140.

¹¹Eysenck, H.J. & D.K.B. Nias (1978). Sex, Violence and the Media, New York: Harper Colophon Books, p. 42.

¹²Eysenck & Nias (1978). *Ibid*, p. 42.

¹³Capra, Fritjof (1991). The Tao of Physics, Boston: Shambala Press, p. 39-40.

¹⁴Thich Nhat Hahn (1995). *Ibid*, p. 171.

¹⁵Lao Tzu (1990). Tao Te Ching, Translated by John C. H. Wu, Boston: Shambhala Publications, p. 62-3.

¹⁶Lao Tzu (1990). *Ibid*, p. 104.

¹⁷On the one hand, if we assume that we can know an “absolute truth,” then we deceive ourselves and we concomitantly open up our experiential horizons to subjugation, political domination and mass murder or, at the very least, sinister mass control. The Nazis sought absolute truths. In fact, any government or group of people who seek the philosophical wizardry of absolute “truths” are like blind beggars walking toward a sea of moral problems. On the other hand, if we do not *struggle* to locate at least a tentative multicultural consensus, a “temporary truth,” if you will allow this phraseology, then society falls prey to the immoral inertia of morally indefensible status quos. Therein lies the political and moral paradoxes we perennially face as individuals. Do we agree to disagree and work out intersubjective solutions or do we fight for political dominance? Future holocausts will *hardly* be averted by being “certain”—the way Hitler was certain that he was correct in his political and moral meanderings through the forests of his psychological obsessions. Future holocausts *will most likely be averted by* (1) maintaining a positive attitude toward social difference, (2) cultivating a willingness to grant rights and privileges to those whose social practices conflict with our moral injunctions (provided no injury results from said practices), (3) acknowledging the need to continually negotiate moral terrain, and (4) redistributing wealth to eliminate consumer capitalism, class division and the insidious capitalistic exploitation of our environment. Capitalism is a dinosaur that needs to evolve into a life form that does not cut itself possibilities of extinction.

¹⁸Dreher, Diane (1990). The Tao of Inner Peace, New York: Harper Perennial, p. 82.

¹⁹Peck, M. Scott, M.D. (1993). Further Along the Road Less Traveled, New York: Simon and Schuster, Page 176.

²⁰Peck, M. Scott, M.D. (1993), *Ibid*, Page 179.

²¹Peck, M. Scott, M.D. (1993), *Ibid*, Page 179-180.

²²Peck, M. Scott, M.D. (1993), *Ibid*, Page 180.

²³Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993), Ibid, p. 297.

²⁴Holt, Robert R. (1989). Freud Reappraised, a Fresh Look at Psychoanalytic Theory, New York: the Guilford Press, p. 347.

²⁵Piburn, Sidney (1990), Ibid, p. 54.

²⁶Giddens (1984) seems to suggest this in his book The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.

²⁷Capra, Fritjof (1991) Ibid, p. 43.

²⁸Polan, Dana B. (1985). The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde, Michigan: UMI Research Press, Page 91.

²⁹The Republic of Plato, in Great Dialogues of Plato (1961), Revised Edition. Translated by W. H. D. Rouse, Edited by Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse, New York: New American Library, Book VII, pp. 371-372.

³⁰Moss, Richard, M.D. (1981). The I That Is We, California: Celestial Arts, Page 20-21.

³¹Moss, Richard, M.D. (1981), Ibid, Page 21.

³²Moss, Richard, M.D. (1981), Ibid, Page 22.

³³ A moral imperative as simple as “Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you” teaches intersubjective morality, a morality so simple and honest and immanently powerful that it would both eliminate homophobia as it would eliminate Hitler’s unholy obsession with murder. This “imperative,” of course, must be understood within the moral parameters of respect for life. An individual who harms himself as well as others for “enjoyment” does not respect life. Such an individual does not manifest unconditional love for the sanctity of life.

³⁴Redfield, James (1997). The Celestine Vision: Living the New Spiritual Awareness, New York: Warner Books, p. 101.

³⁵Dreher, Diane (1990), Ibid, p. 180.

³⁶Dreher, Diane (1990), Ibid, p. 181.

³⁷Dreher, Diane (1990), *Ibid*, p. 181.

³⁸West, Cornel (1993). Race Matters, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 14.

³⁹West, Cornel (1993), *Ibid*, p. 14-5.

⁴⁰West, Cornel (1993), *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴¹West, Cornel (1993), *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴²West, Cornel (1993), *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴³West, Cornel (1993) *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴⁴West, Cornel (1993) *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁴⁵West, Cornel (1993) *Ibid*, p. 19-20.

⁴⁶A tribute to my committee is that they accept and embrace radical or “non-traditional” experts with *almost* the same willingness that they accept and embrace “traditional” experts. My committee’s unspoken agreement has been that if the overall argument “makes sense” and, from a theoretical point-of-view, it has *explanatory power*, then both “traditional” and “nontraditional” experts are welcomed. In other words, ideas are valued over the tacit political concerns of the academy. In the end, the “explanatory power” of any given theoretical perspective is what ultimately determines its validity as scholarly writing. Political choices lie everywhere, in source material and in the evaluation of that material. The epistemological and ontological stance one adopts, in a sense, *politically* determines what one will discover. One must chose carefully in this hybrid postmodern world of constructed social realities to discover that which assists the moral evolution of society.

⁴⁷Gibson, R. (1986). Critical Theory and Education, London: Hodder & Stoughton, Page 10.

⁴⁸hooks, bell (1996). Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies, New York: Routledge, Page 3.

⁴⁹ Contrary to what some may suggest, I am not arguing that prescriptions of culture are black and white certainties. Prescriptions of culture are neither explicit nor homogenous nor vague and multifaceted. The trick to M. Scott Peck’s psychospiritual Fourth Stage (of a heightened critical consciousness) is to embrace paradox. The trick is to see that macro-

level issues and micro-level issues combine in an “enlightened social reality.” The trick is to see that wide-angles and close-ups exist together as non-negating points-of-view. The trick is to see that filmic discourse does not overdetermine “social reality,” it is just highly influential, sometimes so much so that it appears to be “deterministic.”

⁵⁰Hoffmann, Hilmar (1996). The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism 1933-1945, United Kingdom: Bregahn Books, Preface.

⁵¹Hoffmann (1996), Ibid, Preface/viii.

⁵²Hoffmann (1996), Ibid, Preface/viii.

⁵³Yet, some in the academy believe that media effects are *minimal*, that indoctrination is a thing of the past (if it ever existed), that art is mere entertainment, that those who intuit powerful media effects have no scientific basis for their intuitions. Some in the academy believe that intuitions are worthless, that there is no such thing as a “critical consciousness,” a “heightened awareness” that lies just beyond our *rational* abilities to observe and measure social reality. But are they correct when they state that media effects are limited? What if our “consciousness” itself does not permit direct observation of social experience? What if the observer changes what is observed by the mere act of observing? What if modern notions of “reality” are flawed? In this dissertation, I adopt a decidedly **postmodern** (*after* the so-called “modern” age) point-of-view (Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1989), a perspective which (I believe) expands my consciousness into a more *critical* domain.

⁵⁴Peck, M. Scot (1993). Further Along the Road Less Traveled, New York: Simon and Schuster, Page 195.

⁵⁵Peck, M. Scot (1993), Ibid, p. 209.

⁵⁶This question is always asked of transrational analysis: How can films be *both* political and non-political? The “answer” is as follows: To think with *critical integrity* we must accept that those films that do *not* challenge the status quo—*in a sense support it!* While they may not harbor powerful “political” messages, they *function* politically, and, in a sense, *are* political because of this. Besides, every narrative film exhibits social values and ideals which in turn make that film, in a very real way “political.”

CHAPTER THREE

A GLIMPSE OF HISTORY

History never looks like history when you are living through it. It always looks confusing and messy, and it always feels uncomfortable.

John W. Gardner

It has been said that though God cannot alter the past, historians can.

Samuel Butler

Patriarchal white supremacy may be here for some time to come. Too many politically powerful people have benefited from its insidious social and political practices over the years for it to be easily overturned. In these United States, we must understand that capitalism was nurtured on free labor and that when blacks, women and gays have entered into the ranks of the all powerful capitalist class, social institutions of privilege will accommodate new, perhaps somewhat more egalitarian, world hypotheses. There is always the possibility that capitalism will be voted out of office or overthrown by some other social or political practice or social or political act. In any case, greed has historically determined social merit in these United States, if not the world. Unless something spiritual happens to change this, we seem to be stuck in a never-ending cycle of political, economic and social expediency fed by a voracious hedonomania.

With this in mind, the art and science of political film criticism can be considered a psycho-social excavation of the metaphorical elements of our national psyche hidden in the confabulations of culture nurtured by avarice. That the history of film in America is marked

by urgent calls for “improvement” speaks to ideological thrusts directing the diegetic and iconographical future of the medium. We will now examine a few of these ideological thrusts. There are many and, perhaps, better examples than those I have chosen below, but as I said before, I am a “jack of all trades, a master of none.” Interdisciplinary research is fraught with reductionist perils but so too is particularistic research. Interdisciplinary research is, however, simultaneously a moral endeavor because it offers multidimensional horizons of meaning from which we might learn greater moral “truths.” Narrow views offer narrow morals.

As cultural anthropologists, we could, perhaps, consider the historical comments of religious leaders during their sermons, if we could find recorded or published sermons, or other social forms of criticism applied to moving pictures throughout its formative years. Memoirs and memories would certainly flesh out our understanding of political conversations occurring during film’s early childhood. One of the difficulties in looking back at the history of film criticism is that *political* film criticism is more than just movie reviews or technical jousting in technical journals. *Political* film criticism is every discussion that impacts the production of films, their ultimate presentations, as well as their intended or unintended social effects. *Political* film criticism is *public debate* over what should be shown as well as what has been shown over the span of the medium’s life history. It is more than just printed reviews in the popular press or elitist comments in technical journals. To *really* investigate the politics of realism and representation during film’s formative years, I would

have to embark upon a very messy study that might take five to ten years, if not a lifetime (and beyond).

In the interests of simplifying this examination of film's formative years and the political events surrounding it, I will draw exclusively upon published technical journals (and various respected film historians), assuming that comments and suggestions in these journals will reflect socially significant political parries during film's wild and thrusting development. Corrective comments made throughout film's formative years should suggest quite a bit about how contemporary film criticism probably evolved. Whatever I supposedly "discover," I cannot deal in certainties even I had lived through the period because as John W. Gardner has observed in the prologue: *History never looks like history when you are living through it. It always looks confusing and messy, and it always feels uncomfortable.* In other words, one cannot know everything and be everywhere. History is unfathomable, even when it's being made. The best we can hope for is grounded "historical" suppositions that maximize explanatory power. The same holds for contemporary "history." The life we live today is fraught with interpretive uncertainty. Who is to say what is really going on anywhere in the world. Even eyewitnesses offer differing accounts of present day events. How is history to be so factual and true as some would have us believe?

What I present below is far from an *exhaustive* account of the evolution of film criticism in the U.S. I offer but the *briefest glimpse* of "a" possible history of something that later, perhaps, became film criticism. As a transrational analyst, I am the proverbial "jack of all trades, master of none" and can lay no claim to perfecting a pristine view of our cultural

history, as though this might ever be sketched. What I *do* hope to do is provide the reader and myself with something of an historical context from which we might collectively grope our way through the smoky corridors of a psycho-social diagnosis of our present eco-political practices. Idiosyncratically, I focused on film because this has been my main concern from the start. I could have focused on any cultural domain.

The Historical “Reality” of the Movies

As far back as April 19, 1914, a novelist who began writing “scenarios,” as screenplays were once called, stated that “it was a new realization to me to plot out a story and then see how nearly I approached real humanization.”¹ The novelist was Daniel Carson Goodman and he wrote for “The New York Times.” The byline for his article read: “‘Movies’ Now Attracting Well-Known Authors.” It suggests that film, as an art form, was gaining social respectability. Indeed, Goodman’s belief that he “nearly approached real humanization” attests to the expectation some had that films *should* mimic real life. That expectation is problematic. From a social psychoanalytic perspective, it is a rather easy jump from films *mimicking* “real humanization” to films *modeling* social behaviors, attitudes, values and ideals. Social learning theory (or observational learning) suggests as much (Bandura 1973, 1978; Gerbner et. al. 1978; Liebert & Sprafkin 1988; Kryzanowski & Stewin 1985; Zinberg 1976).² Because films are created by human beings and they are disseminated for social viewing, they automatically become social “discourse.” A narrative film does not just mimic social “reality,” it *is* social reality. Because art is representational, it is subjective

and it is therefore unavoidably political. It is “reality” seen from a particular angle. As transrational analysts, we need to question the “reality” narrative films (re)present to viewers all the while keeping an eye on “a” particular history that might have informed the (re)presented social values and ideals.

Quite predictably (or quite “postdictably”), some of our nation’s first films were imbricated with white supremacist ideation. Bernardi (1996) tells us that,

Biograph’s *Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904) portrays caricatures of African Americans as shiftless, criminal and lazy. Another film, *The Chicken Thief* (1904), depicts chicken stealing “darkies” chased by whites, and is essentially a forerunner to Porter’s [very stereotypical and every racist] *The Watermelon Patch*.³

Bernardi goes on to mention that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) was likely popular because of “its liberal coding of African Americans as loyal-yet-inferior,” a subconscious wish of slave owners, and he argues that “Porter’s *Life of a Cowboy* (1906) demonstrates that non-whites included more than African Americans, as a brownface greaser, reface savages, and loyal Indians all function to support the myth of the heroic whiteface cowboy.”⁴ I might add that D. W. Griffith’s epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which could be a training film for today’s K.K.K., was just one of many films that marred film’s formative years. Because narrative films may constitute a uniquely *suggestive* form of art, only matched, today, perhaps, by TV and its video off-shoots, culture critics must culture-analyze the evolution of ideas and values discoverable in the historical evolution of narrative art.

By 1914, Goodman observed that,

The camera has attained a new dignity. A few years ago if everybody in the picture was not moving it was not a moving picture. Now the effect of suspense is sought, the prolongation of anxious situations. The director of a moving picture no longer fights for quickened movements [as, apparently, the novelty of “moving pictures” was wearing off on audiences], but begs for action slow and passive. *One director, who has risen in a few years to the foremost rank of his business, and who was the first to discover that people in pictures should move as they do in real life* [italics mine], sings through the megaphone as the camera man turns the crank of the camera. When the action is dramatic and tense his song befits the occasion; when the action is slow moving his voice sings to them soothingly.

Film’s ability to mimic the social gestures of “real life” seemed to appeal to audiences during the infancy of the art. The *political power* of the medium apparently resonated (and still does) with its psychological capacity to “approach real humanization,” as Goodman puts it. So, from a multidimensional point of view, the historical growth and origins of film criticism has at least one of its roots in film’s ability to “approach real humanization.” Early “critic” attention to these cinematic and psychological details provided evidence of very specific technological and social expectations perhaps guiding the new medium. As directors experimented and audiences flocked to the theaters, the newly developing art form apparently evolved through the conditioned “realism” of human events portrayed for the audience’s scopophilic pleasure. Today, if social events are bizarre, sensationalistic or have something to do with the sordid personal lives of celebrities, they will, in all likelihood, end up as a TV movie of the week. This tendency adds to the perception that moving pictures encapsulate social realities, or at least partial social “truths.”

Wahneema Lubiano (1997) points out that even partial social “truths” are problematic. He argues that,

Realism establishes a claim to truth, but it also presents the ground for its own destruction—somebody else’s truth. Telling it like it is, as John Akomfrah notes, “has to be said with a certain amount of skepticism, because ultimately one needs to challenge the assumption that you **can** tell it like it is” (Fusco, “Interview,” 53). Telling it like it is, for example, can be claimed by narratives that are politically regressive. Shelby Steele, the new African American conservative media superstar, in his numerous attacks on the victims of racism (available in a newspaper/magazine near you) claims to be “telling it like it is” from his reality (Applebome, 18). “Reality” is promiscuous, at the very best.⁵

Post-formal thinking does not hold up cultural relativism as its guiding light. To the contrary, while there may be only intersubjective “truths” in an intersubjective world; in a *just* political world, intersubjected “truths” are measured against the lived experiences of those who are marginal. In a *just* political world, the conservative racist discourse of Shelby Steele is measured against the historical, social, economic and political disenfranchisement of Afro-Americans. History is not forgotten. Present political injustices are not ignored.

As hyper-political cultural critics, we must forever negotiate contested terrain. One such plateau is the ubiquitous notion that narrative films *should* reflect “reality,” that films *should* be evaluated in terms of their representational or mimetic “honesty.” Anyone who has been to a film with a group of friends can relate to critiques that the “film wasn’t true to life,” that “it was fake,” or that “it was farfetched.” These critiques imply that *good* films mimics “reality,” that good films do not distort “real” issues. Where did this notion arise, that films *must* mimic life? It seems to have evolved with the incredible capacity of “moving pictures” to reflect the “movements” that human beings make in “real” life. Early on, audiences

expected film to continue its technological legacy of imitating and, perhaps, revealing social “truths” through its realistic drama.

But art can never be more than a map of “reality,” even if it cues our emotions and defamiliarizes our concepts. Kristin Thompson (1988), in *Breaking the Glass Armor*, points out that,

films are constructs that have no natural qualities. In terms of any absolute or permanent logic, the choice of the devices that will go toward the creation of the film will inevitably be largely arbitrary. (This assumption simply states in another way the idea that art works respond to historical pressures rather than to eternal *verites* [which gels with post-formal thinking].) Even the devices that go into works seeking to imitate reality as closely as possible will vary from era to era and from film to film; *realism, like all viewing forms, is an historically based notion* [my emphasis].⁶

Filmed “reality” changes with the ticking clock. What was once “real” is now “*unreal*.” Tomorrow, we can only guess what will be considered “real” TV or “real” film.

Jeanne Hall (1991), in “Realism as a Style in Cinema Verite: A Critical Analysis of *Primary*,” criticizes the American “cinema verite” movement of Robert Drew and associates. She notes that,

Cinema verite, as Noel Carroll quips, “opened a can of worms and then got eaten by them.” The rhetoric of the movement quickly fell out of fashion as contemporary film theory called into question the apparently obvious nature of the cinematic sign. Cinema verite filmmakers burst on the scene in 1960 talking of “honesty, intimacy, and above all objectivity”—but by the end of the decade, film studies programs were teaching ideology, interpellation and subjectivity. Cinema verite filmmakers, with their liberal humanism and unabashed empiricism, became easy targets indeed. It is not hard to see why contemporary critics bristled at the rhetoric of the movement. In 1965, Richard Leacock [cinema verite filmmaker] insisted that his work was *more* than just realistic: “And then you’ve got what we are doing, which has suddenly arisen, which is totally different because this *really* has to do with

reality.” Documentary scholars were of course right to question such claims. But most simply dismissed cinema verite filmmakers for believing or pretending that they were.⁷

The political point, therefore, is that regardless of what audiences ultimately believe to be “realistic” or not, filmic images register in the subconscious and fester there as symbolic representations of social “reality.”

The Hidden Politics of “Improving” the Photoplay

Almost a year earlier than Goodman’s article, cited above, Louis Reeves Harrison (1913) writes that,

those who frequent moving picture shows have been a long time at it and have unconsciously formulated standards of their own that are not to be disregarded. I have recently noted greater beauty of background in screen presentations than has ever been attempted in stage settings, and the expression of thought in artistic form constitutes the highest value of what is shown in moving pictures. This constitutes a New Art complete in itself.⁸

Clearly, we have, here, some form of “film criticism.” Criticism that suggests that moving picture production is attaining its own status as a valued art form. We must, of course, allow the very political possibility that a technical publication such as *The Moving Picture World* may hardly print articles that lambaste moving pictures in general or dismiss it as something much less worthy than an evolving art form of great potential. Such is the political expediency of one’s point of view.

Harrison’s statement that “the expression of thought in artistic form constitutes the highest value of what is shown in moving pictures” and that this “constitutes a New Art

complete in itself' may allude to what I suggested earlier concerning film's capacity to model human behavior, to set images in motion that more readily reflect human thought than other more "abstract" forms of art. Film seems to blend into the "natural world" as a powerful ideological tool. In this sense, Harrison may be agreeing with Goodman's notion that the writer can "nearly approach humanization." Early on, in any event, we get glimpses of the medium's tacit social and political clout. It is, indeed, a medium rich with didactic or propagandistic potential.

Harrison's "film criticism" highlights the newness of moving pictures and the steps being taken to rectify this "lack of good plays:"

The weak spot in motion-picture production, lack of good plays, is as weak as it has ever been because no reward is offered those who must expend a vast amount of time and energy to create what will make a deep and lasting impression [again with the psychological power of the medium]. An attempt will be made to remedy this fault with reconstructed stage plays for a while, but the sum total of human knowledge is advancing too rapidly for dependence upon what has been creditably done in the past and can only be surpassed by the highest and brightest forms of imaginative work by authors of the hour.⁹

It almost does not matter whether audience attendance ever suffered through film's infancy or not. Such figures may actually belie public opinion. If the "New Art" form was such a novelty, people might have gone to moving pictures just to be seen entering theaters, or to be with friends, or to "suffer" and poke fun of bad plays, or to simply do something whose novelty has not yet worn off. Nearly eighty years later, people still go to the movies, sometimes just to sleep, it appears, or to neck or to have something to talk about at cocktail parties.

Toddlers of Film Criticism

Apparently, as far back as 1909 there were “canned critics” who regularly reviewed silent films. Walter Prichard Eaton, a well-known drama critic, wrote an article titled “The Canned Drama” for *The American Magazine*, and in it he states rather plainly that,

All the dramatic magazines employ regular canned critics now.[my italics] Here is a sample review of a film: *Oh, Rats*: Another humorous idea weakened by crude handling. A bibulous cook who has her employers terrified, refuses to be discharged until her master brings home a pair of white rats. Her aversion to the rats causes him to bring home a large supply, which he sets free in the kitchen, and she is glad enough to throw up her job. As the story is developed by the players it begins in the middle and thus loses much of its force.¹⁰

Eaton’s sample review is not much different from some contemporary reviews. It provides a rather brief summary of the plot and makes a quick, but informed *value* judgement. Eaton goes on to critique the review, itself, ponder the review’s effect on the industry, and suggests how films might be further improved:

On the whole, this criticism seems probably mild. Doubtless such reviews have their effect on the manufacturers. *When historical scenes are to be reconstructed for the instruction of thousands of children* [my italics], it is not only desirable that Napoleon or Washington or Edgar Allen Poe should look like the original character, but that *all the actors should be correctly costumed and the episodes historically true.*[italics mine] But it is also important that ordinary canned dramas be not only free from brutality, coarseness and suggestions to crime, but that they be constructed with imagination, told with interest and coherence, and be well acted. If we must have canned dramas, we must see to it that we have good ones.¹¹

There are at least two points worth making concerning Eaton’s critique of “canned dramas,” an obvious reference to the cans in which film stock was placed to transport it from studio

to exhibitor. One of those points is Eaton's recommendation that "episodes should be historically *true*." Again, there is this notion that film should be "real," that film should reflect historical "realities," as though history was anything but "messy." It was as though the newly evolving art form—and let it be known that during the early developmental stages of film, it was probably not considered "art" by many—was somehow being stretched and pulled to fit preset notions of social "reality." Where other art forms *might* have been given imaginative leeway, film ostensibly was supposed to be "real" from the very start if it were also to be considered "good."¹²

The second point I wish to make regarding Eaton's argument is that he seems to assume either that "historical scenes" were purposefully constructed to draw in and educate children, or that such scenes could not help but "instruct" children. In either case, a didactic purpose is inherently more invested with ideology than an intentional mimicking of social "reality." The intention to teach something, anything, suggests teleological goals. If the intention in the artist's mind was simply to present a mere reflection of social "reality" in narrative art, one is still left with a representation, which is always derived from a particular point of view. But that point of view is possibly less ideological than a didactic point of view since the latter is consciously subjective in addition to being subconsciously, culturally and non-self-reflexively subjective.¹³

James D. Law, writing in *The Moving Picture World* in 1908, demanded "better scenarios" for what he calls the "American public," which really seems to mean those who employ servants and shuffle between the summer home in the Hamptons and an expensive

penthouse in Manhattan. His tone seems to be a tad “holier than thou.” In an article titled, appropriately for what he has to say, “Better Scenarios Demanded,” he clearly is conscious of socioeconomic status when he states that, “Film renters and exhibitors have much in their own power and should make their selections with a view to pleasing *all classes* [italics mine] and not exclusively those who demand farce and sensationalism for a steady diet.”¹⁴ Yet, he appears to speak for *all classes* when he observes that,

the moving picture industry has now reached a point when the public are becoming critical enough to discriminate between good and bad plays. No one can say, moreover, that the people have not been tolerant of poor and very poor work in the past. Even today the sameness of the plots and the tiresome monotony of the characters have about reached the limit of the complaisant public.¹⁵

Is there a contradiction here? Somewhere in the middle of his article, Law reveals his attitude toward what must have been “standard fare” for the silver screen:

Why the American public should be for so long afflicted with such puerile and vicious films seems a hard conundrum to answer when the evidence is overwhelming that good, clean, wholesome, national, patriotic, educational films are everywhere the most popular *when given anything like a fair chance*.¹⁶

Clearly, it is tempting to call Law something of a “political” critic. He is concerned with social issues, particularly the psychological impact of moving pictures. When he concludes that good films “are everywhere popular when given a fair chance,” he suggests, perhaps, an economic or political state of affairs that works against the exhibition of “good films.” But, for Law to truly become a “hyper-political” film critic, besides raising himself from the dead, he would have to transcend the one-dimensionality of his “critical” rhetoric. He would have

to ground his subjectivity. He would have to explain exactly what he means by “national, patriot, educational films.”

Kenneth MacGowan, writing in *The North American Review* in 1921, suggests a possible reason for there being so many “bad” moving pictures in his day (and possibly also in our day):

The fact, however, is that the public has a very imperfect chance of telling what it wants. The exhibitor intervenes. He is the interpreter of public taste. He begins by picking what he likes himself...By and large, I do not believe that the public really cares for these films: but some portion of the public cares for almost anything, and when the exhibitor has been dispensing adulterants, narcotics and pap over his counter for a few months, he has built up a dependable clientele for such stories...If he is inveigled into showing some film of a little more ingenuity and intelligence, his hand-picked audience is bored and the receipts fall off.”¹⁷

Kenneth MacGowan and James D. Law seem to be suggesting that exhibitors provide (what the upper class calls) “good” scenarios even though they may lose money in the beginning. Both seem to believe that haute culture is conditioned. If this is so, it certainly does suggest a *political intent* to “educate” the lower classes, which is a latent manifestation of ideological hegemony.¹⁸

In 1920, an actor named Otis Skinner wrote an article titled “An Actor’s View of the Movie ‘Menace’” which was published in *The North American Review*. Others probably agreed that moving pictures were beginning to become a social “menace.” This view extends the notion that films were “didactic,” if films, indeed, stimulated viewers to embark upon a life of crime or sexual misconduct. The potential ideological function of moving pictures is

evident in the implied notion that films *should not* be a social “menace,” that films should inculcate spiritually *valued* (or communally shared) attitudes, behaviors values and ideals.

It is interesting that Skinner refers to Eaton in his first paragraph:

From an eminence of high idealism Walter Prichard Eaton, in the July *North American Review*, calls the faithful to the defense of the American Theatre. Mr. Eaton has been for many years a champion of the native drama and an ardent advocate of its highest expression. He foresees a stultifying of its growth in the encroachment of motion pictures in theatres built for performances of the spoken drama, unless something is done and done quickly. For him—“’Tis an unweeded garden, That grows to seed: things rank and gross in nature, Possess it merely.”¹⁹

The rapid rise of moving pictures was, apparently, startling to those who perceived its unique potential to rapidly alter social value and ideals. If society’s “upper crust” were feeling the political pinch of moving pictures, then that pinch must have bruised quite a few social expectations. In a system of “free enterprise,” in a capitalist stronghold of continually shifting markets, one would expect that theatres would be allowed to produce whatever sells, that capitalists of popular culture would fit in the round holes of American culture like round pegs. But capitalists do not welcome other capitalists with open arms when lower-class interests are placed above upper-crust demands. Capitalists fight battles between themselves as well as with lower socioeconomic classes. ‘Tis an unweeded garden that *some* capitalists feed upon and *others* differ to de-weed. Skinner, if he was not, himself, a capitalist, was probably speaking for at least a segment of the capitalist class. Whether he disdained capitalism really does not bear on my argument. I am concerned, here, with class conflict,

a macro-level issue that supercedes particularity. But how much of a threat to “cultured drama” was the newly evolving “canned drama?”

Returning to Eaton’s 1909 article “The Canned Drama,” we read the following audience tallies:

Eighty percent of present day theatrical audiences in this country are canned drama audiences. Ten Million people attended professional baseball games in America in 1908. Four million people attended moving-picture theaters, it is said, every day, \$50,000,000 are invested in the industry. Chicago has over 300 theaters, New York 300. St Louis 205, Philadelphia 186, even conservative Boston boasts more than 30. Almost 190 miles of films are unrolled on the screens of America’s 7000 canned drama theaters every day in the year. *Here is an industry to be controlled, an influence to be reckoned with.*[italics mine]²⁰

Eaton suggests that “sensational films” might just “incite, by suggestion, to crime.” He seems to have a very moral concern, a “political” concern (1) that the lower classes might resort to criminal activity to elevate their socioeconomic status and (2) that films might just show the disenfranchised how to become rich without inheriting wealth or without having to work hard to do so. That Eaton states rather plainly that the film industry is “an influence to be reckoned with” suggests that he fully perceives film’s rhetorical potential.²¹

Skinner concluded that,

The film can never oust the dramatist’s art; nor can the legitimate drama ever annihilate the movie. And, above all, the film play can never take the place of the acted play. Be it made ever so perfect, it is, in its very last word, the operation of a remarkable machine. Its story is told by pictures and titles; its characters are shadows. It might be called a kind of vivid and sublimated illustrated storybook, wherein the obligation of a reader is imposed upon the spectator. To follow and understand it, he must read the titles and explanations. Often he must also read the contents of documents such as wills, deeds, contracts, telegrams, letters, newspaper articles, etc., projected upon the screen for a clear understanding of the continuity of the tale.²²

Clearly, the tone here is one of assurance. Skinner goes on to console aficionados of the theatre with the following argument:

It is well nigh impossible to present upon the screen a scene of argument and mental conflict between two characters. The only thing a director may do is to place them face to face and then “cut” to the titles, which the audience must read; and these characters should not talk much, either, for lip movement is bad for the effect. It is in the art of suggestion that the director finds his best medium—an attitude, a look, a motion, a bit of pantomime. *Sometimes a glove, a gun, an empty chair will tell a story better than action.*²³

Skinner appears to understand the psychological power of *portrayed objects* portrayed but not projected images.

The Psychological Resonance of Images

Today, too many critics fail to recognize the both the political and psychological resonance of images. Just the *placement* of various images may indicate a certain political point of view, a certain ideological perspective. The juxtaposition of several images adds yet another dimension of political significance. The very same subtlety with which “a glove, a gun, an empty chair will tell a story better than action,” as Skinner suggests, can be applied to the objects, invariably weapons, that minority characters hold as “props du jour” from one film to the next. This “subtlety” has been addressed in recent years and is being altered so that there are more minorities doing “good” deeds on screen these days. Women are also assuming the status of “action heroes,” but not anywhere near the number of men still fulfilling these mythically charged roles.

Returning for a moment to “An Actor’s View of the Movie Menace,” Skinner writes that,

No audience, seeing a finished picture, can thoroughly appreciate the patient care and labor that have gone into its making. The most painstaking designs of architects—hangings and carpets from the Orient, furniture that might be museum pieces, veritable masterpieces of painting, books in costly bindings, jewels, costumes—indeed, anything and everything which money may command, are requisitioned for scenes that on the silver screen may last but a minute, even less.²⁴

Early on, filmmakers recognized the psychological resonance of images, especially moving images, which so closely mimic life. That they would spend so much time and money “for scenes that on the silver screen may last but a minute, even less,” suggests that filmmakers, at least at a subconscious level, appreciated the psychological draw of specific objects or images.²⁵

In the end, Skinner observes that moving pictures are not really a *menace* to society, that “producers and artists (both actors and designers) were early lured to ‘Movieland,’ and now the film magnates are drafting writers and playwrights of achievement.”²⁶ Clearly, there is a hint that the ideology of society’s upper crust, that is, the values and ideals of the “more sophisticated” elements of society, will find its way into projection booths. Skinner ends his article with the following telltale statement: “Let Mr. Eaton not despair, but rather enjoy the best of both the *silent* and the *spoken* drama, smiling to himself the while as he remembers that, after all, “Words are the only things that live.”²⁷ Words may live in conscious memory, but pictures resonate in the subconscious because the subconscious is a corpus callosum away from structured thought.

Simon (1967) makes a rather vulgar sexist observation (perhaps not in his day) when he says: “A film that is all image and poor words is like a beautiful woman who, the moment she opens her mouth, offends us. We cannot love her. But neither can we love a brilliantly eloquent woman who is ugly as sin.”²⁸ His main point, however obscenely stated, is that,

film is the only complex art in which two main components are equally important: text and cinematography, that is, word and image. The youthful critic, contemptuous of words and proud, like the young film-maker, of “thinking in film”—which means, I suppose, perceiving the whole work as images—should be wary: Pictures are no less important than words . . . In any case, the relation between image and word is much more intimate than some people realize: Even in silent or near-silent films the mind tends to translate seen actions into words—so that the word, excluded, creeps in by the back door.²⁹

Unfortunately, a thousand words could never define the politics of one image. The politics of iconography are not easily definable because such politics reach a portion of the mind that does not directly comprehend the structural terms of language.

Therefore, the art and science of political film criticism is both to accept and to acknowledge the emotional resonance of images—their ability to invoke Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling.” For example, when Newsweek darkened O. J.’s picture, it unconsciously, perhaps, accentuated the *psychological* impact, if not also the *ideological* impact, of such images. As political film critics, then, we would want to go beyond just the words that supposedly “live” in canned drama. We would want to understand the deeper psychological layers of political consciousness that a hermeneutical excavation of films might unearth. We would want to understand the conscious and subliminal *ideological* thrusts of our national psyche.

Ideology and Constricted Awareness

Cormack (1994), who has written cogently and insightfully about ideology, makes these observations concerning the nature of **ideology** and social awareness:

Ideology, then is a process, which links socioeconomic reality to individual consciousness. It establishes a conceptual framework, which results in specific uses of mental concepts, and gives rise to individual's ideas of themselves . . . ideology exists not just as free-floating ideas and values, but as institutionalized in the practices of society, such as the legal system, the family and the media.³⁰

I am not arguing that ideology functions as a monolithic or even a coherent force or that filmmakers conspire to hypnotize the masses with seductive images which the mind translates into "words which slip in the back door." Instead, I am suggesting that filmmakers sometimes subconsciously utilize both pictures and words to form collective ideological horizons of meaning.

Cormack (1994) raises the following caveat to understanding ideology as a social force:

Although the central stream of thinking about ideology has been within the Marxist tradition, recently some of the central ideas of that tradition have been subject to powerful critiques. Under particular attack has been the notion of the dominant ideology. Some writers have argued that even if there has been a dominant class with a dominant ideology in the past, there is no longer anything which can be labeled as such in developed countries such as those of Western Europe and North America.³¹

And, he goes on to make two points with which I thoroughly agree:

The first is that the assertion that a dominant ideology exists and is significant does not imply that everybody thinks the same way, or even that everybody in authority thinks the same way. All that is necessary is sufficient agreement concerning the structure of the socioeconomic system. This agreement may

even be at the basic level of acceptance, rather than anything more positive Since the function of ideology is to reproduce the conditions of its existence, such a minimal level of agreement is not only all that is necessary, but may actually be more effective than any stronger form of agreement. As Capitalist countries have gradually discovered over the last century, allowing a certain amount of disagreement over political and social aims is conducive to the acceptance and continuance of the overall system.³²

Eaton, who voiced his concern that moving pictures were “an influence to be reckoned with,” and other “critics” of early moving pictures represent an *ideological force*, a shaping mechanism that probably influenced the development of moving pictures. I would expect no less, given man’s³³ propensity to rule others and others’ culturally and experientially conditioned propensities to be led.

In any event, Cormack (1994) goes on to say that,

The second point to make about the dominant ideology is that the consequences of there being no dominant ideology would be not just social upheaval, but social disintegration. The concept of a dominant ideology is simply that of a consensus of beliefs which are held to be commonsense and which function as the principles of social cohesion. A society without such a dominant set of beliefs and practices is a society in crisis. In fact, of course, the usual situation is for a certain amount of contestation to take place, both within the broad church of the dominant ideology as different groups come into conflict (different genders, different races, different regions, even different professional groups), and outside it as oppositional groups attempt to influence the boundaries of the dominant discourses. It will not then be surprising to find that cultural products will frequently be the site of ideological conflicts, even (perhaps especially) those products which are aimed at a mass audience.³⁴

And so, when mainstream film critics such as Jeff Miller fail to see the danger of “racism” in *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*, when film studies students object to multicultural films, when scholars ignore the capacity of moving pictures to “nearly approach real

humanization,” as novelist Daniel Carson Goodman put it, and when early critics of the film industry such as Walter Prichard Eaton, James D. Law, Kenneth MacGowan and others fight over film as a cultural artifacts, we see *ideology* on the job “twenty-four-seven,” as the saying goes. The following section will expand upon the ideological functions of film. I will attempt to show how ideology “leaked” into plots as the early film industry became what is now called popular culture.

Moving Pictures: Instruments of Ideology

There will be some who argue that only films that deal ostensibly with the politics of governing can be *political films*. However, Cohen & Braudy (1992) argue, as I have from the very start that,

every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing). The cinema is all the more thoroughly and completely determined because unlike other arts or ideological systems its very manufacture mobilizes powerful economic forces in a way that the production of literature (which becomes the commodity ‘books’, does not—though once we reach the level of distribution, publicity and sale, the two are in rather the same position.) Clearly, the cinema ‘reproduces’ reality: this is what a camera and film stock are for—so says the ideology. But the tools and techniques of filmmaking are a part of ‘reality’ themselves, and furthermore ‘reality’ is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology. Seen in this light, the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its ‘concrete reality’ is an eminently reactionary one. What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology. Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology.³⁵

While Cohen & Braudy may overstate their case somewhat, I very much agree with them that the camera is not “an impartial instrument which is impregnated by the world.” In other words, ideology and cinematography go hand in hand like a recently married couple. Whatever they do during their lives, they are supposed to do it as a couple. I would add that the camera registers the values and ideals, the stereotypes and archetypes, as well as the “vague, unformulated, untheorized world of the dominant ideology.” Moving pictures, from a political perspective, then, are *primarily* instruments of ideology, *especially when they tell specific, coherent stories which engage the status quo without challenging it.*

Freire and “False Consciousness”

Each film presents a particular (subjective) horizon of meaning. If that subjective vista reinforces values and ideals, stereotypes and archetypes, and the bourgeois materialist appetites of the dominant class, then the thought-patterns of the dominant class are potentially reified and reinforced as automatic personal constructs. Films, from this perspective, are psycho-social commodities. They are objects of trade that carry on “submerged” political discourse with consumers. In the final analysis these films support characteristic bourgeois appetites for *personal success* rather than communal success. To ignore this narcissistic political thrust is to play into the collective personal unconscious of those who, from the unseen, often unacknowledged heights of corporate control, have the upper hand in the dissemination of value-laden communiqués. Paulo Freire puts it this way:

The dominant elites . . . can—and do—think without the people—although they do not permit themselves the luxury of failing to think *about* the people

in order to know them better and thus dominate them more efficiently. Consequently, any apparent dialogue or communication between the elites and the masses is really the depositing of “communiqués,” whose contents are intended to exercise a domesticating influence.³⁶

The art and science of political film criticism, then, is to consciously and critically interpret films as “communiqués” from Corporate America. When films are viewed from this perspective, spectators gain access to the subliminal rhetoric of capitalistic discourse, that of rugged individualism and unchallenged avarice.

While the masses may offer moral resistance, unless the masses gain *critical consciousness*, they are likely to perpetuate the immoral cycle of spiritual “mistakes” of the dominant class. In other words, the masses will unconsciously (or uncritically) mimic the power bloc that controls them. Freire calls this uncritical acceptance of dominant values and ideals, stereotypes and archetypes, materialistic and individualistic appetites a “mechanistic view of reality.” He suggests that this over-reductive view of social “reality” disappears only in ever-evolving dialogue, dialogue which is self- and culture-reflexive, theoretical and grounded in personal and collective lived experiences. In the inimitable words of Paulo Freire:

Many people, bound to a mechanistic view of reality, do not perceive that the concrete situation of individuals conditions their consciousness of the world, and that in turn, this consciousness conditions their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality. They think that reality can be transformed mechanistically, without posing the person’s false consciousness of reality as a problem or, through revolutionary action, developing a consciousness, which is less and less false. There is no historical reality, which is not human. There is no history *without* humankind, and no history *for* human beings; there is only history *of* humanity, made by *people* and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them.³⁷

In light of this, one could argue that material conditions of the economy and the social practices of consumer capitalism act as experiential templates which determine social “reality” for those who do not transcend an ordinary consciousness. Each time we pay to see a movie and think nothing of it, we tacitly agree that a fee should be charged. Each time we offer our services for an hourly wage and think nothing of it, we tacitly agree that our labor can be purchased in such a fashion. Each time we see a film and do not challenge the representations, we tacitly agree with its political framing of social realities.

Film as PsychoSpiritual Hypnosis

Hyper-political cultural critics are interested in the psychological effects of film. They ask how viewers might possibly react to the unique enterprise of watching films in dark, crowded theaters. Along this line of thinking, Siegreid Kracauer (1960) writes that,

the moviegoer is much in the same position of a hypnotized person. Spellbound by the luminous rectangle before his eyes—which resembles the glittering object in the hand of a hypnotist—he cannot help succumbing to the suggestions that invade the blank of his mind. Film is an incomparable instrument of propaganda. *Hence Lenin’s dictum: “The cinema is for us the most important instrument of all the arts.”* [italics mine]³⁸

While Kracauer probably overstates his case—that the movie goer is hypnotized by flickering images—from a political perspective neither film critics nor film studies students can afford to ignore the possibility that films imprint an area of the mind that doesn’t function according to logical or structural principles.³⁹

If films are potentially hypnotic, at various levels of human functioning, with various spectators (perhaps those who are non-critical or those who lack “adequate” levels of self-reflexivity), then political indoctrination is much more than a science fiction, it is a nasty political possibility. Spectators, if they are in the lower stages of psychospiritual development, may very well behave as though they were hypnotized—without conscious awareness that they are performing specific “suggested” acts in a film or series of films. What we are concerned with here is not so much specific “suggested” acts, although certain dangerous acts portrayed in films (e.g., lying on the double yellow lines of a highway for thrills) had to be deleted from popular films because youthful spectators consciously performed such acts and subsequently died, but with the rather wholesale uncritical acceptance of values and ideals, stereotypes and archetypes, materialistic appetites, etc., by viewers who are not trained to think for themselves. The Third Reich demanded such a populace. We ought not to.⁴⁰

Emotional Resonance & Political Influence

When Adolf Hitler said, “The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the *heart* [my emphasis] of the broad masses,” he was ringing a “warning bell” for future generations. Kracauer, writing not long after World War II, points out that films are propagandistic not only in their political messages but in their **emotional resonance**, the “emotional charge” of the images and the narrative events portrayed.

Kracauer cites Grierson who once said, “In [a] documentary you do not shoot with your head only but with your stomach muscles” and notes that “Pudovkin used surprisingly similar terms: ‘The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.’”⁴¹

It is this notion of the film as a softly murmuring “rhetorician” that political film critics are mostly concerned with. Sticking with this metaphor, we must admit that not all students will graduate. Neither will *every* student likely achieve the same level of “learning.” This concern—that film must act as an all-or-nothing hypnosis—is a “wrench” which those who wish to contemplate or end the discussion of ideology throw against the free-flowing cogs of emancipatory discourse. Resistance is a given—it does not, however, imply a lack of dominance as some would suggest. The political point I wish to make is that any given narrative film can become a “teacher” who has a particular “lesson” he wishes to get across and that “lesson” may have certain “hypnotic effects” on students if they are not critically conscious. The art and science of political film criticism, therefore, inquires into the potentially subconscious didactic functions of cinematic art by investigating the psychospiritual elements of knowledge construction. Simon (1967) puts it this way:

Good criticism of any kind—of movies, ballet, architecture, or whatever—makes us think, feel, respond; if we then agree or disagree is less important than the fact that our faculties have been engaged and stretched. Good criticism informs, interprets, and raises the ultimate questions, the unanswerable ones that everyone must try to answer none the less. This is *teaching* [my italics] of the highest order.⁴²

Regardless of what else Simon says, for “good criticism” to be “hyper-*political* criticism,” it must interrogate the inherent rhetorical functions of narrative art, which are also the psychological and sociological functions of common communicative practices.

The Psychospiritual Evolution of Film Criticism

In an article published in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film* dated August 3, 1913, titled “Writing The Movies: A New and Well-Paid Business” we learn that,

Herbert C. Hoagland of Pathe Freres, strikes the keynote of the maker’s desires when he says to prospective writers: “Make your story clean, wholesome, and happy—a dainty love story, a romantic adventure, a deed gloriously accomplished, a lesson well learned, an act of dramatic nature which is as honest as daylight. Good deeds are just as dramatic as wicked ones. Keep away from scenes of brutality, degeneracy, idiocy or anything which may bring a poignant pang of sorrow to some of the millions of people who will read your story in the pictures unless the pang be one of remorse for a bad deed left undone. In a word, help the film makers produce films which will help those who see them and make the world a little bit better for your work! And the successful scenario writers of to-day are responding to that call and giving their talents to the world in tales that run the gamut of comedy and tragedy—tales that show deeds of honor and glory, love and war, which, while thrilling, still constitute a power for good that is bound to have its effect.”

This is clearly an *ideological call* to future scenario writers to write “instructive” stories, ones which will “help those who see them” and “make the world a little better.” In many ways, ideology is the train conductor who makes periodic “last calls” for improved scenarios. This attention to pro-social detail is important if both critics and films are to fulfill their moral functions. There is, of course, a big difference between attempting to influence film production in a positive way and outright censorship.

Epes Winthrop Sargent, who wrote *Technique of the Photoplay*, sections of which were reprinted in “The Moving Picture World” in 1911, offers a telling reason for early forms of *ensorship*:

The finicalities [sic] of the censorship are largely due to the practice of juvenile offenders to explain that they were led to robbery through having seen the crime depicted in the pictures. It is seldom that the plea is a truthful one, but that has no bearing on the matter.⁴³

Were there what we might call justifiable “political reasons” to censor the moving pictures of the early 1900's? When society's “upper crust” jumped on the notion that moving pictures influenced some to a life of crime they were, in a larger sense, hypocritically promoting the “immorality” of Bourgeois Culture. To complain about crime without examining the social contracts which produce crime is “immoral” to a hyper-political critic, to a post-formal thinker who observes both context and content in a much expanded analysis.

In the very same article mentioned above, Epes Winthrop Sargent adds that,

Photo-playwrights whose stories deal with crimes of any sort should bear in mind the demand of the various censorships that exist in addition to the National Board of Censorship. Stories in which crime or the seamy side of life is introduced should point to a strong moral and the actual commission of a crime should not be written. A burglar may be seen taking money from a safe, for instance, but he should not be seen breaking open the safe nor should his actual forcibly (sic) entry be depicted. He may be seen beside a closed window, but he cannot be shown jimmying the window in his effort to enter. It is a nice distinction, but since the powers that be decide against it the rule must be obeyed.⁴⁴

Sargent seems a bit sarcastic here. All in all, the idea that moving pictures should present a “strong moral” message is ideological and, of course, *political*. Whose values and ideals are

important when it comes to what gets portrayed up on the silver screen? I am not suggesting that moving pictures should be permitted to exercise unlimited “free speech,” which is really a political illusion. Instead, I simply wish to argue that there *is* always a measure of rhetorical impulse in human interaction and this, in itself, often represents an unacknowledged *political thrust*. Society needs to control (i.e., regulate) its cultural capital and this control is just if it is both dialogical and inclusive. Cultural inheritance which presents a one-dimensional “philosophy of life” is subjectively constrictive and politically dangerous, as Hitler proved.

In Chapter Five of his book titled “Technique of the Photoplay” Epes Winthrop Sargent tells his readers which plots “are not wanted:”

Complicated plots are not wanted because they are not easily to be followed through their many ramifications. Stories of murders, thefts, abduction and all crimes are not wanted *unless the moral is strong and rightly placed*. [italics mine] These stories require such careful treatment that they should not be attempted until experience has been gained. It is well to keep away from them entirely if other ideas can be found. Stories based on racial traits, malformations, differences in political or religious creeds, or anything reflecting upon a people, class, sect, creed, deformity, affliction, *or the differences between capital and labor are not wanted. The photoplay appeals to all classes and peoples, and it is the aim of the manufacturer to avoid offense*. [italics mine]⁴⁵

It is hard to imagine a more *political* statement than the above, that photoplays which show the “differences between capital and labor are not wanted.” If the so-called “lower-classes” represent the majority that frequent theaters that show moving pictures, how can it be truthfully said that they do not want to see moving pictures about class, the evils of capitalism or differences in “political creeds?” Clearly, Epes Winthrop Sargent and Walter

Prichard Eaton, both cited above, speak from “an eminence of high idealism,” as actor Otis Skinner put it in his article “An Actor’s View of the Movie ‘Menace.’”

Early on, we see that there was apparent class conflict concerning moving pictures. There was the apparent encroachment of a rather “lowly” popular culture on high society, or at least fear of such by drama critics. There was, perhaps, unconscious fear that the “inalienable rights” of property owners to own property might be eroded by the depiction of unpunished crime against property. And, there was the notion that moving pictures *should* be didactic, from at least a moral and an historical perspective. All of this attests to a clearly identifiable ideological thrust during film’s formative years. Better film historians can, perhaps, offer more examples of political influence during film’s infancy. I eagerly await such wonderful research.

The Ideological Issue of “Good Story Telling”

Sargent offers the following as examples of “good stories,” although he cautions that “these plots were the stock in trade of the director when the photoplay was first developed” and “they have been done to death:”

*The discharged workman who plans to be revenged upon his employer for his fancied wrong, but who either saves the employer’s child from abduction, his money from theft, or his house from arson, thereby obtaining reinstatement and an increase in salary. [italics mine] The child who reunites parted parents or prevents a separation. The child who reunites parents and children separated through an unapproved marriage. The child who redeems the criminal or who saves the discouraged from a downward plunge. The employee who gets an interest in the business, and his employer’s daughter, either with or without opposition from the foreman or the junior partner. The bad small boy.*⁴⁶

The “discharged workman” example above is almost laughable propaganda. It is hard to imagine how audiences would have perceived such in the early 1900's. Still, as hyper-political film critics, we need to be aware of at least some of these rather blatant rhetorical ploys. Whether or not audiences saw through capitalist propaganda is, perhaps, beyond our capacity to know and is probably not as important to hyper-political cultural criticism as apparent efforts to control or influence what gets produced and what gets ultimately exhibited.

Managing Editor of the Famous Players-Lasky story department, Ralph Block, made the following observation:

When the movies first came, they were crude and met with much ridicule. They were a new invention, but the first impression with some persons seems to have been a lasting one. It still lives. Now and again when I go to a dinner some man or woman will tell me of a story that will make a wonderful picture. The information which follows is very much like the narratives in the pictures of fifteen years ago, with plenty of shooting and killing.⁴⁷

Who ridiculed movies when they “first came” on the scene? Was it society's upper crust? Today, there is still “plenty of shooting and killing,” as Ralph Block puts it. The art and science of political cultural criticism is to interrogate *violence* in the media, to at least *try* to unravel the deeper psychological relevance of viewers' apparent fascination with certain filmic events. Perhaps violence taps into more than just unconscious fears of death, fears of change, fears of the unknown. *Perhaps violence taps into an unconscious frustration with the materialism of consumer capitalism, the ultimate meaninglessness of product worship.* Perhaps viewers' fascination with violence is a displaced manifestation of spiritual

discontent—perhaps it reflects a mind not at peace with its surroundings, its destiny, its subliminal will to be “one” with the universe.

The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film (1921A) reports that “at Columbia University, where some thought has been given to photoplay making, there are classes in ‘cinema composition’ and ‘motion picture production,’ but no course in ‘photoplay writing.’” Apparently, the writing aspect of film production was not given much thought in film’s infancy. Was it an art form that developed “off the cuff?” Did it reflect the ideas, the thoughts, the immediate aspirations of the age? When we reach the point where courses are provided in the political *hermeneutics* of films and in the art of *writing* films from a multicultural perspective, then we will reach beyond the status quo, then we will reach beyond the capacity of films to normalize social “reality.” Then we will reach beyond the capacity of films to stabilize the historical dimensions of inherited culture.

So far, we know (1) that various authors wrote about what constituted “good scenarios,” (2) that censorship boards ultimately determined what was exhibited and (3) that society’s “upper crust” seemed to care a great deal about the psychological encroachment of moving pictures on haute culture. Within an historical context, it appears that, early on, moving pictures were viewed by society’s “upper crust” as exerting or potentially exerting a powerful influence on the masses. Whether many believed that moving pictures could teach audiences how to become “better” criminals or influence them to embark upon a life of crime is, perhaps, beyond our ability to ever know. What we have learned from studying early writings on moving pictures is that segments of society apparently influenced the *political*

direction of moving picture plots—this certainly does suggest that *ideology* was as a functioning social apparatus during film’s infancy.

Social Conscience During Film’s Formative Years

In the introduction to *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, Kevin Brownlow (1990) writes, “The silent era is celebrated for its innocence...But the silent era...revealed the corruption of city politics, the scandal of white slave rackets, the exploitations of immigrants.”⁴⁸ This very political nature of early films (silent pictures as they were called) fleshes out my argument that the ability of films to mimic “real” life lent the newly evolving art form a more prickly political *probability*. Some filmmakers were eager to exploit this potential, others perhaps were not. A particularly salient example of what might be called a silent picture’s “political crusade” occurs on page forty-eight in Brownlow’s text where we read of Margaret Sander’s attempts to educate the masses on birth control:

One aspect of the film which struck the “Variety” reviewer was the pervasive sincerity of Sanger: “Playing a role that is herself, one looks for at least fleeting moments of artifice in the woman’s efforts to repeat for the screen the emotions she lived while conceiving her crusade and fighting for it until she fought herself into jail.”⁴⁹

It seems obvious that the “reviewer” was impressed with Sander’s acting that Margaret Sander was able to portray, on screen, the “real” emotions she felt. That the “reviewer” was alert for “artifice,” as he referred to it, suggests that some critics expected a bit of affective verisimilitude in cinematic performances.

Brownlow's summaries, and there are many, evince the kind of poignant sense of history which allows astute readers an extrapolated glimpse of the extent to which political, professional and ideological cliques influenced early film production. For example, in his discussion of heroic portrayals of police officers in silent films, he writes:

Picture men learned to make films that would please the police because they were dependent on police cooperation. Filming in the streets, unless carried out by hidden cameras, often attracted vast crowds, impossible to control without police. One wonders whether some of the early films were not a kind of gratuity on celluloid for favors past!⁵⁰

Of course, this does not mean that *all* silent films, or even most of them, were something of a tribute to efficient, professional police departments. Many were not. The famous "Keystone Kops" collection is a reminder of just how far filmmakers would go to get a laugh at the expense of the authorities. What concerns us here is (1) the *potential* for politics to play a role in what gets projected on the silver screen and (2) possible political reasons for filmic content. The very absurdity of some filmic events (e.g., the Keystone Kops) suggests a parody that few will give much political weight. But "Keystone Kops" bungling around are *not* exactly comparable to African tribesmen in *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* spitting in each others' faces as a bizarre means of greeting one another. For one, the police were never enslaved as a so-called "race." For two, individual citizens are more likely to have met police officers than African tribesmen and they are therefore more likely to have internalized representations of "good" police officers as well as "bad" police officers. So, it *does* make a political difference *who* gets ridiculed. Race, as Cornel West admonishes, does matter. Gender, age and sexual preference matter, as we will see in succeeding chapters.

Another example of how politics and ideology worked its way into film we find on page 173 of Brownlow's text:

[Judge Willis] Brown then presided over the juvenile court of Salt Lake City. Invited by the editor of the *Publisher's Guide* to comment on motion pictures, he wrote, "If I owned a motion picture house, I would show children the pleasing, helpful things in life . . ." The editor challenged him to write a scenario which would meet his requirements yet still be a draw to the public. The judge did so and took it to the editor, who showed it to several producers. The result was that the judge himself directed a five-reeler...⁵¹

That Judge Brown would "show children the pleasing, helpful things of life" suggests that in film's infancy some thought that its didactic potential ought to be exploited for "good" purposes. It almost seems absurd to think that films are *not* something of a cultural curriculum of sorts, given all this bantering about what should and what should not get portrayed in film.

Brownlow's *Behind the Mask of Innocence* is about films of social conscience in the silent era. Interwoven in his "Great Person" approach is an expose of the ideological leanings of the period. In discussing the notion that Griffith stood out as the "social reformer" of his age (e.g., *Intolerance*), Brownlow cites the following:

One historian, Leslie Wood, has suggested that to talk of Griffith as a social reformer is misleading. Certainly many of his films dealt with the hardships of the poor. But in this period, Woods points out, the sufferings of the poor were common currency in literature and on the stage. There was still a hangover from the late Victorian period of sentimentality.⁵²

As movie archeology, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* illuminates the politics of film production as well as what might have been part of the national psyche during film's early years. Of films dealing with the social ills of drug abuse during the early 1900's, Brownlow writes:

Such films feared to tell the truth about the drug traffic. One film which made a valiant effort in this direction was *A Romance of the Underworld (1918)*...It was essentially a melodrama about a girl fresh from the convent who joins her brother on the Lower East Side. A young reform lawyer opens an investigation which reveals that the brother is the lieutenant of a notorious drug trafficker...The film was taken to Sing Sing and shown to the inmates who applauded it warmly. A review written by a prisoner indicates how close this lost picture came to suggesting the involvement of municipal politicians in the drug traffic...⁵³

Obviously, filmmakers can potentially expose or "suggest" *political corruption* and thereby influence public sentiment against such corruption. In this respect, narrative filmic art assumes a journalistic function. As such, filmic art undeniably fulfills its moral obligation "to perfect the power to perceive" the strong arm of seedy politics. Whether or not such pro-social art was well-received or whether or not a significant number of such films were made I leave to more devoted film historians. My interest is in demonstrating that there were political issues taken up by filmmakers during film's formative years and these issues, by definition, comprise a horizon of meaning most of us call ideological.

Brownlow's text helps me in my endeavor (1) because issues of sex, violence, prejudice, poverty and crime remain as salient today as they apparently were in the early 1900's and (2) because Brownlow emphasizes the political aspects of film production. For example, on page 100 he writes that,

These were the days when a director would see an article in the newspaper and sit down and write a script about it, as John Noble did when he read

about the addiction of messenger boys to cocaine. The result was “Black Fear” (1916) . . . It opened with the statutory allegorical scene in Hell, then showed in detail how messenger boys doing night work are kept awake with small doses of cocaine; soon they are confirmed addicts and cannot live without the drug.⁵⁴

It is Brownlow’s emphasis on specific political issues that draws our attention to specific values and ideals. As critical consciousness increases, we should be able to discern more and more of the “hidden” politics of what others might label “apolitical” films. Granted, films about political corruption and drug addiction are manifestly political, but my argument is that all narrative art incorporates a certain measure of bias, whether that bias is manifest or latent.

In his discussion of journalist Randolph Bourne’s reaction to *The White Terror* (1915), Brownlow reveals technological advances occurring as the inescapable subjectivity of critics:

According to Bourne, the acting was wooden, the actors merely rolling their eyes; he found, however, the children appealing, especially “as they ran to their mother, lying dead from too much devotion to ‘Saco-Ozone, Nature’s Only Cure for Consumption.’” He described elaborate effects, white lines of skeletons superimposed over the magnate’s patent medicine advertisements, and serried rows of gravestones, each marking the effect of a bottle of his poison. None of this appealed to Bourne...⁵⁵

Bourne apparently expected a large dose of “realism” in the acting and ostensibly objected to the heavy-handed use of metaphorical iconography to achieve emotional resonance with the audience.

From my point of view, Bourne’s response to *The White Terror* suggests that during film’s infancy filmmakers might have known very well how to appeal to the deeper

structures of human consciousness. That Brownlow chose to write about socially conscience films, those who criticized them, those who produced them and those who censored them, attests to his will to address the historical bias of presenting the silent years as deliciously “innocent.” He chose to reveal how film history has become a “politics of exclusion,” where idyllic notions of the past replace more “realistic” ones, where primary sources, when they are available, point to a confusing and messy history as John W. Gardner puts it in the prologue to this chapter.

In the end, society gains greater insight into contemporary filmic culture by exploring issues of social conscience during film’s formative years. By exploring the political issues that Brownlow raises, we can perhaps stumble upon greater insight into contemporary social practices. Yet, history does not seem to exist for some critics, for some academics, for some students. It is as though historical intertextuality were an unknown soldier buried in an unknown tomb. By forgetting the contributions of history, critics and others obfuscate an important contextual possibility, the possibility that we might understand social guilt as it was and is shuffled from one generation to the next through cultural inheritance. If psychotherapy has taught us anything, it is that the subconscious has a good memory. If slavery produced huge waves of raw guilt, the type that confabulated “genetic inferiority” and cast Africans as legal property, then we need to interrogate this guilt if we are ever to break free of the subconscious shackles of racial injustice and racial oppression. Hitler’s regime should have taught us that “genetic inferiority” is one of the man’s most wicked modernist constructs. To fulfill our moral obligations as film critics, we must learn from the mistakes

etched in history's recent tragedies. We must correct the guilt that re-inscribes itself in an endless series of repressive representations.

That we may have become a less restrictive society (in terms of a very rigid notion of what's "proper" and what is not) than what we might have become had filmmakers of the past not explored the political issues that they did, apparently does not occur to some film historians or to some contemporary film critics. All in all, I propose that a transrational view of film criticism requires at least a critical *glimpse* of film's formative years. Some films were probably pro-social in that they awakened the power in some to perceive injustice in the world. Apparently, however, film's formative years did not awaken much of the U.S. to its social guilt for decades of slavery. Prejudice, intolerance and racial discrimination are undeniably still with us. Unfortunately, we all cannot be consummate historians and those who are may, as Samuel Butler suggests, probably alter history, this does not mean that we should never peruse primary sources to prime our deeper spiritual intuitions. We have within us the collective unconscious of countless generations. In a sense, hyper-political film critics continually struggle to stimulate Jung's collective unconscious, perhaps the richest source of spiritual insight, when they watch old films and when they research what was said (or written) about such films.

Footnotes

¹Goodman, Daniel Carson (1914) “‘Movies’ Now Attracting Well-Known Authors” in New York Times Encyclopedia of Film 1896 - 1928. New York: Time Books (1984). PN1993.N 465 1984 V. 1. Gene Brown, Ed.

²Social Learning Theory suggests that social behavior (such as aggression) is learned through observing and imitating the behaviors of others. This theory has great face validity and is supported by social psychological research. The reader is referred to (1) Bandura, A. (1973), Aggression: A social learning analysis, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. (2) Bandura, A. (1978) Social learning theory of aggression, Journal of Communication, 28, 12-29. Gerbner et. al. (1978) Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9. Journal of Communication, 28, 176-207. Libert & Sprafkin (1988) The early window: Effects of television on children and youth. New York: Pergomon. Kryzanowski & Stewin (1985) Developmental implications in youth counseling: Gender socialization. International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 8, 265-275. Zinberg (1976) Normal psychology of the aging process, revisited (I): Social learning and self-image in aging. Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 9, 131-150.

³Bernardi, Daniel (ed.) (1996). The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, p. 111.

⁴Bernardi, Daniel (ed.) (1996) *Ibid*, p. 110-111.

⁵Lubiano, Wahneema (1997) “But compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do The Right Thing, and Spike Lee Discourse,” in Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video, Edited by Valerie Smith, New York: Rutgers University Press, P. 105.

⁶Thompson, Kristen (1988). Breaking The Glass Armor, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 35.

⁷Hall, Jeanne (1991). “Realism as a Style in Cinema Verite: A Critical Analysis of *Primary*,” in Cinema Journal 30, No. 4, Summer, p. 27.

⁸Harrison (1913), *Ibid*, Page 405.

⁹Harrison (1913), *Ibid*, Page 405.

¹⁰Eaton, W. P. (1909) “The Canned Drama” in The American Magazine. Volume LXVIII MAY to OCTOBER 1909. Page 499.

¹¹Eaton, W. P. (1909), *Ibid*, P. 499.

¹²Perhaps, one might argue that staged drama was also expected to be historically true. Even so, the notion that narration, that acting, that drama should “ring true” in order for it to be “quality art” feeds the kinetic energy of art to advance ideological goals, if not to precipitate a blatant propagandistic political agenda. In other words, if the perception of dramatic art is that it should represent what is “real” or “true,” then one could argue that its didactic potential is greater than it would be if art were “pure fantasy,” pure fiction, total fabrication, or fanciful abstractions. Through transrational analysis, though, communication in any form, whether it is art or not, is both didactic and hegemonic.

¹³Eaton, in the same article mentioned above, appears to be speaking over the top of his pinkie finger when he makes the following comments which reveal not only (then) recent improvements in “canned drama” but an attitude toward so-called lower socioeconomic classes: “The greatest improvement at present (and there is still plenty of room for more) is along the line of dramatic structure and significant acting. *Does it sound silly to talk thus pedantically, in the language of dramatic criticism, about moving pictures?* [my italics] If you will watch a poor American picture unroll blinkingly, and then a good French one, you will realize that unconsciously a certain standard of taste, a genuine aesthetic standard, can be set for the children and poor people who frequent canned drama by the millions. You have your standards—or you should have—of acting, gesture, facial expression, dramatic unity, coherence, interest, on the stage. These people can be taught, *are being taught* [italics mine], to have their standards on the moving picture screen. Canned dramas succeed or fail, like any others, and for very much the same reasons.” When Eaton rhetorically asks the reader, “Does it sound silly to talk thus pedantically, in the language of dramatic criticism, about moving pictures?” he implies more than his tea-totting positionality (position in the web of power). He implies that moving pictures, as of 1909, were just beginning, perhaps, to attract the attentions of “real” critics, that the novel art was developing to the point where critics might have something worthwhile to critique. Oddly, nearly ninety years later, there are many in higher education who parallel Eaton’s better-than-thou socioeconomic attitude, i.e., there are those who give popular culture the scholarly evil eye. When Eaton writes “these people are being taught” to have “standards,” he ostensibly means film “manufacturers” and implies that in 1909 the film industry, as a whole, was just beginning to step into the limelight of the “genuine aesthetic standards” of society’s luminary upper crust. His overall attitude is that critics need not bother themselves with something that has not yet reached the noble status of “dramatic art.” Apparently, moving pictures, in its formative years, appealed to so-called “lower classes.” The upper classes had the theater, if they wished to see dramatic art performed with any degree of sophistication.

¹⁴Law, James D. (1908). “Better Scenarios Demanded” in The Moving Picture World July-Dec. Vol. III, No. 9, Page 153.

¹⁵Law, J. D. (1908), *Ibid*, Page 153.

¹⁶Law, J. D. (1908), *Ibid*, Page. 153.

¹⁷MacGowan, K. "The Artistic Future of the Movies" in The North American Review, Vol. CCXIII, Page 260.

¹⁸ If this is not a rather clear and concise suggestion to spread the ideology—the values and ideals—of the upper class, then what is it? The art and science of political film criticism unearths evidence of ideation that reveals the intent to control, influence or persuade others through film. It also appreciates that "criticism" is, itself, an ideological force to be reckoned with. And, it does not really matter where "criticism" or ideology originates, e.g., from a drama critic, a congressman, a judge or a respected actor(ress). Criticism itself is a form of politics.

¹⁹Skinner, Otis. (1920). "An Actor's View of the Movie 'Menace'" in The North American Review Edited by George Harvey Vol. CCXII. Page 387.

²⁰Eaton, W. P. (1909), *Ibid*, P. 498.

²¹ This need to "control" unarguably manifests itself as a specific ideology. In other words, the ideology, the values and ideals and *ways of seeing* of the "upper crust," must reign supreme in oligarchies of capitalist power. As far back as 1909, Eaton, a drama critic, apparently recognized the political power of moving pictures. Here we had a technological wonder, derided as "*canned* drama," that threatened the collapse of one feature of haute culture. But did it really give the upper crust a run for their money?

²²Skinner, Otis (1920), *Ibid*, Page 389.

²³Skinner. Otis (1920), *Ibid*, Page 389.

²⁴Skinner, Otis (1920), *Ibid*, Page 389.

²⁵ Hyper-political film criticism, therefore, examines these images, sometimes frame-by-frame, with the intent to discover their emotional resonance, their rhetorical flavor, or their affective political essence. Part of political film criticism is *science*, certainly that part that records the number of violent acts per movie or the number of weapons utilized throughout any given movie, and the other part of political film criticism is an *art*; per se, it is the *intuitive* study of the emotional resonance of juxtaposed objects and images in narrative art.

²⁶Skinner, Otis (1920), *Ibid*, Page 390.

²⁷Skinner, Otis (1920), *Ibid*, Page 392.

²⁸Simon, John (1967). "A Critical Credo" published in *Awake in the Dark*, Edited by David Denby (1977), New York: Vintage Books, Page. 177.

²⁹Simon, John (1967), *Ibid*, Page 177.

³⁰Cormack, Mike (1994). Ideology and Cinematography in Hollywood, 1930-39, New York: St Martin's Press, Page 10.

³¹Cormack, M. (1994), *Ibid*, Page 10.

³²Cormack, M. (1994), *Ibid*, Page 10-11.

³³ Should we alter this to read "human beings' propensity to rule others, etc.? I think not. Men have overwhelmingly been the harbingers of political despotism over the years, why include women and children?

³⁴Cormack, M. (1994), *Ibid.*, Page 11.

³⁵Mast, Gerald, Marshall Cohen & Leo Brady (1992). Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings. New York: Oxford University Press. P. 684-5.

³⁶Freire, Paulo (1995 reprint). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Continuum, Page 112.

³⁷Freire, Paulo (1995 reprint), *Ibid*, Page 111.

³⁸Kracauer, Seigfried (1960). Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Page 160.

³⁹ That another world famous dictator, Lenin, plainly states that "cinema is the most important instrument of all the arts," should serve as a warning to all—cinema must be studied for its unmeasurable effects. The entire film-viewing process (darkened theatre, etc.) makes it *suspect* as a potential subliminal instrument of propaganda. Whether that propaganda comes from the state or modern day capitalists, who (in a sense) control the state, is another issue. Suffice it to say that whoever controls the camera, has access to the masses.

⁴⁰I am not in any way arguing that cinema is, for *everyone*, a monolithic ideological force. Just for some, it may be such a monster. I am pointing out that since mainstream films stimulate a rather large audience with psychologically captivating images, notions, perspectives and narrative messages, these films have the *potential* to

indoctrinate a public, if that public is not critically conscious, if that public is not politically self-reflexive, if that public is too preoccupied with materialistic or pleasure-seeking pursuits to recognize its inherent ability to construct and appreciate social "reality." Therefore, the art and science of political film criticism is to interrogate the potential for propaganda to be disseminated both consciously and subconsciously through mainstream films while it simultaneously considers the social construction of the self and the appetites cultural artifacts provoke. There is, in any event, more to this equation than most critics or film studies students will readily admit.

⁴¹Kracauer, S. (1960), Page 160.

⁴²Simon, John (1967). "A Critical Credo" in Awake in the Dark, Denby (1977) New York: Vintage Books, Page 172.

⁴³Sargent, E. W. (1911). "Technique of the Photoplay" in The Moving Picture World, Vol. 9, No. 1, Page 109.

⁴⁴Sargent, E. W. (1911), Ibid. Page 109.

⁴⁵Sargent, E. W. (1911). "Technique of the Photoplay" in The Moving Picture World, Vol. 0. No. 1, Page 450.

⁴⁶Sargent, E. W. (1911), Ibid, Page 450.

⁴⁷Unknown Author (1925A) Citation taken from an article titled "Misconception Concerning Movies, Says Story Expert" published in The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film.

⁴⁸Brownlow, Kevin (1990). Behind the Mask of Innocence, Los Angeles: University of California Press, Page. xv.

⁴⁹Brownlow, Kevin (1990), Ibid, Page 48.

⁵⁰Brownlow, Kevin (1990), Ibid, Page 157.

⁵¹Brownlow, Kevin. (1990), Ibid, Page 173.

⁵²Brownlow, K. (1990), Ibid, Page 278.

⁵³Brownlow, K. (1990), Ibid, Page 105.

⁵⁴Brownlow, K. (1990), Ibid, Page 100.

⁵⁵Brownlow, K. (1990), Ibid, Page 273.

CHAPTER FOUR

SLAVERY, RACE AND CULTURAL CONFIRMATION

*I went to Riis Beach and Put my ear to the ocean
 I went to Atlantic City and Put my ear to the ocean
 I went to Chesapeake Bay and Put my ear to the ocean
 I went to the South Sea Islands and Put my ear to Clapboardwalls
 I heard chains inside the ocean's roar
 I heard Bones whitened by salty time rattlin for blackskin
 I heard different moanblues in Yoruba, Ibo, Akan, Bantu
 I heard transformed memories and tears drop from ashy seaswept faces*
 S. E. Anderson (1995)¹

Criticism derived from an ordinary consciousness does not recognize a personal unconscious in individuals nor does it recognize a national psyche in a large collectivity such as the United States of America. For those uninitiated to Jungian psychoanalysis, the **personal unconscious** is a storage place for an individual's personal experiences. Hall and Nordby (1973) conclude that Jung believes the personal unconscious to be the,

level of the mind [which] adjoins the ego [the conscious mind]. It is the receptacle that contains all those psychic activities and contents which . . . were once conscious experiences which have been repressed or disregarded for various reasons, such as a distressing thought, an unsolved problem, a personal conflict, or a moral issue.²

I would add that the personal unconscious probably does not directly process formal concepts such as language, symbolic or organized thought. Perhaps Jung's personal unconscious physically resides in the right hemisphere of the brain. Moral or personal conflict may arise because the right hemisphere of the brain does not think the way the left does. The left,

recently thought of as the cradle of language, might actually perceive social “reality” relative to a particular philosophy of life or particular world hypotheses, i.e. it might perceive the world in terms of schemata. The right, in this case, would be more “honest” since it functions, perhaps, in terms of visual or non-schematic relationships and it does not force-fit its output to readily available schemata because it is, in a sense, further away from conscious thought than the left hemisphere. Why would cultural critics wish to engage such a paradigm for human thought? The answer is that the concept of a “divided brain” explains individuals’ personal struggles with their consciences and/or individuals’ idiosyncratic struggles with repressed aspects of their personal history. In any event, the notion that a portion of the human mind is not always conscious is useful to cultural critics because it explains pervasive subliminal patterns in historicized cultural thought.

Jung’s notion of the **collective unconscious** is perhaps more interesting for cultural critics because it introduces an expanded historical context to human behavior. Where Freud considered the individual’s *personal* history, Jung considers humanity’s *ancestral* history. Hall & Nordby state that Jung’s,

collective unconscious is a reservoir of latent images, usually called *primordial images*....[which] means “first” or “original”; therefore a *primordial image* refers to the earliest development of the psyche. Man inherits these images from his ancestral past, a past that includes all of his human ancestors...³

The **national psyche**, as I define it, embraces the most recent experiences of the collective unconscious that relate to a nation’s (or a collective’s) shared social past. For the United

States, the preeminent event of our history is slavery since it endured for over a hundred years and its moral, social and economic repercussions are still being felt to this day.

Slavery was, arguably, a holocaust here in America and its psychological effects, I would argue, are still being felt to this day. It is time to take a serious look at the way we critique cultural artifacts. However, before we can truly understand the political and moral weaknesses of contemporary film criticism and film production, like social-psychoanalysts, we need to go back in time to discover the traumatized “child” that has become today’s “troubled critic” or today’s “troubled producer” of cultural artifacts. This traumatized “child” was, metaphorically speaking, these United States and what we suffered was the moral trauma of a “peculiar institution” called slavery. While it could be argued that cultural critics and producers of narrative art have been interested in developing a social conscience (of sorts) regarding film, they have nevertheless not developed, for the most part, a deep psycho-social understanding of narrative art peculiar to the sordid history of these United States. Cultural critics and producers of narrative art, in other words, have not psychoanalyzed our culture to reveal its repression of a world hypothesis that thrives to this day—patriarchal white supremacy.

According to black historian John Hope Franklin (1947), it is “not possible to give an accurate figure of the number of slaves imported into the New World from Africa.”⁴ Franklin, however, adds that,

it has been estimated by Dunbar that 900,000 were imported in the sixteenth century, 2,750,000 in the seventeenth, 7,000,000 in the eighteenth, and 4,000,000 in the nineteenth. These figures, among the most conservative

estimates, may not be accurate. It cannot be denied, however, that the total number of Africans removed from their native land ran far into the millions.⁵

As one might readily expect, African slaves were tortured in order to get them to become “willing” slaves. Untold numbers were killed in Africa, on the boat, and in these United States as a way of saying, “It is futile to resist.”⁶

The examples set by slave traders and slave owners were morally bankrupt. Ancestral memory of such horror, if it does exist, is sure to be repressed because it would tend to grate on the moral conscience of the nation, especially since our Bill of Rights was written with equality as its moral lighthouse. Franklin describes a rather brutal example of the historic treatment of Africans in the New World:

One Mississippi master dragged from the bed a slave whom he suspected of theft and inflicted over one thousand lashes on him. Repeated descriptions of runaways contain phrases such as “large scar on hip,” “no marks except those on his back,” “much scarred with the whip,” and “will no doubt show the marks of a recent whipping;” they suggest a type of brutality that doubtless contributed toward the slave’s decision to abscond.⁷

Franklin reports that “self-mutilation and suicide were popular forms of resistance to slavery” and adds that “slaves cut off their toes, hands, and mutilated themselves in other ways to render themselves ineffective as workers.”⁸

Regarding mass suicides, Franklin observes that “slaves fresh from Africa committed suicide in great numbers. In 1807 two boatloads of newly arrived Negroes in Charleston starved themselves to death.”⁹ He also provides individualized accounts of slave suicides:

When his slave woman was found dead by her own hanging in 1829, a Georgia planter was amazed since he saw no reason why she should want to

take her own life. When two Louisiana slaves were returned to their master after having been stolen in 1858 they unbound themselves and drowned themselves in the bayou. One of the South's wealthiest planters, Charles Manigault, lost a slave by a similar act when the overseer threatened him with punishment. Sometimes slave mothers killed their own children to prevent them from growing up in slavery.¹⁰

No matter how many slaves committed suicide or how many were murdered by slave traders or their masters here in these United States, there seemed to be an endless supply of slaves because slave traders actually depopulated much of Africa (S. E. Anderson, 1995).¹¹

The following question often arose in my high school history classes (but was never fully answered to my satisfaction)—“Why were Africans brought to the New World, why didn't plantation owners just enslave indigenous people?” Historian Eric Williams (1944) provides a partial picture of a satisfactory answer to this question. He points out that,

the first instance of slave trading and slave labor developed in the New World involved, racially, not the Negro but the Indian. The Indians rapidly succumbed to the excessive labor demanded of them, the insufficient diet, the white man's diseases, and their inability to adjust themselves to the new way of life. Accustomed to a life of liberty, their constitution and temperament were ill-adapted to the rigors of plantation slavery. As Fernando Ortiz writes: “To subject the Indian to the mines, to their monotonous, insane and severe labor, without tribal sense, without religious ritual . . . was like taking away from him the meaning of his life. . . . It was to enslave not only his muscles but also his collective spirit.”¹²

Anderson (1995) completes the picture by stating that (1) so many Africans were pried from their homeland that it was actually economically feasible to kill many who resisted, (2) enslaved Africans did not often speak a common language throughout their travails in this country and so plotting against their captives was not as easy as it might have been had they

spoken a common tongue, (3) slavery was already practiced amongst some competing nations in Africa (a different form of slavery than the brutal American version). Hence, plantation slavery here in America thrived on *African* slaves.

The share numbers of Africans stolen from Africa is itself a satisfactory answer because it explains the contradiction between white supremacist notions that there is some sort of genetic “aggressiveness” in blacks and ludicrous notions in American history textbooks that Negroes made good slaves because they were helplessly and ignorantly docile. Sure, there were submissive slaves. This is true because slaves witnessed unspeakable brutality and this put a damper on their attempts to escape from or resist domination. Still, we know that slaves, male and female, engaged in multiple measures of resistance. In fact, plantation owners were ever conscious of possible slave uprisings, even amongst the “docile” slaves.

Williams notes rather wryly that “Negroes therefore were stolen in Africa to work the lands stolen from the Indians in America.”¹³ One cannot help but notice how much “stealing” America enjoyed, which brings us to the eternal roots of social and political injustice—greed. From the dawn of recorded time, greed has been humanity’s immoral nemesis. Ever since Adam and Eve stole an apple from God’s sacred tree, greed combined with a will to power and subsequently all hopes of peace on earth ended. To this day, greed and a will to power create political misery for many.

Slavery was, indeed, an *economic* institution long before it became a *racist* institution. As Williams observes,

[slavery] had been the basis of Greek economy and had built up the Roman Empire. In modern times it provided the sugar for the tea and the coffee cups of the Western World. It provided the cotton to serve as a base for modern capitalism. It made the American South and the Caribbean islands. Seen in historical perspective, it forms a part of the general picture of the harsh treatment of the underprivileged classes, the unsympathetic poor laws and severe feudal laws, and the indifference with which the rising capitalist class was “beginning to reckon prosperity in terms of pounds sterling, and . . . becoming used to the idea of sacrificing human life to the deity of increased production.”¹⁴

The racial component to slavery was added in modern times. As Williams observes, “The features of the [black] man [sic], his hair, color and dentifrice, his “subhuman” characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later *rationalizations* [my emphasis] to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest...”¹⁵ S. E. Anderson estimates that between 50-80 million Africans died during the 1400 years of a period of history he calls the “Black Holocaust.”¹⁶ He believes that the Black Holocaust “began with the Arab slave trade of around 700 AD, with Europeans (Portuguese) entering the picture around 1442.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the enslavement of Africans by Arab-Africans and others within the Arab world persists to this day (Anderson, 1995, p. 4).

Regarding the political and moral issues of slavery, Williams concludes that,

politics and morals in the abstract make no sense. We find the British statesmen and publicists defending slavery today, abusing slavery tomorrow, defending slavery the day after. Today, they are imperialist, the next day anti-imperialist, and equally pro-imperialist a generation after. And always with the same vehemence. The defense [sic] or attack is always on the high moral or political plane.¹⁸

My contention throughout this dissertation is that morality shifts with shifting subjectivities (points of view). When we broaden particular subjectivities to include multicultural perspectives and when we pray and meditate, we open our minds to a transrational morality, a morality that fleetingly dissolves the subject-object dichotomy. In that ephemeral moment, a multidimensional wisdom is glimpsed. Because humans rationalize, because we so easily rationalize moral “reasons” for immoral political and social practices, cultural critics must go beyond “reason.” We must reach for transrational “truths”—“truths” based on spiritual intuition, prayer, meditation and intercultural dialogue.

We must see that which others refuse to see. We must accept the evidence that slavery was a “peculiar institution” abused our nation’s conscience.

Historian James W. Loewen (1995) notes that,

In real life the Founding Fathers and their wives wrestled with slavery. [American History] textbooks canonize Patrick Henry for his “Give me liberty or give me” death speech. Not one [of twelve examined] tells us that eight months after delivering the speech he ordered “diligent patrols” to keep Virginia slaves from accepting the British offer of freedom to those who would join their side. Henry wrestled with the contradiction, exclaiming, “Would anyone believe I am the master of slaves of my own purchase!”¹⁹

The fact that contemporary American history texts efface the moral dilemmas of the Founding Fathers points to a unconscious desire, perhaps, for educators and book publishers to repress the inconsistencies of a horrible history. The moral struggles of our Founding Fathers would be a great teaching tool since it points to the need to examine one’s logic. Besides, why don’t historians traditionally include much about our “Founding Mothers?” Perhaps the nation owes a larger debt than can ever be imagined to the women who

supported or even argued with the so-called Founding Fathers throughout their political lives?

With respect to at least one “Founding Mother,” Loewen adds that,

Abigail Adams wrote her husband in 1774 to ask how we could “fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.” The contradiction between his words and his slave owning embarrassed Patrick Henry, who offered only a lame excuse—“I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living here without them”—and admitted, “I will not, I cannot justify it.” Other options were available to planters. Some, including George Washington, valued consistency more than Henry or Jefferson and freed their slaves outright or at least in their wills . . . Manumission [freeing the slaves] gradually flagged, however, because most of the white Southerners who, like Jefferson, kept their slaves, grew rich. Their neighbors thought well of them, as people often do of those richer than themselves.²⁰

And so, our moral dilemma as a nation is not necessarily that we are inherently racist as a nation but that we are profoundly materialistic and pervasively un-spiritual (even though there are many in nearly every town). We are, in other words, greedy. We are, in other words, a capitalist country without much of a true moral conscience.

In succeeding pages, I hope to social-psychoanalyze narrative film criticism because I believe that the more context one considers, the more connections one ultimately discerns between psycho-social causes and historico-political effects. One must, of course, allow for some measure of capricious behavioral experimentation—free will. There must always be a transrational side to our coin of cultural inquiry because we are by no means automatons, responding to our social worlds like highly organized computer software. The ensuing

discussion will truly be an historical mess, but those who wish to know some measure of a repressed “truth” will, with God’s help, discover such.

The hyper-political cultural critic is, therefore, not unlike the passenger on the Titanic who, once overboard, swimming deep in the cold currents of thrashing seas, first observes a great mass of solid ice *beneath* the surface of the water. She comes to realize that the mass of ice *above* the surface was not as dangerous as that below. She discerns that it was actually the ice below the waterline that sank the “unsinkable” Titanic. My overall argument, therefore, is that our national psyche is influenced by both conscious world hypotheses that rely on schemata and a “political subconscious” that can only be discovered, perhaps, by comparing the metaphors and social practices of the past with those of the present. I intend to argue that uncovering the political subconscious is a tricky business partly because it requires *self-reflection*, a difficult proposition because it is metaphorically akin to the eye looking at itself, and partly because I suspect, indeed assume, that the human mind, as a whole, resorts to confabulation where its will conflicts with its moral conscience.

Confabulation is a term used by neurologists to describe when one half of the brain is ignorant of something the other half knows. The verbal half of the brain “confabulates” a story to explain away its ignorance. For example, patients who experience damage to their corpus callosum, a part of the brain which connects the two hemispheres of the brain, resort to confabulation to explain what one half of the mind does not know. Francis Crick (1994) reports that,

when the callosum is cut, the left hemisphere sees only the right half of the visual field; the right hemisphere, the left half. Each hand is mainly

controlled by the opposite hemisphere, although the other hemisphere can produce some of the coarser movements of the hand and arm. Except under special conditions, both hemispheres can hear what is being said. . . . When a picture is flashed into the patient's left (speaking) hemisphere, he can describe it the way a normal person can. This ability is not limited to speech. When asked, the patient can also point to objects with his right hand (largely controlled by the left hemisphere) without speaking. His right hand can also identify objects by touch even though he is prevented from seeing them. If, however, a picture is flashed into the *right* (nonspeaking) hemisphere, the results are quite different. The left hand (largely controlled by this non-speaking hemisphere) can point to and identify unseen objects by touch, as the right hand could do previously. But when the patient is asked to explain why his left hand behaved in that particular way, he will invent explanations based on what his left (speaking) hemisphere saw, not on what his right hemisphere knew. The experimenter can see that these explanations are false, since he knows what was really flashed into the non-speaking hemisphere to produce the behavior. This is a good example of what is called "confabulation."²¹

While I do not intend to argue that healthy humans behave exactly like these "split-brain" patients, I do suggest that we are, in a similar way, generally not aware of how we are *partially* programmed to construe our social world in particular ways by inherited culture.

Our ideas about the world, in some cases explicitly stated and in other cases implicitly understood, block out much of the social formatting that (over)determines our wants and desires. When we create narrative art, whether that be as screen writers or playwrights or any other kind of writer or even as directors and actors, we draw upon the experiences of the personal unconscious as well as the national psyche. Narrative art invariably becomes **cultural conformation** of ideation reflected in the national psyche and the personal unconscious. Narrative art offers cultural anthropologists indirect reflections of culturally inherited philosophies of life (or "world hypotheses").

In other words, one's personal history and one's national history both affect the creation and production of cultural artifacts. I propose, then, that cultural critics must search for the bias that informs specific philosophies of life. One of the ways to discover this bias might be to examine both history and the present as one continuously checks these against "reality." One such reality check might be the "shadows" of the past that lingers in the present. If there are such "shadows," then our conclusions are probably quite accurate. I am suggesting a new way of evaluating his-story. As Nietzsche once said, "The historian looks backward; eventually he also *believes* backward." A transrational approach looks back at history but measures what it "sees" in terms of an eternal present that knows no time.

For now, I wish to argue that our nation's past has set the stage from which present and future political "plays" are and will be performed. For example, an abused child almost always recycles his injuries. The National Organization for Women reports that,

Violent juvenile offenders are four times more likely to have grown up in homes where they saw violence. Children who have witnessed violence at home are also five times more likely to commit or suffer violence when they become adults.²²

The abused child's psyche has incorporated schemata that normalize power and a subconscious will that feeds itself on naked aggression. Likewise, our nation's abusive history with the "peculiar institution" must be examined for its recycled psycho-social effects. We must ask ourselves what a morally atrocious practice such as slavery (and lynching and breaking-up families, etc.) had on our nation's political subconscious. That we, as a nation, abused ourselves, only compounds the injury.

In an historiographical analysis of “guilt over slavery,” historian Gaines M. Foster (1990) points out that some of his fellow historians argue that the so-called “South” never acknowledged the evils of slavery and therefore never felt guilty about the “peculiar institution.” Foster observes that,

an analysis of the evidence offered in behalf of the guilt thesis [that southerners actually felt bad about slavery on a certain level], like that of the assumptions underlying it, offers no definitive proof for or against the thesis but does tend to reduce its plausibility. The best support for the guilt thesis, of course, would be explicit acknowledgment of guilt by southerners. Almost all historians concede that a few southerners felt guilty and said so. No one, not even defenders of the thesis, claim to have found very many of them.²³

Definitive proof of guilt does not readily surface in *explicit* acknowledgment because guilt generally operates at a subconscious level. One’s subconscious is hardly ever *explicitly* acknowledged. This is indeed one of the main points of psychoanalysis! As transrational analysts, we must apply an understanding of guilt to our nation’s political and social practices as well as to the creative social practice of **cultural conformation** (producing artwork derived from elements of the national psyche which supports the status quo).

As Schiller once said, “It is criminal to steal a purse, daring to steal a fortune, a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases.” And so, southerners might not blame themselves for slavery but their guilt is, nevertheless, submerged like the ice that sank the Titanic. But the South is not the only guilty party. Anderson notes that,

Wall Street, in New York City, became a vital capitalist financial center because it was the first big slave trade center in the colonies and, later, the

new nation's principle trading port, where the business of slavery was transacted (until 1862!).²⁴

The North was and is not a morally pure collection of states, even if northern states rose up in arms to destroy the “peculiar institution.” Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement proves that economic parity and equal opportunity were pipe dreams. More recently, the Chicago Riots, “racial profiling” by New Jersey State Police, the atrocious sexual abuse of Abner Louima and the ridiculous shooting of Mr. Dion by N.Y.P.D. serve as historical “shadows” of the vicious abuses that slaves endured throughout the iniquitous years of the “peculiar institution.” Things have changed but the “shadows” remain. Why is this? Perhaps it is because we have a subconscious political will to power that nourishes itself on greed.

Jonathan Kozol (1991) writes of recent political attempts to minimize educational possibilities for minorities in his impassioned book *Savage Inequalities*. Kozol writes that “denial of ‘the means of competition’ is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities.”²⁵ In the distant past, slaves were taught by those of a religious bent or simply denied the privilege of reading and writing. Today, the “shadow” of this ignominious political practice survives in grossly unequal schooling for those who were born poor. Blacks are poor in overwhelming numbers. Until this nation decides that an equal amount of funding should be spent on each child regardless of race, class, age, gender or any other classificatory scheme, the American Dream is but an illusion and true democracy is a wish fulfillment for the disenfranchised. Any society that lives in the illusions of merit morally dies in the delusions of avarice.

John Hope Franklin observed over fifty years ago that,

Nothing has been more persistent in the twentieth century than the tendency to continue the disparity between the money spent for the education of white children and that spent for the education of Negro children. In fact in many instances the differential has increased. In 1900 for every \$2.00 spent for the education of Negroes in the South, \$3.00 were spent on whites; but in 1930 \$7.00 were spent for whites to every \$2.00 spent for Negroes. As recently as 1935-36, the current expenditures per white pupil in ten Southern states averaged \$37.87, while such expenditures per Negro pupil averaged \$13.09, slightly more than one-sixth as much for all schools of the United States. In the new services, such as transportation, visual aids, laboratory equipment, modern buildings, and the like, the differentials are even greater.²⁶

Remnants of an historical “shadow” that denied African slaves civil rights remained as historical “shadows” that denied free African-Americans equal access to a quality education. As one traces social and political practice throughout our nation’s history, one cannot help but conclude that we are a deeply racist country that prides itself on merit. If we were intersubjectively moral, we would not spend unequal amounts on education for children supposedly equal under the law and equal with respect to our nation’s moral conscience.

No one should readily expect those who are guilty to confess to their crimes. That is not the real world. More than likely, the guilty bury their consciences in lies, a.k.a. “confabulations.” The guilty have no intention of admitting guilt and wrestling with their consciences. This is the point of therapy—to *transform* one’s consciousness as a result of awakening one’s conscience. Moral rehabilitation requires a transformation of the soul. It is a difficult process, one not unlike psychoanalysis. It takes time. It takes effort. It is not achieved in a day, or a week, or a month. Success is measured in long stretches of time and massive self-reflexive inquiry. Is it no wonder that The Gospel of Matthew states: “Why do

you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but not notice the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Before we judge other nations for lapses in their political administration of civil rights, we ought to address our own very immoral social and political practices.

Racism and Film Scholarship

That there is no movement in film studies to examine issues of race comparable to feminist film theory, is quite telling. It tells us that race is something America would rather sweep under its academic rugs and its critical credenzas. Daniel Bernardi (1996), in his introduction to *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, points out that "unlike feminist research or even studies of class, *film scholarship on race as a formation has yet to develop into a major critical movement [my emphasis].*"²⁷ My contention throughout this dissertation, therefore, is that race takes a back seat in the academy and in mainstream film criticism because moral *political* film criticism has yet to be spelled out in its most useful theoretical and pedagogical format.

Much of the writing in the academy that might help mainstream film critics and film studies students is almost hopelessly inaccessible to those who need it most. A *process* is needed, an *art* and *science* is called for, one that demonstrates how mainstream film critics and film studies students might raise their *political* consciousness to a level that recognizes the very subtle and the not-so-subtle elements of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination

in narrative film. In other words, those possessing an ordinary consciousness would hardly be able to recognize racialized iconography or discourse in a film that is not ostensibly about race. However, those with a heightened critical consciousness *would* be able to discern the deep structures of racism, homophobia, sexism, classism or even ageism in narrative art. Because there are so many in and out of the academy who are of an ordinary consciousness, these prejudices go largely uninterrogated in many narrative films.

Bernardi makes the following startling observation:

in the last five years there has been a substantial growth in the critical and historical writings on early cinema. However, within this work there is surprisingly little attention given to the issue of race. There is not a single book on race in early cinema; there are only a few articles or book chapters (most of which deal with *The Birth of a Nation*). Yet, racial meanings are a significant, omnipresent part of the birth of cinema. Edwin S. Porter, D. W. Griffith, Oscar Micheaux, among other early filmmakers, employed race in both overt and implicit ways throughout their work. Genres such as the Western and the melodrama, and subgenres such as the Indian and “greaser” film, were very much about the “manifest destiny” of white civilization. Race marked the careers of such notable silent stars as Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Sessue Hayakawa, Al Jolson, Rudolph Valentino, Anna May Wong, to name just a few. Indeed, cinema’s invention and early development coincided with the rise in power and prestige of biological determinism, with increased immigration and immigration restriction laws, and with the United States’ imperialist practices in the Caribbean and Asia.²⁸

Why have academics ignored these issues? Race, in America, is cloaked behind the invisible shield of political denial, which states that art should be examined apart from its politics. The erasure of racialized critical inquiry when our country defines itself and functions through and within racial distinctions points to repressed social guilt. One does not easily investigate what disturbs one’s soul.²⁹

Of course, our own obsessions, any psychologist will tell you, are not so easily noticed. And so, Bernardi agrees that,

race is certainly not a safe or straightforward subject for any scholar to grapple with. However, to bypass or ignore this term of differentiation is to bypass and ignore film history. The examples of racist representation are numerous, ranging from the *Chinese Laundry Scene* (1896) to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), from *The Searchers* (1956) to the Latino drug and Vietnam revisionist films of the 1980's, among many others. Race has been and continues to be a fundamental part of U.S. cinema. And the fact remains that silence on this is albeit contentious subject serves to perpetuate and enforce one of the dominant ways whiteness persists from historical period to historical period, and from film to film.³⁰

Clearly, a radical multicultural critical project must address race as paradoxically both biological fiction and as a political economic reality.

Bernardi notes that the momentum is, however, building to create film scholarship on race. He makes the following assessment of film studies classes in America:

Though slow to tackle rigorously the racial practices that inform U.S. cinema, film studies, thanks largely to the impact of cultural studies, has begun systematically addressing this important issue. A significant work of the late 1970s is Thomas Cripp's *Slow Fade to Black*, which historicizes both the representation of African Americans and African American filmmaking from 1900 to 1942. A sampling of just the books published in the last few years on African Americans include Cripp's *Making Movies Black*, Manthia Diawara's anthology, *Black American Cinema*, Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, and Mark A. Reid's *Redefining Black Film*.³¹

Even though progress is currently being made, this progress is not enough. Nearly a century has lapsed in which racism, sexism, classism and homophobia have been allowed to take deep psycho-social roots in the established formulas of Hollywood. Today's prescription for

developing a heightened critical consciousness in mainstream film critics as well as film studies students must focus on psycho-social techniques for raising one's level of critical consciousness.

Anna Everett puts it this way:

Even with the phenomenal influence of cultural studies, cognitive, “postcolonial, poststructural, postmodern” and feminist theories, there remains a conspicuous absence of theorizing about the narratological function of race *qua* race in contemporary films, not to mention the pleasure principle suturing spectatorial identification to racialized character-ideals. Consequently, there is a dearth of discussion about recent filmic narratives that deploy race among their organizing principles of story advancement even though films utilizing race in this manner are on the increase . . . because race functions in these films to reify already established real-life socio-cultural hierarchies, its narrative centrality as a structuring presence often proceeds undetected or, at the least, unchallenged.³²

While cultural studies, cognitive, “postcolonial, poststructuralist, postmodern” and feminist theories have done much to *re*-politicize a vastly de-politicized process, much *more* than these theories are needed to create hyper-political cultural criticism. What we need is *a new way of thinking*, a new way of perceiving, a heightened critical consciousness that transcends logic.

For example, Anna Everett offers the following *hyper-political* criticism of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*:

In having his arch-villain speak in a constructed black dialect, Burton is little concerned with representing the heteroglossia or polyphony of voices that are the American vernacular. Rather, it is clear that this singular and particularized instance of “blackspeak” has the narrative intent of invoking already circulating notions of black male criminality. Moreover, when contrasted to all other speech representations that signify normative diction or “whitespeak” in this film (eccentric speech included) this insidious use

of cinematic blackspeak renders untenable the recourse to pleas of innocence and misconstrued irony on behalf of the filmmaker and his target audiences (interestingly, irony and satire are favored terms for rationalizing or excusing white racist utterances, but few would argue that Leonard Jeffries or Louis Farakhan is simply being ironic). Solidifying the racial theme in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is the music that punctuates this narrative enonce, music suggestive of a jazz-like tonality that redoubles the racial impact of this otherwise charming film. This issue is crucial to our argument because it uncovers the veiled function of race in this film's narrative structure. The subterfuge is that the blackened arch-villain is not drawn with what could be thought of as black features or even coloration, but his speech, his environment, and his function as narrative obstacle clearly deploy socially recognizable codifications of racial undesirability: threatening and racialized speech, "jungle" music signifying a debased culture's jazziness (as jazz-like music is the preferred mode for soundtracks that want to convey a sense of the underworld, or savage and uncontrolled passions), and the villain's underground cave is the virtual heart of darkness for this script.³³

Everett argues that "ideologemes on race appear less objectionable, pointed or pedantic" in films "that advance their racialized narrative emplotments through the disarming genre of comedy."³⁴

Indeed, I watched *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with a white graduate student, one whom I had known for several years. As the film progressed in its narrative, my friend laughed her head off while I giggled at first and then gradually came to feel somewhat ill-at-ease. There was this creeping sense in me that something reeked in Denmark. Now, I would certainly not call my friend a "racist," far from it, she is very vocal about racial injustice and, as a teacher, she is moved to point out every sort of discrimination to her students. She did not *consciously* perceive the racism in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Neither did I, at first. It took several moments for me to translate my intuitions into cognitive hypotheses

which could be checked against multiple dimensions of social “reality.” I did not, immediately, discern what “bothered me” about this film. Intuition, in other words, sensed moral turmoil. A feeling of concern swept over me. Yet, I knew not what was amiss.

Everett astutely points out that,

an aspect of textual erotics registers in [*The Nightmare Before Christmas*] because the implied spectator is expected to, and is rewarded with the textual pleasure for, “getting it,” or comprehending the narration of race and ultimately lessening the disparities of textual knowledge between implied author and implied reader (Branigan 3).³⁵

From personal experience, I now believe that “getting it” probably occurs at an *subconscious* level. My friend “got it” but was not, ostensibly aware of what she “got.” I was not consciously aware of what I was “getting” until some time after the movie was over. All I sensed was an ill affect about what transpired throughout the film. Later, when we discussed the film, she slowly, with some effort, recognized the racialized “sub-text.” Anyone who knows my friend knows that she is more apt to disagree than to agree with her friends; in fact, she has disagreed with me on many racial issues and, as one who speaks her mind, is not in any way timid about expressing her views. So, her “agreeing” to see the racialized sub-text in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was not, apparently, an “I-don’t-want-to-appear-to-be-racist” confirmation of her black friend’s “enlightened” *political* reading of the film. *Kids* (199?) can also be examined for its “constructed black dialect.” Cultural critics need to ask why it was necessary for the unruly and unsavory “kids” in *Kids* to talk black? Doesn’t this suggest that an urban “hip hop” blackness is, itself, an inherently corrupting influence on white kids? And, what about the rape scene at the end of the movie, doesn’t that suggest an

assumed “blackness” raping a young white woman? We should not expect the political subconscious to make direct one-for-one comparisons. The political subconscious, instead, makes *indirect* allusions, which is to argue that hyper-political film criticism is not a simple cash and carry business. Hyper-political cultural criticism draws a deep well.

Which is not to argue that much of the film criticism in the U.S. is a-political. It is, however, to point out that *hyper-political* film criticism is essentially a psycho-spiritual *process*. Those who engage in political film criticism fight an uphill battle with a nation that *subliminally*, if not also *consciously*, practices racism. Feminists have succeeded in achieving a few of “their” goals [which are really *our* moral goals as a nation]—goals which have been accepted and adopted by open-minded men and grudgingly acknowledge by those who are not quite so open-minded. Still, the glass ceiling gets polished in too many corporate boardrooms and violence against women is often overlooked in both the courts and the streets. Throughout our history as a nation women were denied access to higher education, to the courts as attorneys and judges and to the corporate sector as professionals and corporate leaders. NOW (National Organization For Women) reports that the level of violence against women in these United States even in this so-called “enlightened” age is still quite shocking.³⁶

MURDER. Every day four women die in this country as a result of domestic violence, the euphemism for murders and assaults by husbands and boyfriends. That’s approximately 1,4000 women a year, according to the FBI. The number of women who have been murdered by their intimate partners is greater than the number of soldiers killed in the Vietnam War.

BATTERING. Although only 572,000 reports of assault by intimates are officially reported to federal officials each year, the most conservative

estimates indicate two to four million women of all races and classes are battered each year. At least 170,000 of those violent incidents are serious enough to require hospitalization, emergency room care or a doctor's attention.

SEXUAL ASSAULT. Every year approximately 132,000 women report that they have been victims of rape or attempted rape, and more than half of them knew their attackers. It's estimated that two to six times that many women are raped, but do not report it. Every year 1.2 million women are forcibly raped by their current or former male partners, some more than once.

THE TARGETS. Women are 10 times more likely than men to be victimized by an intimate. Young women, women who are separated, divorced or single, low-income women and African-American women are disproportionately victims of assault and rape. Domestic violence rates are five times higher among families below poverty levels, and severe spouse abuse is twice as likely to be committed by unemployed men as by those working full time. Violent attacks on lesbians and gay men have become two to three times more common than they were prior to 1988.

America is truly a vicious, violent country, a savage immoral nation wallowing in its own narcissistic evil. But, that's the bad news. The good news is that we have great potential and, hopefully, we will command the collective will to rectify a ghastly state of immoral "pleasures."

To truly appreciate our national psyche we must create "metaphorical abstracts" of narrative events. We must reduce narration to its least common thematic denominator. For example, when Keanu Reeves, a *white* man, becomes the savior of all humankind in *The Matrix* (1999), patriarchal white supremacy rears its ugly head. Why is it that, when we consider cultural intertextuality, a *white* man *almost always* saves the human race? It is easy to confabulate that there are more white people in America than there are people of any

specific racial category, but this does not address the psycho-social issues of our nation's history with the "peculiar institution" and our religious beliefs that we are separate and saved according to particular faiths, particular religious practices and by a God that offers only conditional love. To the hyper-political cultural critic, narrative art becomes like the chapters in a book; each chapter adds something new to a transrational appreciation of culture, and taken together they form an interlocking picture of the national psyche just as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle form a coherent picture once fully assembled.

Because this picture is self-reflexive, it must include an historical glimpse of "a" particular past that might logically generate "the" political present. History must be interrogated in terms of its recurrent themes and its principle political preoccupations. Narrative art becomes a social dream that must be analyzed in terms of the past. As C. G. Jung (1964) wrote in *Man and His Symbols*, "The general function of dreams is to try to restore our psychological balance by producing dream material that reestablishes...the total psychic equilibrium."(p. 50) In this sense, narrative art in America, for the most part, is a wish-fulfillment for patriarchal white supremacy. Narrative art in America attempts to restore psychological balance but it cannot do so because it neglects its own conscience and it neglects an almighty God that loves unconditionally (which partially explains why evil is still around).

Narrative films must be critiqued in terms of our nation's politics, which include our philosophies of life as well as our world hypotheses. That women's bodies are used to sell everything from tires to toothpaste, is psychologically descriptive of our patriarchal collective

will to power women's bodies. We paradoxically hate that which we sexually, physically and psychologically abuse and—look around—women have been abused for ages. More recently, advertising depicts *emaciated* women as attractive. This is inherently misogynist because it prompts women to starve themselves to death and it probably has something to do with current levels of (what I would call) psychosomatic illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia. Feminists rise up against such abuse and they are called “Femi-Nazis” by some of those who prefer a misogynist status quo over emancipatory (or should it be *efemcipatory*?) social justice.

Star Trek: First Contact (1996) is a prime example of cultural conformation because it *confirms* the “patriarchy” in patriarchal white supremacy. If our nation's patriarchal history and its continuing abuses of women are considered, the plot of *First Contact* is actually quite immoral. For those who have not seen the film, its plot “is simply a mix of an old sci-fi scenario (the villain travels back in time to alter the course of the future) and the *Best of Both Worlds* episodes (instead of Picard (Patrick Stewart), Data (Brent Spiner) is the one who is assimilated). In this case, the villain is the Borg, a race of cybernetic beings [feminists] who exist in the form of collectives, and assimilate other races [*human* men and women] into their own in order to acquire their knowledge and experience [patriarchal political power and prestige], with the ultimate goal of becoming “perfect” [becoming feminists].”³⁷ As first glance this analysis might appear farfetched or even patently unbelievable. But when one considers that “the Borg led by the Borg *Queen* [my emphasis] are the scum of the galaxy, assimilating every life form until they are superior to everyone,”³⁸ the plot takes on new

political significance. As transrational analysts, we juxtapose the Federation over patriarchy and the Borg over feminists. Feminists desire to overthrow the patriarchal order, the natural order of the universe. It is quite interesting that the Borg are known for their political chant “resistance is futile,” which is really a backlash version of “Women! Can’t live with them, can’t live without them!” The notion that the villainous Queen assimilates both men and women attests to both men and women accepting feminist rhetoric as their “own.” Feminism is an alien force, fighting to control patriarchal America (the Federation).

Any narrative with an evil “Queen” is suspect, e.g., *Alien* (1979) and all of its offshoots. Similarly, transrational analysts would want to examine *The Wizard of Oz* for its evil *witch* and its pleasant *wizard*. The polarity becomes obvious when one reduces the film to a thematic abstraction. The fact that there is also a *good* witch in *The Wizard of Oz* is, of course, politically significant because the *good* witch balances out, to a certain extent, the negative implications of there being a *bad* witch. Tying the *bad* witch to a lonely spinster, however, should cause us to raise our critically conscious eyebrows. *Snow White* is another example of patriarchy’s paradoxical treatment of white women. Snow White is both the measure of white purity and an object of male pleasure. Granted, lots of other “lessons” are being taught through narrative art, but this does not excuse us from seeing the political lessons that truly reflect our historical past and our political present.

Any narrative that has a black man kill a white woman is highly suspect because as a thematic abstraction (the lowest common denominator of narrative events) it *confirms* patriarchal white supremacy’s deepest fears. *Othello*, whether we address the film version

which starred Lawrence Fishburn or the dramatic poetry of His Highness William Shakespeare, is highly suspect because at the most basic level of narrative events, a black man (a Moor) does, indeed, kill a white woman (Desdemona). When one factors in that Desdemona ostensibly told the truth throughout the narrative, the guilt begins to grow. It does not matter so much that an evil white man, Iago, went to extremes to deceive Othello. At the most basic level of narrative events, a black man *still* murders a white woman. All else is confabulation that hides the subliminal rhetoric of patriarchal white supremacy. When one balances how much verbal (poetic?) abuse is thrown toward Othello against how much praise he receives and when one adjusts this accordingly with Othello's inability to discern the truth (that Desdemona is white and pure as the driven snow), patriarchal white supremacy rears its ugly head in declaring, even in its subtlety, that black males do not do right by white women.

So great is our national guilt and our collective political narcissism that many Americans buy into pseudo-science such as *The Bell Curve*. The "lies" this book feeds our national psyche (or attempts to feed it) resonate well with patriarchal white supremacy. What is quite predictable or *postdictable*, and consequently quite psychologically revealing and empirical to boot, is that scholarly refutation of such evil pseudo-science (e.g., *Measured Lies*) does not sell nearly as many copies as "scientific fiction" such as *The Bell Curve*. Are educated minds *really* curious or are they just looking for "confabulations" to justify the status quo? Part of my overall argument is that Americans "confabulate" or buy into "confabulations" such as *The Bell Curve* to assuage their guilty consciences. They buy into

“scientific fiction” because it allows them to ignore social “truths” that they would really rather not face. Patriarchal white supremacy is economically “good” to those who control America’s corporate boardrooms. If poor whites buy it, so much the better—they know not where their oppression comes from. They have subconsciously and inauthentically purchased “scientific fiction.” Either way collective political narcissism rules. The power elites would consciously and subconsciously have it no other way.

Just as psychoanalysts must become archeologists of their patients’ repressed past, transrational analysts must utilize intuition to uncover historical guilt in contemporary political and social practices. When historians such as Foster argue that,

a review of the major evidence cited on behalf of the guilt thesis—manumissions, the confusion of person and property, the vehemence of the proslavery defense, the failure to reopen the slave trade, and the response to defeat and emancipation—reveals no more definitive proof for or against the guilt thesis than does an analysis of the assumptions on which it rests,³⁹

transrational analysts look for “definitive evidence” in historico-political practice. That many were against teaching slaves how to read and write throughout slavery is politically significant. Educated slaves, of course, would tend to disprove eugenic arguments that slaves were subhuman, that slaves were correctly considered “property,” like cattle or oxen. Is it not a manifestation of guilt that southerners and others did not want to see their beliefs upset by hard evidence? Is it not a manifestation of guilt that such beliefs were self-told “lies” from the start? When police officers see criminals toss drugs or weapons out of speeding cars, don’t these officers and the courts take such behavior to be evidence of guilt? Shouldn’t we

consider political practices that deny blacks equal status under the law as evidence of American guilt and unconscionable greed?

Today, Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* more than adequately demonstrates how white supremacy continues its long traditional of privileging those who are white. Such social practice, besides being viciously immoral, is definitive evidence of social and political guilt. One has only to examine white responses to Jack Johnson, a black heavyweight boxing champion from 1908 to 1915 to discern white supremacist guilt attempting to escape an imposing, impending reality in the form of a tough intelligent black man who wasn't afraid of letting white people know it. Streible (1996) reports that,

White reception of Johnson's image, after some initial curiosity and intolerance, however, was marked by alarm over this icon of black power. So great were white anxieties that many states and cities censored Johnson films in particular and the U.S. Congress banned interstate traffic in prizefight films in general. Jack Johnson was not the first black boxer to appear in films, but his bold, confrontational persona radically contradicted prevailing racial stereotypes. Earlier screen caricatures portrayed black fighters as either naturally deferential to or fearful of whites. Ring mythology held that black boxers had "yellow streaks." The myth of the "spooked" black fighter, in fact, often appeared in accounts about the first moving pictures.⁴⁰

That it took so many years for black athletes to break the "color barrier" and blacks have still not stepped in to many leadership roles attests to a thriving racism in this country.

In terms of supposedly "objective" news, we can turn to Ishmael Reed's (1993) *Airing Dirty Laundry* for evidence of the differential treatment of social "reality" by a largely white media. This differential treatment, I argue, is definitive evidence of confabulation and concomitant potencies of guilt.

After years of front-page pictures about black violence in inner-city schools, the *New York Times*, on April 21, 1993, quoted a Justice Department report of 1989, which found “surprisingly little difference between cities, suburbs, and non-metropolitan areas in a number of measures of school violence.” Yet even when the media does report stories of white violence the participants are often provided with excuses. For instance, a rise in battery against women that occurred in Alaska was blamed on male depression about unemployment that resulted from the Exxon oil disaster. The murder of a Little League baseball player by a youngster on a rival team was blamed on violence in adult sports. But the network news shows illustrated this story with pictures of black athletes fighting instead of showing white athletes engaged in brawls.⁴¹

Excuses are what one hears first from guilty parties. Reed adds that, “when a black man was murdered by a white mob in the Howard Beach section of New York City, a *New York Times* writer said that it was because whites were afraid of the underclass. When a trigger-happy white Louisiana suburbanite killed a visiting Japanese student, Yoshihiro Hattori, who had mistakenly knocked on the wrong door, NBC News said that the Japanese ought to learn slang so that they will understand what is meant by *freeze*.”⁴²

Transrational analysts assume that there will always be the possibility of confabulation. There will always be “rational” explanations and “reasonable” excuses which hide bias, guilt and collective political narcissism. Blaming the victim is a perfect example of such heinous confabulation. It tells us that women are raped because “they asked for it,” not because rape is a vicious act of aggression. It tells us that gays deserve to be killed because they go against the “natural order.” It tells us that old people don’t deserve to be a vibrant part of the American community because they’re too set in their ways and too out of touch to contribute to the greater good of society.

Even Heidegger, German philosopher extraordinaire, who proposed that human beings are experientially determined by culture, was a member of the Nazi party until the end of World War II. He later accounted for his “inexplicable” support of such villainy by calling it a moral “blunder,” but he could not explain how *he*, a philosopher, a deep thinker, could have taken up with politics so wretched as Nazi totalitarianism. Perhaps he did not know of the death camp atrocities until *after the fact*, as many other Germans claimed. Perhaps Hardy clarifies the whole issue with his aphorism, “Though a good deal is too strange to be believed, nothing is too strange to have happened.” Heidegger’s philosophy is, indeed, a good metaphysical deal, it offers great explanatory power. And, its own proof may lie in the fact that Heidegger, himself, fell victim to his own philosophy.

In a sense, Heidegger’s notion that people are a product of their worlds (Mehta, 1976)⁴³, actually *explains* his Nazi involvement. Human beings may be more powerfully “thrown” by inherited culture than even Heidegger suspected. He probably didn’t recognize his *own* inclinations to relinquish his superego to a father figure such as Hitler, as Freud predicted might someday happen. For those who know little of German philosophers, Heidegger proposed that each individual was first and foremost a product of the world. A transrational understanding of Heidegger’s “blunder,” therefore, suggests that human beings are *both* autonomous *and* determined by inherited culture. In other words, Sartre and Heidegger are *both* correct. Heidegger’s “blunder” was that he did not fully comprehend the Nazi threat. This may be *somewhat* understandable since history is always a mess while you are actually living it and Hitler did, indeed, make appeals to God as he went about proposing

a strong, united Germany, which was what nearly everyone *in Germany* was looking for after the last World War and its harsh (from Germany's point of view) recriminations.

As Burckhardt once said, "The great destroyers of life remain an enigma to us." When these "great destroyers of life" no longer puzzle us, we will have overdetermined the root causes of evil and we may well be on to something marvelously significant.

Footnotes

¹Anderson, S. E. (1995). The Black Holocaust, New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., p. 172.

²Hall, Calvin S. & Vernon J. Nordby (1973). A Primer of Jungian Psychology, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., p. 35.

³Hall & Nordby (1973), *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴Franklin, John Hope (1947). From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 57.

⁵Franklin, J. H. (1947), *Ibid.*, p. 57-8.

⁶Incidentally, this theme (resistance to external control), if it runs through our culture, should tell us something about our national psyche. Perhaps, our national psyche struggles with a guilty conscious? The theme is borrowed from Star Trek's *First Contact*. It refers to the Borg (alien invaders) who desire to "assimilate" (control) human beings or any sentient beings, actually.

⁷Franklin, J. H. (1947), *Ibid.*, p. 205-6.

⁸Franklin, J. H. (1947), *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁹Franklin, J.H. (1947), *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁰Franklin, J. H. (1947), *Ibid.*, p. 206-7.

¹¹ Of side interest, I must add that my father traced our family roots back to one of perhaps several plantations owned by Charles Manigault—hence my last name, Manigaulte. My father added the "e" to remind us that we were "e"-mancipated.

¹²Williams, Eric (1944). Capitalism & Slavery, Richmond, Virginia: The William Byrd Press, Inc., p. 7-8.

¹³Williams, E. (1944), *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁴Williams, E. (1944), *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁵Williams, E. (1944), *Ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁶Anderson, S. E. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁷Anderson, S. E. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹⁸Williams, E. (1944), p. 211.

¹⁹Loewen, James W. (1995). Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 146.

²⁰Loewen, James W. (1995). *Ibid*, p. 148-9.

²¹Crick, Francis (1994). The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search For the Soul, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 170.

²²NOW Homepage, Violence Against Women in the United States, pg. 2 of 2, <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html> (5/3/99 @ 1:06 PM).

²³Foster, Gaines M. (1990). "Guilt Over Slavery: A Historiographical Analysis" in The Journal of Southern History, Vol. LVI, No. 4, November, p. 687.

²⁴Anderson. S. E. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 23.

²⁵Kozol, Jonathan (1991). Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools, New York: Crwon Publishers, Inc., p. 83.

²⁶Franklin, John Hope (1947), *Ibid*, p. 535.

²⁷Bernardi, Daniel (1996). The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press., Page 6.

²⁸Bernardi, D. (1996) *Ibid*, Page 7.

²⁹It is interesting to note that the academy effectively limits minority enrollment by such "honored" practices as selecting student recruits from amongst the highest scoring applicants on multiple-choice exams, only adds to the confabulations the academy tell itself as it garners what it calls "quality" students. The practice of education is to educate, not to select, test and reward social privilege with more social privilege. Yet, this is what universities all across the country do. For the most part, there is no political moral imperative in higher education.

³⁰Bernardi, Daniel (1996), *Ibid*, Page 5.

³¹Bernardi, Daniel (1996), *Ibid*, Page 5.

³²Everett, Anna (——) "The Other Pleasures: The Narrative Function of Race in

the Cinema” in Film Criticism, [_____] Page 26.

³³Everett, Anna (——), Ibid, Page 29-30.

³⁴Everett, Anna (——), Ibid, Page 31.

³⁵Everett, Anna (——), Ibid, Page 31.

³⁶Data from NOW website: <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>. Accessed 5/3/99 @ 1:06PM.

³⁷Adapted from Star Trek Movie Series Reviews on the world wide web: <http://www.ram.org/ramblings/movies/generations.html#8>

³⁸From a review in The Washington Post, Nov. 22, 1996, Friday, Final Edition, “Star Trek: On Track,” by Desson Howe.

³⁹Foster, Gaines M. (1990), Ibid, p. 692.

⁴⁰Streible, Dan (1996). “Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films” in The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema, Daniel Bernardi, Editor, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, p. 170.

⁴¹Reed, Ishmael (1993). Airing Dirty Laundry, New York, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, p. 16.

⁴²Reed, Ishmael (1993), Ibid, p. 16.

⁴³Mehta, J. L. (1976) Heidegger, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

CHAPTER FIVE

POPULAR PRESS REACTION TO OPPRESSIVE NARRATIVE ART: *ACE VENTURA (WNC) AND CHASING AMY*

It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject.¹

Toni Morrison

Post-formal thinkers recognize that cultural criticism in these United States often lacks a self-reflexive political edge. Criticism derived from an ordinary consciousness does not recognize a personal unconscious in individuals nor does it recognize a national psyche. For those uninitiated to Jungian psychoanalysis, the **personal unconscious** is a storage place for an individual's personal experiences. Hall and Nordby (1973), in their book *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*, conclude that Jung believes the personal unconscious to be the,

level of the mind [which] adjoins the ego [the conscious mind]. It is the receptacle that contains all those psychic activities and contents which...were once conscious experiences which have been repressed or disregarded for various reasons, such as a distressing thought, an unsolved problem, a personal conflict, or a moral issue.²

Where I depart from Jung is my suspicion that the personal conscious is not just a storage place for once conscious experiences, it is the right hemisphere of the brain which does not directly process such formal concepts such as language or other methods of symbolic thought. Moral or personal conflict may arise because the right hemisphere of the brain does not think the way the left does. The left might be able to confabulate perceptions to fit a particular philosophy of life or particular world hypotheses, but the right is more "honest,"

it functions, perhaps, in terms of visual or post-formally sensed relationships and their histories. In any event, the notion that a portion of the human mind is not always conscious is useful to us as cultural critics because it explains persistent patterns in cultural thought.

Jung's notion of the **collective unconscious** is perhaps more interesting for cultural critics because it introduces an extended history to human behavior. Hall & Nordby state that Jung's,

collective unconscious is a reservoir of latent images, usually called *primordial images* . . . [which] means "first" or "original"; therefore a primordial image refers to the earliest development of the psyche. Man inherits these images from his ancestral past, a past that includes all of his human ancestors...³

The **national psyche**, as I define it, embraces the most recent experiences of the collective unconscious that relate to a nation's (or a collective's) shared social past. These prejudicial inflections guide both the creative process as well as the critical process. Slavery was, unarguably, a holocaust here in America and its psychological effects are still being felt. It is high time that we take a serious look at the way we critique what has come to be called "popular culture."

Case in point is *Ace Ventura 2: When Nature Calls*. As a critically conscious person of color, I squirmed in my seat from the moment Ace's plane landed in the highly stereotyped jungles of Africa until the credits came up, almost too late to prevent me from nearly gagging from the racist rhetoric I had just seen. A decade or so ago, I might not have even felt this repulsion. Yet, from an ideological point of view, I later asked myself, "Could the film makers have chosen to situate their comedy in *modern* Africa?" Obviously, the

answer was a resounding, “Yes.” That they chose to situate the film in a jungle setting, a rather typical portrayal of the African continent in U.S. media, incidentally, firmly established, for me, the prejudicial “feel” of this film. As I watched, intrigued by the images I saw on screen and the glowing glee and guffawing of an audience primarily made up of white college students, I tried to understand my festering repulsion to this film. The very difference between my perception of the film and others’ (white others’) perception of it propelled me to closely examine it, to make such an examination part and parcel of a semester long research project. Students of color whom I had spoken with who had seen the film expressed a similar reaction to it. It grated on their nerves, but precise critical words were slow to evolve.

In researching *When Nature Calls*, I discovered that, for the most part, the popular press did not lambaste what I perceived to be its vulgar racist stereotyping, its abhorrent iconography and its unconscionable derogatory narration. I discovered that many mainstream film critics simply effaced or “euphemized” *WNC*’s racial politics. Below, I summarize my original findings. I allude to no special methodology. I simply went to Lexis/Nexis, typed in *Ace Ventura 2: When Nature Calls* and chose those reviews which were somewhat demographically varied and loosely represented what one might call “the majority view,” although, in reality, no such view exists.

(1.) Leslie Felperin of *Sight and Sound* (Page 34) writes:

When Nature Calls has not a shred of compunction about stereotyping African tribes people, but then given that it’s dealing in comedy as broad as an elephant’s backside, why should it?

Do comedians have “poetic license” to stereotype? Moreover, does our national psyche perpetuate oppression through its humor? I would argue “Yes.” And, indeed at a recent “Talk Back to the Critics” forum at the Huntington International Independent Film Festival in Huntington, New York on June 14 of 1998, I raised this question to three critics of the popular press. To simplify the discussion, I pointed out the popularity of *The Simpsons* and its obsession with negative stereotypes. David Sterrit of *The Christian Science Monitor* strongly objected to the notion that U.S. culture by and large denigrates Others. He pointedly observed that “Italian film makers recently made a comedy about the Holocaust.” He seemed to think that an Italian film producer making fun of the Nazis (*La Bella Vita*, perhaps?) represents the same type of humor one characteristically sees in popular American comedy such as “*The Simpsons*.”

I did not get a chance to ask many follow-up questions. However, one member of the audience, whom I will call “Jane” to allow her some anonymity, afterwards approached me and agreed with Sterrit’s view, stating that “since *The Simpsons* makes fun of *all* ethnic groups, it could hardly be considered socially offensive.” I disagreed and considered referring to Henry A. Giroux’s (1997) insightful observations in “Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness” wherein he states:

Central to theoretical work on Whiteness is the attempt to confront “the issue of White racial identity [and to raise] the questions of when, why and with what results so-called ‘white people’ have come to identify themselves with what results so-called ‘White people’ have come to identify themselves as White.” No longer the stable, self-evident, or pure essence central to modernity’s self-definition, Whiteness is unmasked, in the work of such historians as David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev, as an attempt to arbitrarily categorize, position, and contain the “other” within racially ordered

hierarchies. Dislodged from a self-legitimizing discourse grounded in a set of fixed transcendental racial categories, Whiteness is analyzed as a lived, but rarely recognized, component of White racial identity and domination.⁴

Instead, I simply told “Jane” that making fun of *everyone* (as though this were possible) by means of negative stereotypes is not the same as being politically *neutral*. After some dialogue, I sensed that raising one’s political consciousness is not a simple matter, one which might employ only a few carefully chosen words or phrases. Raising one’s political consciousness is a transformative spiritual process that takes both time and effort. To my surprise, I have engaged in many discussions with intelligent people who state that “if you make fun of everybody, it’s okay.” This is problematic. The process of making fun of Others *is always a political act*, it is symbolic and it is evil because it not only emotionally defines Others but it reinforces an “Us” versus “Them” mentality.

In her review of *When Nature Calls*, Felperin writes:

There was something instantly appealing about Jim Carrey when he made his debut as a star in *Ace Ventura Pet Detective*. While many comedians have been likened to Jerry Lewis, in Carrey’s case the comparison is justified: like Lewis he is graceful and elastic of frame, blessed with near-perfect comic timing, and excels at making slightly repulsive *schlemiels* oddly likeable.

That Carrey excels at making “slightly repulsive *schlemiels* oddly likeable,” only exacerbates the hideous effects of racism on younger, perhaps less self-reflexive viewers. In this movie, Carrey is the penultimate role model for future racists. He teaches (models) prejudice as a way of being “white,” indifferent and holier-than-thou. While I cannot attest to being an authority on the films of Jerry Lewis, my memory of Lewis is one of bumbling, oddly

intelligent clown of sorts, not a “graceful, elastic of frame” comedian who makes his thirty pieces of silver ridiculing non-whites.

(2) Jay Carr of “The Boston Globe” (10 November 1995, Page 51) has this to say of *When Nature Calls*: “It’s difficult to imagine hearts being lifted by the tribal stereotypes filling the screen.” As I stated earlier, my heart was certainly not lifted. Pierced, perhaps, but not “lifted.” Carr’s *tepid* comments vastly understate the viciousness of the jungle stereotypes in *When Nature Calls*. Moreover, Carr observes that,

Most comics are aggressive, but there remains in Carrey an eagerness to please and a juvenile exuberance that are awfully engaging. Before you’re aware of it, you find your own facial muscles arranging themselves in a smile when he starts driving sidekick Ian McNeice nuts with animal noises on the plane.

I would argue that if an adult critic finds himself mimicking Carrey, how much more so are young impressionable minds going to be influenced by the *practice of ridiculing Others* and the normalizing of this practice through humor.

(3) Janet Maslin of “The New York Times” 10 November 1995, Film Review, Page 8 writes:

The plot, which involves African tribesmen (treated with goofiness verging on insult) and the search for a sacred bat, is worthwhile only as an excuse for Mr. Carrey to be the white person in plaid pants at a tribal dance, high-kicking like a Rockette.

Goofiness verging on insult? Perhaps U.S. culture is so steeped in racism that the only recognizable insult (for some) would be for Carrey to use the “N” word. What rates an insult these days? A videotape of LA cops beating Rodney King was insufficient evidence of police

wrongdoing. Apparently, blanket stereotyping of African natives as ignorant savages is also insufficient for a charge of racism to stick to this film.

Maslin states that “if the movie itself aimed higher, it could have drawn laughs without compromising Ace’s anarchic sense of fun.” Yet, one might reasonably argue that Carrey could just as easily poke fun at the dominant elite in this country. He focuses his “anarchic sense of fun” at those “greedy moneygrubbers” at the helm of Corporate America. Why did “his” movie choose to ridicule Africans and British Upper Crust Colonialists? Is there something in American history that unconsciously positioned *WHC* to chart its particular course of abject ridicule?

Granted, Carrey did not write the script. As far as I was able to determine, there were seven “script supervisors” (whatever this means) and the writer/director Steve Oedekerck reportedly was Carrey’s friend. I am shocked that none of these people, apparently, were overly concerned with offensive stereotypes, of denigrating women, or of deriding gays, e.g., when Ace knocks out an effeminate man at a cocktail party and “wears” him like a fur stole after the man’s female companion tells Ace to “Enjoy the fruits of nature!” Carrey, however, does have a bit of artistic pull, and he could have demanded revisions in the script.

(4) Marshall Fine of the “Gannet News Service” 9 November 1995 writes regarding stereotypes: “There were also plenty of culture-clash jokes pitting Ace’s crude and obnoxious ways against the tribal customs of both the tribes.” The question arises: “Does this critic suggest that *When Nature Calls* accurately represents African tribal culture?” It is not apparent to the reader that Mr. Fine recognizes the constructed nature of the film’s African

setting. Moreover, Fine makes no reference to the absurdity of the film's portrayal of African "tribal customs." The reader is left to imagine that African tribes might, indeed, spit in each other's face as a pleasant form of greeting one another.

(5) Jeff Miller of "The Houston Chronicle" 10 November 1995 writes, in the "Weekend Review:"

"The first thing you might want to ask me about "Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls" is the same question that Lawrence Olivier posed to Dustin Hoffman in *The Marathon Man*: "Is it safe?" Yes, it is, in that there are no diarrhea jokes here, although the movie's title opens the door to that possibility."

From a political perspective, *WNC* is not "safe"—far from it. *When Nature Calls* is a vehicle for sexism, homophobia and racism. It is a conduit to the preservation of hatred and social injustice and it furthers the immorality of negative cultural dispositions toward those who are marginal. Miller does not even mention stereotypes. This is inexcusable for a conscientious film critic. Obviously, politics did not enter Miller's mind.

(6) Michael Wilmington of the "Chicago Tribune" 10 November 1995 writes, in Friday's Guide to Movie & Music:

"Shamelessness? Mind-boggling? Dumber than dumb? Luridly Freudian? Those words don't even begin to describe "When Nature Calls," a sequel to last year's 'Ace Ventura' that makes the original bad-taste smash hit look like a Merchant-Ivory version of 'Lassie Come Home'—even though 'When Nature Calls' has Merchant-Ivory-style actors."

Apparently, the "shamelessness" which Wilmington addresses has to do with the "excretions and secretions" that one views on-screen, since Wilmington writes of these, but not of the

racist portrayal of Africans, since he only passingly refers to stereotypes in his review. He adds:

“If all that [summary of the plot] sounds like a lot of shikaka, the movie doesn’t disappoint you. It even includes a long gag sequence—the word is doubly appropriate here—where Ace and the tribal leaders expectorate all over each other, spitting in your face apparently being the traditional greeting of the Whachatis [an African tribe].”

From a political perspective, “spitting in your face” becomes an apt metaphor to vilify people of color. For example, people of color could be called “criminals” in that they “spit in the face of the law.” People of color love welfare, they “spit in the face” White America’s Protestant work ethic. People of color do not maintain family structure, they “spit in the face” of “family values.” Hardly anything is ever mentioned about economic conditions, the history of slavery and its long-term psycho-social effects on African-American families. People of color could be said to “spit in the face” common decency and Christian morality when they engage in promiscuous sex, drug abuse, etc. In other words, “spitting in your face” becomes a catch-all term to define people of color as Others who disrespect decent White values and ideals.

(7) Eleanor Ringel of “The Atlanta Journal and Constitution” of 10 November 1995

writes in the Preview Section (P. 9):

Only someone as certifiably loony as Carrey could mess around with the delicate (and often degrading) racial residue of old jungle-movie cliches (right down to tribal rituals and an elephant cavalry) and get away with it.

Somehow “jungle-movie cliches” doesn’t sound as bad as “vulgar stereotypes.” “Messing around” doesn’t sound as bad as “perpetuating racism.” Why do I feel like I am forced to swim a channel of euphemisms? Is ours a culture so deeply racist, sexist, ageist and homophobic that popular press film critics would not recognize prejudice if, like an angry dog, it bit them on their proverbial butts?

(8) Kenneth Turin of the “Los Angeles Times” 10 November 1995 writes in a review titled “Nature Calls, Carrey Answers” printed in Part F Entertainment Desk (Page 1):

“As those two names make obvious [he is referring to the Wachatis and Wachootos African tribes of *When Nature Calls*], this is very much a cartoon Africa, an out-of-date caricature of the continent...”

Is that all? An “out-of-date caricature?”

Mainstream critics, at least those I read, were impervious to the racial politics of *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*. I picked this film because of its blatant racism, (hetero)sexism and classism. Clearly, we need a plan for critiquing narrative films that does not ignore political issues.

When *Chasing Amy* Turns Into *Chasing Insecure Sex Roles*

We now turn our attention to mainstream reviews of *Chasing Amy*. Again, I will demonstrate that too many popular press critics did not look under the waterline for the enormous heteronormative politics in this film. I did not do an *extensive* review of critical responses to *Chasing Amy* because that is somewhat beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Nevertheless, the fact that the following critics ignored sexual politics while reviewing a film ostensibly about sexuality is quite disturbing.

(1) Jay Carr, staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, April 11, 1997, Friday, City Edition, writes in the Arts & Film Section the following “intertextual” comment:

While retaining the earlier films’ scatological frankness, it deepens the exploration, begun in “*Clerks*,” of a young man’s insecurity and fear of women’s sexuality and experience.

Indeed, it is much easier to see the (hetero)sexism in *Chasing Amy* when one also considers the sexism in Smith’s other two films, *Clerks* and *Mall Rats*. A pattern emerges in the context of the “intertextuality” of Smith’s so-called “New Jersey Trilogy.” Moreover, when one considers American culture as context, the psychological effect of blatant heteronormativity is accentuated to the point where *Chasing Amy* is undeniably a (hetero)sexist film. Gays and lesbians are denied basic civil rights all across these United States. Carr continues with,

[*Chasing Amy’s*] political incorrectness represents bravery as well as honesty in remaining true to its protagonist’s macho narrowness. Never do you doubt that “*Chasing Amy*” is first and foremost about male hang-ups.

At least, Carr recognizes the “political incorrectness” of *Chasing Amy*. That is a very good first step. But to apparently dismiss this “political incorrectness” as the “bravery” and “honesty” of the film’s protagonist (or even its writer) is to essentially de-politicize *Chasing Amy’s* heteronormative discourse. Any film, from a “political” standpoint, represents, in some ways if not many ways, the culture within which it was produced. The values and

ideals of the protagonists become something of a cultural voice, if the film does not expressly (or in some other way) demonstrate that the protagonist is perhaps a “tragic hero” of sorts.

Even so, one might very well cogently argue that “tragic heroes” represent the “heroic” side of human frailty. One could argue, then, that “failure” or “success” makes no difference to our *conditioned acceptance* of “heroes” in narrative art. Put differently, we have been historically conditioned to accept protagonists as a s/heroes. No wonder some youngsters “inexplicably” engage in *very* irresponsible or *very* dangerous behavior they see in movies. Furthermore, social psychologists have discovered that John F. Kennedy was more popular after his “failure” at the so-called “Bay of Pigs” invasion than before. There is, apparently more to “failure” than first meets the eye. For “failure” to represent a clear political statement by the filmmaker, it probably should be failure that occurs “external” to the protagonist, that is, a movie about Nazi intolerance should be seen from the eyes of someone who is Jewish (e.g., *La Vita E Bella*).

(2) Jeff Miller, staff writer for “The Houston Chronicle” April 11, 1997, Friday, 2 Star Edition, the Weekend Review Section, page 5, makes the following comments in his review:

[Smith’s] dialogue actually resonates with characters trying to figure out things in the idiom in which they are comfortable.

“Ridicule” seems to be this “idiom.” Unfortunately, *ridicule* seems to be an integral part of the comical coolness of American culture from *The Bowery Boys* to *The Simpsons*, although

The Bowery Boys made fun (ridiculed) “neutral” characters as opposed to those who were traditionally marginal. Miller adds that,

Smith’s protagonists, males of his age group, treasure coolness above all. The cool cannot be shocked. Much of the humor of *Chasing Amy* derives from how young men struggle to appear cool while they’re having their timbers shivered.

One could state that Bill Cosby is adept at maneuvering between the “struggle to appear cool” while he is having his “timbers shivered,” but Cosby relinquished his human frailty without (for the most part) “ridiculing” others. We must tip our hats to his comedic savior *faire* even if he did not adequately address racial issues in his popular TV sitcom.

Finally, Miller appeals to the “reality” of *Chasing Amy*’s filmic discourse:

This is going to end badly,” says Banky, who ultimately tries to sabotage his friend’s new friendship. Eventually, Bank has to ask himself why what he feels about Alyssa looks an awful lot like pure jealousy. The fact is, this will end badly only if you expect it to click into the slots of the typical boy-meets-girl Hollywood template. The characters do go through some bad patches, but they’re young and they’ll heal. The film’s bittersweet ending feels a lot more like real life than it does the movies.

Chasing Amy’s “bittersweet ending” is typical gay bashing when viewed in the expanded historical context of Hollywood’s ugly homophobia (e.g., gays overwhelmingly die in narrative art) and America’s intolerance of homosexuality (e.g., the lack of civil rights, gay bashings, etc.).

(3) Mike Clark, writing for *USA TODAY*, April 11, 1997, Friday, Final Edition, Life Section, Page 4D, makes the following comment:

Inauspiciously billed as Part 3 of writer/director Smith's "New Jersey trilogy," *Amy* is actually a rowdy romance about a straight guy named Holden (Ben Affleck) who falls hard for Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), a gay woman with a sexual past both heavy and hetero. . . . burden is on the actors to make us accept Alyssa's decision to love Holden against her inclinations.

Clark accepts the "premise" of the movie without challenging its heteronormative discourse.

True, Clark recognized the "challenge" facing the actors, but that is not enough.

(4) In the *Daily Variety* of January 29, 1997, Wednesday, Review Section, one reads

the following comments:

The story of a young man's attempt at romance with a self-professed lesbian, this spring Miramax release will be a tricky sell: some gays and lesbians will undoubtedly decry it. . . . Smith pivots his yarn on two central intimate questions: The possibility of a confirmed lesbian's crossing over to begin a serious affair with a man, and the ability of that man to deal with the woman's extensive sexual past . . . [the] film comes off as a completely honest attempt to cope with edgy sexual politics from a hetero, if rather callow, perspective.

Given the "racy" dialogue, the aggressive sexuality, the "street smartness" of Holden, the macho protagonist, doesn't anyone find *his inability to accept premarital sex* in a rowdy woman he sees dancing and singing in a throbbing nightclub a bit unrealistic? *Chasing Amy* is anything but "honest." It proposes two political scenarios: (1) that a lesbian would convert if she got a good "deep dicking" [dialogue from the script], and (2) that a man who "talks the talk" doesn't "walk the walk," that your above average "sexually inexperienced white male" who knows at least the dialogue of sexual excess is so pure and squeaky clean that he cannot accept his true love's "sexual indiscretions"—sleeping with two guys. A bit further, we read:

[*Chasing Amy*] opens at a Gotham comic-book convention, where best friends Holden (Ben Affleck) and Bank (Jason Lee) are signing copies of their popular “Bluntman & Chronic.” Providing a taste of the political irreverence to come is the appearance of black cartoonist Hooper (Dwight Ewell), who is first seen delivering a militant diatribe against the way minorities have been portrayed in comic books, only to reveal himself privately as a campy, acerbic queen who tends bar at the femme-slanted Meox Mix club.

On one level we have a black man (Hooper) looking for racism in all the wrong places. On another level we have the political picture of a black man going *ape*-shit attacking prejudice. And, on a third level we resolve this situation with the “black fag of a fool” (the film’s positioning of Hooper) representing the epitome of “queerness.” The Nazi of yesteryear ridiculed those who did not fit into the “master plan,” let us, Dear God, not follow their nefarious footsteps into a menacing immoral future. The Nazis despised homosexuals.

The script for *Chasing Amy* unfortunately and rather ominously reveals its “master plan.” On page 184 we read: “Hooper fills the frame. He comes off like a typical, pro-Black/anti-White homeboy.” How are we to understand “*typical* pro-Black/anti-White homeboy?” Are *all* homeboys pro-Black/anti-White? The ambiguity may, in fact, be a Freudian slip that reveals more unconscious racism than sloppy writing. Hooper’s dialogue, fantastic as it seems, says something very political about how the audience is to view him:

HOOPER

Now my book, *White-Hating Coon*, doesn’t have any of that bullshit. The hero’s name is Maleeka, and he’s a descendant of a black tribe that established the first society on the planet, while all you European motherfuckers were still hiding in caves and shit, all terrified of the sun. He’s a strong role model that a young black reader can look up to. ‘Cause I’m here to tell you—the chickens are comin’ home to roost, ya’ll: The black man’s

no longer gonna play the minstrel in the medium of comics and Sci-Fi/Fantasy! We're keeping it real, and we're gonna get respect—by any means necessary!

The references to Malcolm X's discourse (e.g., "chickens coming home to roost," and "by any means necessary") set the tone by juxtaposing militant black leadership against the buffoonery of black homosexuality (as seen through the filmmaker's eyes). That Hooper titles his book, *White-Hating Coon*, suggests two psycho-social implications: (1) Smith's (conscious or unconscious) disdain for militant black male leadership and (2) the inherent stupidity of blacks. The title seems to define the character. In this respect, it is vulgar racism at its worse. Probably unconscious, but vicious nevertheless.

Ignoring racism will not cause it to disappear. The subconscious is a vital force for "political" effect. Critics who ultimately ignore politics are ultimately ignorant political critics. They plod along paths of self-righteousness without whimpering at the trials of the disenfranchised. That Hooper's dialogue emphasizes the non-traditional name of the "hero"—Maleeka—further ridicules the struggle Blacks engage to reclaim social dignity by tracing their historical roots. Moreover, it is no coincidence that Holden, the white protagonist, interrupts Hooper's diatribe.

HOLDEN
(Calling out)

That's a bunch of bullshit! Lando Calrissian was a black man,
and he got to fly the *Millenium Falcon*!

HOOPER *whips his head around, looking for the source of the comment.*

HOOPER

Who said that?

HOLDEN
(Standing)

I did! Lando Calrissian is a positive black role model in the realm of Science Fiction/Fantasy.

That Lando Calrissian plays “second fiddle” as a “hero,” that he *gets to fly* the *Millenium Falcon*, suggests a natural order to the universe in which Blacks play a secondary, if not tertiary, role. The continuing dialogue suggests that it is absurd for cultural critics to attack cherished popular culture such as the *Star Wars* trilogy, which by implication could *never* ingrain narration an iconography with shades and tones of racism.

HOOPER

Fuck Lando Calrissian! Uncle Tom nigger! Always some white boy gotta invoke “the holy trilogy”! Bust this—those movies are about how the white man keeps the brother down—even in a galaxy far, far away. Check this shit: You got Cracker farmboy Luke Skywalker; Nazi poster boy—blond hair, blue eyes. And then you’ve got Darth Vader: the blackest brother in the galaxy. Nubian God.

From the very beginning, Smith opened up the possibility that neo-Nazism might speak, subconsciously of course, through Hooper when Smith had Hooper title his new comic book “White-Hating Coon.” When Hooper states: “Fuck Lando Calrissian! Uncle Tom nigger!” we hear a Neo-Nazi voice of reason. We hear the recovery of the racism through the appropriation of dialogue.

Smith, of course, makes no reference to the long-standing iconographic tradition of “White is good” in Hollywood and “Black is bad.” Decontextualized, Hooper’s argument

appears false, contrived, artificial—even silly! And, this is exactly the point, decontextualization makes resistance a foolhardy enterprise.

The script continues as follows:

BANKY

What's a Nubian?

HOOPER

Shut the fuck up! Now, Vader, he's a spiritual brother, with the Force and all that shit. Then this cracker Skywalker gets his hands on a light-saber, and the boy decides he's gonna run the fucking universe—gets a whole *Klan* of whites together, and they're gonna bust up Vader's 'hood—the Death Star. Now what the fuck do you call that?

BANKY

Intergalactic Civil War?

HOOPER

Gentrification. They're gonna drive out the black element, to make the galaxy quote, unquote safe for white folks.

HOLDEN

But Vader turns out to be Luke's father. And, in *Jedi*, they become friends.

HOOPER

Don't make me bust a cap in your ass, yo! *Jedi's* the most insulting installment, because Vader's beautiful, black visage is sullied when he pulls off his mask to reveal a feeble, crusty old white man! They're trying to tell us that deep inside, we all want to be white!

BANKY

Well, isn't that true?

HOOPER explodes. He pulls a nine millimeter from his belt, draws on BANKY and fires. BANKY goes down, falling forward into the crowd. The crowd screams and starts to scatter. HOOPER jumps over the table and raises his fists in the air.

HOOPER

BLACK RAGE! BLACK RAGE! I'LL KILL ANY WHITE FOLKS I
LAY MY MOTHERFUCKIN' EYES ON!

It's hard to imagine a more racist scene, other than, perhaps, a black man raping a white woman or killing an innocent white child and eating its heart. Perhaps, the typical western in which First Nation People slaughter innocent settlers for no apparent reason other than to satisfy their inherent savage inclinations might be more racist.

First, one must consider the subtle fact that Hooper's "argument" about the irreproachable *Star Wars* trilogy *somehow makes sense*, it is not so absurd that one actually finds oneself puzzling over its meaning. *This*, in itself, points to the possibility that Hooper's "unrealistic analysis" may be a *subconscious rendition of racism* spoken through a *white* writer's most blatantly bigoted *black* character. Second, that *it makes sense* should kick us into a mode of cultural analysis that reaches beneath the surface level of our traditional political consciousness.

If, in America, black has taken on evil connotations, then the fact that Darth Vader wears a *black* military outfit *is* politically significant! The fact that the Evil Emperor wears *red* *is* politically significant in a society that has, for so many years, dealt with a "red scare" and sees its life-long enemy as "reds," or "pinkoes." That Vader is a white guy gone bad, dressed in black, *is* politically significant because it is socially symbolic of the supposed infectious quality of blackness. When one re-contextualizes the argument, when one erases social amnesia, the existential rays of political significance shines through. What Kevin

Smith has really achieved is to play out the fantasies of white supremacist logic, to unearth the “oppressor conscious” in his own subconscious mind.

Should he be castigated (or castrated) for writing this scene? Certainly not. Because, as Freire suggests, we *all* need to develop a “critical consciousness”—it is not *entirely* our fault that we inherited a very specific culture with very specific hatreds and wont’s. As Heidegger suggested, we are “beings-in-the-world.” Third, “Black Rage” refers to the Long Island shooter who went crazy, firing his weapon at innocent passengers on the Long Island Rail Road. This reference further underlines Neo-Nazi notions that Blacks are innately violent.

(5) In a headline titled “‘Chasing’ Is Simply Charming; A Young Man Falls For Wrong Woman—She’s A Lesbian,” Courant Film Critic Malcolm Johnson, of “The Hartford Courant,” April 18, 1997, Connecticut Living Section, Page E3, Statewide Edition, makes the following observations:

“Chasing Amy” moves from the flippant to the sincere as Holden vainly pursues Alyssa, who demonstrates her preference for members of her own sex by planting a long kiss on the eager lips of a hungry-looking vixen named Kim. Holden, invited to a club through the thorny, witty Hooper, is stunned by Alyssa’s bold declaration of lesbianism. But he is drawn to her anyway, like “The Blue Angel’s” Lola Lola’s moth to a flame. For a time, the two are friends—until, on one dark and stormy night, Holden can no longer stand the platonic way. Now “Chasing Amy” takes a sharp turn, which may not be entirely credible.

Where does *credibility* lose or find its way in a Kevin Smith movie?

(6) “The Toronto Star” of November 29, 1997, Saturday, Final Edition, Starweek Section, Page SW42, has this to say:

Chasing Amy: Clerks and Mallrats auteur Kevin Smith's offbeat love story follows the friendship of two comic-book artists (Ben Affleck and Joey Lauren Adams). Equal parts gentle romance and pop-culture comedy, this is Smith's best movie to date - with risky sexual politics that give the story surprising resonance.

Are the politics "risky" because the author of this statement suspects that they will offend? As far as being "equal parts gentle romance and pop-culture comedy," the language and framing of sexual relationships in Smith's movies are anything but "gentle romance," unless one were used to drunken orgies with a hundred or so of Hell's Finest Angels. Perspective matters, I guess.

(7) Janet Maslin, while reviewing another movie for "the New York Times," makes the following comment in the Friday, Late Edition, Section C, Page 19, Column 1 of the Weekday Desk, April 25, 1997:

It's certainly possible to make a smart, knowing film about role-playing and shifting sexual orientation—"Chasing Amy" for instance—but "All Over Me" is content to drift and mumble.

I would not have referred to *Chasing Amy* as a "smart, knowing" film. It does not politically deal with shifting sexual orientation, otherwise its white male protagonist would have had sex with another guy, not an avowed lesbian.

(8) Mark Caro, Staff Writer for the "Chicago Tribune," April 18, 1997, Friday, North Sports Final Edition, Page F; Zone: CN; Movies, writes the following:

Smith is not trying to titillate in "Chasing Amy." He's not even necessarily trying to provoke, at least not in a confrontational way. Instead, he's simply putting issues of sex and sexuality on the table and dealing with them in a matter-of-factness that may be common in intimate real-life conversations but

certainly not on screen. This small-scale, low-budget movie is defined by an honest searching quality. . . . Smith could stop right there [with the straight-guy lesbian love angle] and have the basis for a breezy relationship comedy, but he probes further: into Holden's greater difficulty reconciling himself to Alyssa's previous heterosexual experiences than her gay ones; into the repressed-gay overtones of Banky's jealousy of Alyssa; and into the nature of Alyssa's homosexuality itself—whether it's an innate trait or a position she has adapted through years of being “an experimental girl.”

An honest searching quality? Only an ordinary consciousness would perceive such a thing. Whether Alyssa's homosexuality is an innate trait or “a position she has adapted through years of being ‘an experimental girl’” is politically “resolved” through both the protagonist's thoughts and actions and Alyssa's sexual complicity. Clearly, Alyssa's having sex with Holden, on a subconscious level, speaks to the pornographically revisited male fantasy of a virulent male “converting” an avowed lesbian. The issue, for this film, is somewhat “resolved” as follows—homosexuality is a position one adapts through years of experimental sex. We, as the audience, have no significant narrative information to prove otherwise. Here, Bordwell's inferences work well. The conclusion that homosexuality is simply a matter of “preference” is overwhelmingly stated through the principle characters' behaviors, to mention nothing of their dialogue. Chalk one up for the “science” side of political film criticism.

(9) Eleanor Ringel in the Preview Section, Page 13P, of “The Atlanta Journal and Constitution” of April 11, 1997 makes the following observations:

Welcome to “Chasing Amy,” a terrific comedy/drama about girl trouble, boy trouble, and every imaginable trouble in between. Writer-director Kevin Smith has done the seemingly impossible: He's pulled off a smart, heartfelt Gen-X romance that doesn't come off as contrived, complacent or cloned .

. . . [*Chasing Amy*] is a savvy, no-holds-barred romantic roundelay with lengthy ruminations on love in all its varied permutations—gay, straight, bisexual, gay-with-straight, just-friends-repressed, etc. And none of it's rendered in a self-consciously hip, shrugged-off manner. Smith has a way with dialogue and characters that are as honest as it is funny, as challenging as it is from the heart.

Chasing Amy comes not so much from the “heart” as it comes from the “political subconscious.” And, it is not a film about “love in all its varied permutations” because we do not see happy, *normal* gay love in *Chasing Amy*. We see a heterosexual white male “straighten out” a white lesbian lover. We see two close male friends “flirt” with gay sex, although this “flirtation” certainly seems to be more of a “joke” than an actual, out-of-the-closet foray. Finally, let us turn to Smith’s own comments about the film.

(10) In the April 13, 1997 Arts & Entertainment Section of the “Chicago Tribune,” Page 15; Zone C; Movies, Mark Caro apparently interviews Kevin Smith and Joey Lauren Adams:

Talk about walking into a hornet’s nest: In “*Chasing Amy*,” director Kevin Smith depicts gay tendencies in straight men and straight tendencies in a lesbian, and he based the movie’s central conflict on his then-rocky relationship with his girlfriend. And he cast the girlfriend, Joey Lauren Adams, as the female lead. “I certainly didn’t want to stir a (expletive) storm,” the 26-year-old writer/director said before unveiling the movie at January’s Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. “I just wanted to talk about some topics that I found interesting.” “It’s odd to see it up there, Adams, 29, said of the relationship’s depiction on screen. “I feel slightly invaded. But I think if he hadn’t written the movie, we would have broken up.” Instead, Smith and Adams are still together, “*Chasing Amy*” opens Friday, and Smith’s career seems back on track after 1995’s failed farce “*Mallrats*.”

The heteronormative appeal of the political events of *Chasing Amy* (a straight guy “dethrones” a lesbian) sets a macho tone which is, narratively speaking, pathetically homophobic. Continuing, we read:

Homosexual themes, which include the suggestion that Holden’s gay-hostile collaborator Bank (Jason Lee) may be fixated on him, do spring from Smith’s view that sexual identities are slippery. “It’s just not easily defined and shouldn’t necessarily be,” he said. “What fascinates me was that it’s personally acceptable if two girls who are very good friends slip one night and get ‘gay’ with each other. Everyone thinks it’s cute. If you have two guys and that same situation happens, people freak: ‘What, are you gay all of a sudden?’”

The “political” contradiction here is that Smith’s interview does not match his projections. The narrative does not unfold in a way that principally demonstrates that “sexual identities are slippery.” If they were “slippery” (in a way that wasn’t blatantly heteronormative), instead of a straight guy “deep dicking” a lesbian, the male lead, Holden, would “deep dick” his buddy, Bank. Now, that would open a *real* “hornet’s nest” in the present political climate! A “straight” filmmaker shooting such a film would be truly “progressive,” worthy of the accolades that Smith garnered from the popular press.

To his credit, Mark Caro does bring up the “straight-guy-deep-dicking-a-lesbian-for-her-own-good” hetero-imaginative fantasy:

In the movie Alyssa adamantly identifies herself as gay until she becomes involved with Holden, at which time she says she has chosen to be with a man on her own terms [Bravo! Gasp!]. Smith’s writing and Adam’s emotional performance are convincing on this point, but one can envision someone accusing Smith of playing the old tune that what a lesbian really needs is a good man. “*I think if you go in viewing this movie from the head, there’s a lot of potholes, a lot of political issues that can pop up*,” Smith said.

“But if you go in viewing from the heart, you won’t really have that problem.” [my emphasis]

Unfortunately, the art and science of *political* film criticism does not allow critics to disengage politics as Smith suggests. Politics are our primary interest because politics determine right from wrong, power from disenfranchisement. So, hyper-political cultural critics focus on the “heart” *and* the “head.”

What Smith means by the “heart” is apparently the white supremacist patriarchal “national psyche” that informs his creative imagination. If we allow ourselves to float through life without *seriously* reflecting on our cultural inheritance, then we will probably enjoy *Chasing Amy*. If we *think* about our “thrownness,” if we challenge the film, if we afterwards uncover its subconscious politics, we will certainly not have the thrill of our lives.

Finally, I will address what the script *could* have been about. Let us return to Caro’s interview/critique:

“Chasing Amy” initially was going to be a PG-13 movie about a high-school lesbian in love with an older woman, but as Smith reworked the script, Adams said she slowly became aware that he was writing about them. “Those are the fights we should have had that we didn’t,” said the actress with the little girl’s voice that can rise to a rage. She added that she cried when she read Holden’s declaration of love to Alyssa, and, no, she never read other passages and threw the script at Smith’s head. “How could I?” she asked. “If he made the Holden character out to be some sort of hero and smart guy, I probably would have broken up with him. But his whole point is Holden is stupid for not being able to get past this.”

There are two politically valid responses to this analysis. One, the protagonist is *always* heroic, given the Hollywood tradition of storytelling and, indeed, the intra-cultural and

intertextual tradition of global story telling. Two, if Holden were indeed a “tragic hero,” we would see him, at a later stage of his life, perhaps, alone, fatigued, desperate and dying. No such thing happens. Given Hollywood’s cookie-cutter tradition of endless happy endings, audiences are culturally conditioned to imagine or project a “happy ending” in which Holden meets a “real” woman, marries her and lives a contented heteronormative life. As for Alyssa, the heteronormative hope is that she will eventually be “deep-dicked” by a guy who can forgive her “sordid” past.

“Women suck,” this film seems to say—both literally and figuratively—when one considers the blatant misogyny of its “sister films” in Smith’s *The New Jersey Trilogy*. From the politics of intersubjective morality, *Chasing Amy* is as far from being ‘a smart, knowing film about role-playing and shifting sexual orientation’ as one can get without falling into the misogynist sway of vulgar slasher flicks. In some ways, both *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* and *Chasing Amy* parrot Neo-Nazi politics and serve their audiences round plates of ridicule that the Führer would find politically palatable if he were alive today.

Film is unquestionably a “politics of choice” wherein filmmakers *choose* what they put on the silver screen, or those who pay them *choose* what we see. But this choice is often ignored by those who watch films and those who afterwards critique them. For example, a friend of mine, whom I will call “Allen,” recently argued that Kevin Smith’s *Chasing Amy* is actually “a pro-lesbian film.” He argued that its politics is not in any way sexist or even heterosexist. I, of course, begged to differ. *Chasing Amy* is, in many ways, homophobia at its ambiguous worse. Holden, a heterosexual white male, which we will for simplicity’s sake

define as one who has not had sex with a man, *chases* Alyssa (not Amy, who refers to another “character”), who is gay. Some dialogue should straighten out just how gay Alyssa thinks she is:

HOLDEN

It’s unfair that I’m in love with you?

ALYSSA

No, it’s unfortunate that you’re in love with me. It’s unfair that you felt the fucking need to unburden your soul about it. Do you remember for a fucking second who I am?

HOLDEN

So? People change.

ALYSSA

Oh, it’s that simple? You fall in love with me and want a romantic relationship, nothing changes for you with the exception of feeling hunky-dory all the time. But what about me? It’s not that simple, is it? I can’t just get into a relationship with you without throwing my whole fucking world into upheaval!

HOLDEN

But that’s every relationship! There’s always going to be a period of adjustment.

ALYSSA

Period of adjustment?!?

(Hitting him)

THERE’S NO “PERIOD OF ADJUSTMENT,” HOLDEN! I’M FUCKING GAY! THAT’S WHO I AM! AND YOU ASSUME I CAN TURN ALL THAT AROUND JUST BECAUSE YOU’VE GOT A FUCKING CRUSH?

Holden and Alyssa copulate in this so-called “pro-lesbian” movie. Later in the script, Holden asks Alyssa: “Can I at least tell people that all you needed was some serious deep-dicking?” By not recognizing *choice*, my friend “Allen” was able to convince himself that *Chasing*

Amy, from a political standpoint, is a pro-lesbian film. But it is decidedly *not*, when one fully considers poetic license or “choice.”

One who is critically conscious would rather easily recognize we are responsible for which choices we make. A cultural context of pervasive homophobia is presently (notwithstanding recent improvements in this context) a major psychological artery which feeds the largely subconscious “choices” that some filmmakers make so that their films might outwardly appear to be egalitarian but latently portray prejudice, intolerance and discrimination.

To sidestep the issue of “free will,” the issue of “choice” when analyzing films, I suggest, is to invite an a-political critique of narrative art, which is really, in my paradigm, a *very biased analysis*. In other words, one probably cannot *politically* analyze a narrative film if one does not first acknowledge or hypothesize (and keep ever-present in his or her mind) that any given film might have been shot *differently*. For example, “Allen” argued that *Chasing Amy* is primarily about relationships, which in a sense it is. However, that a *male* has a sexual relationship with one who professes to be a *lesbian* is presently politically significant since we live in a period of time when lesbians cannot get same-sex health benefits, etc. That this *male* “straightens” her out (pun intended), even momentarily, says something *political* about one’s being a lesbian in the late 1900’s.

Not surprisingly, when I questioned one of my graduate friends, “Elissa,”(name changed) who *is* lesbian, about my hyper-political critique of *Chasing Amy*, she disagreed with me, saying that, “*Chasing Amy* is not sexist and certainly not (hetero)sexist simply

because Alyssa [a lesbian] has had sex with two guys before she knew she was a lesbian and because she slept with a guy. It happens all the time.” “Elissa” is, of course, politically correct. But there is a major problem with Elissa’s critique of a profoundly (hetero)sexist film. To examine narrative films from a hyper-political perspective, one *must* consider prejudice, intolerance and discrimination against women, especially against lesbians. One must consider historical, political, economic and social context. Elissa’s a-political critique does not consider that what may be believable, what may appear quite natural for characters to do or say on the silver screen or in “real” life has to be measured up against the *fantasies and the imaginations* of those who oppress women as well as the political, social and economic practices that oppress women. Mediated art is representation; it is not “reality.” When “reality” is projected on the screen, it becomes representation and as such it transforms social “reality” into symbolic interaction.

Freire (1995) argues that,

Manipulation, sloganizing, “depositing,” regimentation, and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are components of the praxis of domination. In order to dominate, the dominator has no choice but to deny true praxis to the people, deny them the right to say their own word and think their own thoughts. He and she cannot act dialogically; for to do so would mean either that they had relinquished their power to dominate and joined the cause of the oppressed, or had lost that power through miscalculation.⁵

Similarly, the “sloganizing” of porno flicks—a particularly vicious form of (hetero)sexist discourse—cannot be part and parcel of moral art. Moreover, the oppressor’s “art” can never

become revolutionary moral praxis when it instantiates the latent vulgar pleasures of macho hedonism.

What happens on the silver screen must be juxtaposed against prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. That many porno flicks portray lesbians making love and so-called hetero(sexist) males enjoy this *fantasy*, speaks volumes about what is oppressive to women. From a psychological point-of-view, that which gels with the *fantasies* of the oppressor is hardly likely to be anything but profoundly repulsive to those seeking revolutionary social and moral praxis. So, when Holden momentarily “converts” Alyssa, an outspoken lesbian, it is not a question of whether this is possible in real life or whether or not this has happened to friends that we all know, it is a question of symbolic social interaction—*representation*. Why does Alyssa, a lesbian, *have* to sleep with a man in *Chasing Amy*? As a screenwriter, I would answer, “She does not *have* to do any such thing.” As a *meta-critic*, I would add that, given our historical moment—that of intense homophobia (gay bashings in every major city) and political wrangling to deny gays and lesbians civil rights—*Chasing Amy* is really a male fantasy about conquering a lesbian. Moreover, *Chasing Amy* demonstrates that lesbians, in a sense, do not exist, that lesbianism is simply a matter of a “preferential life style” that narratively fades away in the presence of a very “likeable guy” (from the film’s perspective) named Holden.

Both “Allen” and “Elissa” experienced difficulty discerning the (hetero)sexist politics of *Chasing Amy* because they are fettered to Plato’s Cave. In the Parable of the Cave, remember that Socrates sought to illustrate how philosophers could lead prisoners out of the

cave of their perceived biases into an even larger (and truer) world outside their previously known and horrendously oppressive “reality.” Until the prisoners had witnessed this *new* social “reality,” they could hardly imagine how “misled” they had been by their senses. Similarly, political film critics, as well as the multicultural educators, must somehow unshackle inherited values and ideals from students’ minds if these prisoners of inherited culture are to glimpse the “real” world of multiconditional politics in narrative film.

“Allen” and “Elissa” are like many students (and mainstream film critics) who have not yet escaped the fetters of Western Inherited Culture, a culture whose world hypothesis is that each event, each film, is a unit unto itself. When “Allen” and “Elissa” someday come to see each film as but one page in a continuously running, albeit sometimes ambiguous, sometimes coherent social text of their being-in-the-world, a text that includes both history and the political economy as well as the intertextuality of all films they have ever seen and every other aspect of symbolic social interaction, then they will have taken their first steps outside of Plato’s Cave.

Even so, their philosophical journey is not complete, for Socrates adds that,

one might be released [from bondage], and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round, and to walk and look towards the firelight; all this would hurt him, and he would be too dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what was a little more real? What if he were shown each of the passing things, and compelled by questions to answer what each one was? Don’t you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?⁶

And so, to become critically conscious, to become truly self-reflexive, one must engage in a very *radical* re-working of one's critical faculties.

The art and science of *political* film criticism, therefore, is to recognize that religious beliefs and moral issues *are*, in fact, political, that we cannot truly separate what is moral from what is political. It is to recognize that inherited values and ideals are, in a sense, cultural fetters which keep the eyes from seeing not only alternative social realities but the subtle narrative erasures or demonizing of those who are marginal. There is always a "rationale" for oppressing those who are marginal. Transrational analysis goes beyond what is "rational" and seeks to discover an intersubjective social "reality" that affords those who are marginal a democratic measure of political freedom. Indeed, a certain open-minded multi-perspectival or multicultural appreciation of "social reality" is crucial for one to transcend culturally-inherited definitions of what is "right" and what is "wrong."

A transrational approach considers that our knowledge of homosexuality is largely *political*. That is to say that, it is presumptuous for any of us to conclude that homosexuality is not a complex issue. Some individuals may be gay because they consciously choose to be gay. Others *may* not really have a conscious choice in the matter. Science cannot be sure on this point and may *never* be sure on this point. Others, still, may override biological proclivities with a strong or persistent "free will." However we examine this issue, philosophy rears its ugly head. To be transrational, we must follow the middle road, which is to accept that our knowledge is always incomplete, our judgments are always political. To be *truly* fair, to *transcend* some of our inherited biases (i.e., to be transrational), we must

accept that those who are gay or lesbian do not destroy humanity, that “being fruitful and multiplying” is still possible for those who are gay or lesbian. Women have allowed homosexual males to impregnate them for the express purposes of producing children to be raised in same-sex relationships. We *must consider* that to treat homosexuality as if it were a crime against nature is to demonize it and to politically oppress those who are marginal. Nature is what nature does. One set of values, in other words, should not, without severe intersubjective scrutiny, be imposed upon another set of values. Political film criticism requires a suspension of beliefs.

Moreover, hyper-political film critics look deeply into the politics of human sexuality. With this in mind, we turn to Cockerham (1992) who writes that, “homosexuality was considered a mental disorder by American psychiatrists until the early 1970s but is not considered such today.”⁷ That a “mental disorder” can be erased by medical consensus only adds fuel to my argument that everything, in a certain sense, is political. Cockerham concludes that,

In a social context, mental disorder is seen as a significant deviation from standards of behavior generally regarded as normal by a majority of people in a society. The relevance of this perspective for our understanding of mental disorder is that, even though a pathological mental condition is something that exists within the mind of an individual, the basis for determining whether or not a person is mentally ill often involves criteria that are also sociological. A psychiatric finding of generalized impairment in social functioning requires an understanding of such sociological concepts as norms, roles, and social status that establish and define appropriate behavior in particular social situations and settings. It is the disruption or disregard of the taken-for-granted understandings of how people should conduct themselves socially that causes a person’s state of mind to be questioned. Consequently, it is the overt expression of a person’s disordered thinking and activity as social

behavior that ultimately determines the need for psychiatric treatment in most cases.⁸

Similarly, gay clergy challenge many contemporary translations of the Bible, arguing that there wasn't even a word for "homosexuality" in biblical days—how could there then be, today, a moral injunction against homosexuality? Is it not political that modern translations have invented "homosexuality?"

Clearly, when one leaves Plato's Cave, one discovers very confusing moral landscapes. One gazes out across multiple horizons of meaning in which it is impossible to separate politics from religion, politics from psychotherapy, politics from nearly anything that we do socially. One discerns that there are muddied moral waters that surround continents of cultural expectations. For the first time, one notices that political tributaries feed great plateaus of narrative art and vast planted fields of social science.

To ignore context is to avoid politics in narrative films. To ignore the pervasive homophobia in Hollywood's history is to "misdiagnose" *Chasing Amy*. A truly *political* critique considers multidimensional contexts. So, when Holden "converts" Alyssa, then discovers later that she has had sex with several guys, we see the misogyny of the script—if we recognize the politics of *choice*, if we recognize that the filmmaker did not have to make Alyssa so sexually active, so much of a "slut," to use the script's own dialogue. The filmmaker did not *have* to portray a "straight-guy-in-love-with-a-'lesbian'" to address the theme of one partner becoming jealous of another's explorative sexual history. The

filmmaker did not have to portray a straight guy in love with a lesbian to deal with one partner learning to forgive another's "sordid" sexual history.

Those who stare at the shadows of "reality" in Plato's cave argue that since homosexuality is condemned by certain fundamentalist religions and various other religions, *Chasing Amy* is a *morally correct* political film, that my "political" analysis is not only *politically* flawed, it is *morally* flawed. However, even though I argue throughout this dissertation that *morality* is inseparable from *politics*, this does not translate to my following any *particular* spiritual mandate, except, perhaps, the politically safest spiritual mandate, that of unconditional love, such as: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself, but love God, who exists in all things, with all your heart." Profoundly homophobic or profoundly racist or profoundly (hetero)sexist individuals or groups are often profoundly *emotional* and cannot bring themselves to leave the affective comfort of years of social judgment, which they call "moral" judgment. These individuals simply cannot bring themselves to leave Plato's Cave. When and if they ever do leave the cave, it will surely be because their minds have undergone the transformation that I wrote about in Chapter Two.

Chasing Amy cannot, indeed should not, be examined without first understanding post-formal notions of unconditional love. Nor should *any* film be "politically" analyzed from anywhere but a transrational plane of moral inquiry. The art and science of *political* film criticism, therefore, is to step beyond, as much as is humanly practicable, one's moralistic subjectivity, to embrace an unconditional acceptance of others' rights to be "different." The art and science of political film criticism is to not only tolerate but to love

those who practice a variety of social prescriptions. With this in mind, we must conclude that past critical practices have been anything but transrationally and intersubjectively moral. The academy, to the extent that it has not addressed racial politics in its critical practices, is delinquent in its moral duty to “perfect the power to perceive.” As I have demonstrated in this chapter, it seems as though too many popular press film critics do not recognize their moral responsibilities. In other words, too many critics are still shackled in Plato’s Cave.

Footnotes

¹Morrison, Toni (1992) "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," New York: Vintage Books. P. 11.

²Hall, Calvin S. & Vernon J. Nordby (1973). A Primer of Jungian Psychology, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., p. 35.

³Hall & Nordby (1973), Ibid, p. 39.

⁴Giroux, Henry A. (1997). "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 67, No. 2 Summer, Page 290.

⁵Freire, Paulo (1995). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Continuum, Page 107.

⁶The Republic of Plato, Ibid, Page 373.

⁷Cockerham, William C. (1992). Sociology of Mental Disorder, Third Edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Page 3.

⁸Cockerham, William C. (1992), Ibid, Page 2.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING A FILM CRITIC

One cannot fully understand the movie process—the ways in which movies are made, and what they express about society—if you exclude their place in the political process. Not all movies are about politics, but then again not all movies are not about politics. The job of the inquirer is to specify those ways in which we can make valid inferences about movies as part of the political process.¹

James Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*

I see critics as bus drivers. They ferry the visitors round the City of Invention and stop the bus here or there, at whim, and act as guides.

Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice*

It is truly a very difficult task being a critic. “The test of a good critic,” says Samuel Butler, “is whether he knows when and how to believe on insufficient evidence.” As human beings we are always left in the unenviable position of having “insufficient evidence” for almost anything we believe. When we think, we generally toss around concepts or constructs, even if we do not call them such. These concepts and constructs are merely snapshots of the social universe that unfortunately leave out much of the “reality” that overdetermines media effects. It is all too easy, therefore, to remove politics from art as though one were Michelangelo and politics were useless chips of marble that drop to the floor. But this is far from being true. Politics are the ideas that move the hands that chisel and polish newly formed sculptures. Politics are the unseen thoughts that guide the mind to its ultimate visions. Art, if it is good, is the material manifestation of those visions.

The problem with cultural criticism is that we are often chiseled by the very same culture we try to sculpt. How then are we to discuss politics? How then are we to validate specific political critiques? One of the ways we can make “valid inferences about movies as part of the political process” is to constantly keep in mind the preeminent sites of local, if not international, political conflict. In the previous chapter I engaged (hetero)sexism and racism because these are the mental streets where political riots do nationally occur. A good critic does more than ferry visitors around the City of Invention, pointing out the hot spots. A good critic tells you who made the City of Invention and why people are protesting in front of the Capitol.

I lambasted certain mainstream critics in the preceding chapter for their apolitical responses to two very prejudicial films—*Chasing Amy* and *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*. In all fairness, though, I must say that mainstream film critics do not have an easy job. In John Simon’s (1967) “A Critical Credo” he compares film criticism to other forms of criticism and concludes that,

A book can be read slowly and reread. The painting usually though nowadays not always, stands still; it is also available in reproduction. Music places score, text (if there is one), and recordings into one’s hands. Even the ballet critic has the advantage of viewing and reviewing certain ballets over and over again, and thus knowing at least some of the staples of the repertoire practically by heart. In film, even where a printed script is obtainable, the critic depends on a few notes—often, because they have to be scribbled in haste and darkness, illegible—and on his evanescent memory of a fleeting experience.²

The art and science of *political* film criticism is much more than a “first-impression analysis” scribbled in the dark. It is an enlightened process that consumes the critic’s time, patience and self-reflexive capacities.

Bywater & Sobchack (1989) report that,

The film reviewer of a daily, limited by a deadline and by space, can usually do no more than synopsise a film’s plot, comment briefly on the production, and make a few general statements about a film’s worth. Such writing, though difficult to do well, is rarely critical and analytic in nature. But that does not mean criticism never exists. In fact, the most interesting side of the journalistic approach involves those writers whose work transcends the review function.³

If reviews appear to be little more than plot summaries, or if critiques are minimally “critical,” then the *potential* for films to serve ideological functions rises rather dramatically. In others words, a certain element of prejudice goes unchecked when cultural artifacts go unchallenged.⁴

In all fairness to popular press reviewers, Bywater & Sobchack (1989) point out that,

Film reviews appearing in a daily newspaper are usually written immediately after a film’s commercial release. They are, therefore, written for a nearly immediate deadline and do not allow the reviewer time to see the film more than once. The reviewer’s first impressions are the ones that count; the time for critical contemplation is limited. In addition, space is limited. Only so much room is allowed a daily newspaper review and the writer must, therefore, keep in mind the allotted space, first answering those questions the reader expects answered in a review and using the remainder of the space—if there is any—for other critical purposes.⁵

My hyper-political analysis of *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* took several days, considering that I first saw the film in a theater with an audience of white college students,

then I rented it and watched it over the course of four hours, replaying sections over and over, pausing here and there to make notes, etc., until I was “sure” of my intuitions, “sure” that I could defend my evolving impressions, “sure” that I was seeing more than what I was “culturally programmed” to see.

Such analysis is painstakingly slow, even though my intuitions were instantaneous and somewhat subconscious. For me, cogitation “proved” my intuitions and added substantive support to my critique. I find that since I have connected with my intuitions and researched my political views (even changed some in the process), I can more quickly draw in the net of intuitive impressions as I go about fishing for meaning in narrative films. The critical process has become so much quicker now as I sink lower and lower into my subconscious, the part of my mind that utilizes political symbols.

Some films may be so riddled with contradictions that hyper-political critics may not be able to present a clear and concise critique other than to say that the film perhaps engages in a “politics of diversion” wherein meaning is dispersed like grains of sand in a storm—one cannot make progress in any direction and hence one can do little to alter the status quo. In America, every film’s function is, therefore, political regardless of its content.

Kristen Thompson (1988) cautions that,

there is no such thing as film analysis without an approach. Critics do not go to films only to gather facts which they convey in pristine fashion to others. What we take to be the “facts” about a film will partly depend on what we assume films to consist of, how we assume people watch films, how we believe films relate to the world as a whole, and what we take the purpose of analysis to be. If we have not thought over our assumptions, our approach may be random and self-contradictory. But if we examine our assumptions,

we have at least a chance of creating a reasonably systematic approach to analysis.⁶

As post-formal thinkers, hyper-political cultural critics recognize that any type of an approach involves form, and as such form imports its own politics of abstraction.

Thompson (1988) continues by proposing that,

an aesthetic approach [as she uses it in *Breaking The Glass Armor*] refers to a set of assumptions about traits shared by different artworks, about procedures spectators go through in understanding all artworks, and about ways in which artworks relate to society. These assumptions are capable of being generalized and hence constitute at least a rough theory of art. The approach thus helps the analyst to be consistent in studying more than one artwork. [She adds that she considers] a *method* to be something more specific: a set of procedures employed in the actual analytical process.⁷

Clearly, either an “approach” or a “method” constitutes form and as such these *may* be crucial elements of cultural criticism to modernist critics but to transrational analysts, form is the chisel, intuition is the mallet that drives the chisel through stone. With chisel *and* mallet in hand, cultural critics can sculpt unimaginable “works of art.”

Throughout this dissertation I may suggest as well as imply both an approach and a method but the reader must continually bear in mind that my suggestions and the implications I raise might be likened to a “wax model” that the sculptor uses to give herself some ideas to start off her project. Once she has decided to create a work of art, the sculptor draws on an internal, unutterable reserve which captures the very essence of human *existence*. Transrational film criticism, therefore, considers Zen Buddhist notions of “right effort,” which embrace an understanding that one lives *without* goals, *without* objectives,

without form when one connects with the larger complexities of being human. As hyper-political cultural critics, therefore, we continually shift between form, background and holism. In other words, we *feel* the cultural artifact as much as we *think* about it.

Textual vs. Contextual Approaches

There are, as you probably already realize, many approaches to cultural criticism. Bywater & Sobchack (1989) divide *film* criticism into “textual approaches, which describe and analyze individual films”⁸ and “contextual approaches, which exam relations between films and the world outside the frame.”⁹ They conclude that. “for [film] criticism to have any meaning, there must first be the confrontation between *the individual consciousness* [my emphasis] and the matter revealed in the sights and sounds of a particular film. The experience of a film is the essential first step in the process of developing critical awareness, the aim of all discourse on film.”¹⁰ Theirs is a survey textbook and as such is not in the position to truly suggest one approach being better than any other. As to their claim that “the aim of all discourse on film is the development of a critical *awareness*,” I would revise it to read that the aim of all *moral* discourse on film is the development of a critical *consciousness*, a sense of the paradoxical which transcends the repressive forms of conscious thought. Out of the seven different “critical” approaches which Bywater & Sobchack present to their readers, it is rather unfortunate that only two are aimed at developing a heightened *critical consciousness*. The others focus on form which often conveniently ignores politics.

In this chapter I argue that much of what passes as film criticism is foolish, naive, and absurd. For example, over twenty years ago, film historian and critic Robin Wood (1977) delivered a series of lectures at the National Film Theatre in London wherein he stated that,

Each theory of film so far has insisted on its own particular polarization. Montage theory enthrones editing as the essential creative act at the expense of other aspects of film; Bazin's Realist theory, seeking to right the balance, merely substitutes its own imbalance, downgrading montage and artifice; the revolutionary theory centered in Britain on *Screen* (but today very widespread) rejects—or at any rate seeks to “deconstruct”—Realist art in favor of the so-called “open text.” Auteur theory, in its heyday, concentrated attention exclusively on the fingerprints, thematic or stylistic, of the individual artist; recent attempts to discuss the complete “filmic text” have tended to throw out ideas of personal authorship altogether. Each theory has, given its underlying position, its own validity—the validity being dependent upon, and restricted by, the position. Each can offer insights into different areas of cinema and different aspects of a single film.¹¹

Wood goes on to suggest that the critic's “aim should always be to see the work as wholly as possible, as it is—to be able to draw on the discoveries and particular perceptions of each theory, each position, without committing himself [sic] exclusively to any one.”¹²

He says something significant about the critic's social, indeed *moral*, responsibility, as Dewey puts it, to “do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing,” to “perfect the power to perceive” when he argues that,

no critic, obviously, can be free from a structure of values, nor can he afford to withdraw from the struggles and tensions of living to some position of “aesthetic” contemplation. Every critic who is worth reading has been, on the contrary, very much caught up in the effort to define values beyond purely aesthetic ones (if indeed such things exist). Yet to “live historically” need not entail commitment to a system or cause; it can involve, rather, being alive to the opposing pulls, the tensions, of one's world.¹³

Being alive to the “opposing pulls, the tensions, of one’s world” is being receptive to the politics that shape one’s life. Yet, mainstream film critics by and large withdraw into well-written plot summaries that evince verve and vigor, that even draw upon the insights of the film theories Wood discusses, but hardly ever delve into the political struggles and tensions of symbolic interaction. This lack of attention to politics is immoral, in my view. I do, however, agree that film critics (cultural critics in general) should utilize a wide variety of approaches or methods if these “perfect the power to perceive.”

To Integrate “Art” with “Life”

Too many film critics contemplate each film as though it existed only in the theater in which it is shown. They may not overwhelmingly focus on elitist aesthetics, but they certainly do not “tear away the veils due to wont and custom” with the same vim and vigor with which they compose humorous critiques. Perhaps they sense a need to *entertain their readers* rather than *put forth a political “review.”* In any event, today’s mainstream film critics can hardly be said to assist their readers in developing a heightened critical consciousness. They do not, as Wood invites them to, integrate art and daily life, which is what hyper-political cultural criticism is partly about. Academic film critics generally fair better, although critiques that focus on individual films and exclude the struggles of those who are marginal, by my definitions and assumptions, are immoral.

Few critics seem to recognize the psycho-social effectivity of mass media. If we can look past John Simon's vulgar sexist views, we might recognize a glimmer of something meaningful in an article he wrote titled "A Critical Credo" wherein he states that,

the fact that film, of all arts, comes closet to looking both like life and like dreams, both like palpable reality and like wish-fulfillments made manifest, makes it the preferred medium for escape: it has neither the arrant artifices and inescapable limitations of the theatre, nor the crippling self-censorship and disintoxicating commercials of television to cope with. Thus it invites us on a voyage where all is *luxe, calme et volupe*, or, if we would rather, *luxe, frenesie et volupte*, and the seekers of artificial paradises flock right in.¹⁴

When we combine this with what Hitler said, "The most striking success of a revolution based on a philosophy of life will always have been achieved when the new philosophy of life as far as possible has been taught to all men," we recognize that media effects cannot truly be measured in terms of the individual as social scientists have been doing for decades.

Because media are macro-level social events, they can only be superbly examined at the macro-level. That is to say that mass media should be analyzed through historico-social lens. As film critics, as film studies instructors, and, finally, as film students, or even as untutored spectators—we all need to take away the blinders that restrict the horizons of meanings that we attach to mediate communication. We should not expect violent films to breed violent *individuals*. Violent films might be expected to breed violent nations or violent nations that partially sublimate aggression. By looking for effects at the individual level, social scientists miss the boat that embarks for cultural terrain.

Given the political possibilities, we must conclude that "critical" means very little, spiritually, if it does not consider the multiconditional nature of social "truth." Out of the

seven approaches presented by Bywater & Sobchack in their survey of film theory, the only two approaches which might consistently address politics, if various critics employing these approaches choose to do so, appears to be “The Ideological/Theoretical Approach: Using Basic Principles to Uncover Deeper Meanings” and “The Social Science Approach: Films as Social Artifacts,” both of which fall under the rubric “Contextual Approaches.”

If a critic is ever to unearth the philosophy of life that informs any given film, that critic needs to develop a rather sophisticated critical *consciousness*, not a simplistic formula for what constitutes “good” art or “bad” art. “Thumbs up” or “thumbs down” critiques tell us little about the political *bias* of film. Nazi propaganda expert, Goebbels, knew better. For a film critic to be critically conscious, s/he would need to be aware of the political economy within which films get produced. S/he would have to consider any given film within its social and historical contexts and s/he would need to query its intertextual significance. How can this be done through reasoned approaches? How can the conscious mind imagine infinite stretches of history while one blunders through blinding flurries of intertextual significance? The only “approach” that may work is a transrational approach that combines the logic of reason with spiritually informed intuition.

Film critics must always keep in mind that those who go to see films generally have seen other films. To ignore the “intertextuality” of both film and culture is to live on a plane of consciousness that does not recognize the true complexity of the human condition. Nazi expert in propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, essentially called this plane of consciousness “foolish, naive, and absurd.” As beings-in-the-world, we have both a personal history and

the history our ancestors passed on to us through generation after generation. You might call it a hand-me-down culture that gets modified throughout the ages. If we can image Sigmund Freud interrogating our personal past, then we can imagine transrational analysts interrogating generations of our national psyche.

The “Disservice” of Survey Courses

Bywater & Sobchack’s survey of the journalistic, humanist, auterist, genre, social science, historical, and ideological/theoretical approaches to film criticism was, ostensibly, not written as a pedagogical tool for developing a heightened critical consciousness in film studies students. Used with other texts, perhaps, it might serve an enlightening function. In any case, we must face up to the fact that institutions of higher learning do a terrible disservice to their students by offering survey-style film appreciation courses, courses which are devoted, in some way, to the aesthetic uniqueness of each film.

By focusing on the particularity of each film and not the intertextuality of all films, indeed, the intertextual flow of one’s culture, film studies pedagogy maintains the status quo by not allowing culture to discover its own ideology, which exists primarily in the intertextuality of cultural artifacts. As such, a pedagogy or theory of film which emphasizes the aesthetic uniqueness of each film represents a “politics of denial,” a politics that allows ideology to evaporate in the “one film-one opinion” nutshell of positivist thinking. The Nazi war machine was supported by people who lived on such a plane of consciousness. A moral

society cannot afford a “Politics of Aesthetic Uniqueness.” This brand of reductionism misses fascism like fascism misses multicultural morality.

Zavarzadeh’s Politics of “Aesthetic Uniqueness”

Mas’ud Zavarzadeh (1991) makes this point rather cogently in *Seeing Films Politically*, wherein he states that: “The dominant mode of reading films, which is devoted to the protection of the aesthetic “uniqueness” of each film, is in the last instance itself an ideological alibi.”¹⁵ It is as though we could imagine a detective asking where ideology (personified) was when people of color were denied equal access to a bulging economic pie or women bumped their heads against an impenetrable glass ceiling. Zavarzadeh suggests that,

The valorization of the uniqueness and specificity of the filmic experience is among the discursive apparatuses ideology employs to “aestheticize” itself and place its products under the interrogative immunity usually offered to the arts in bourgeois circles. In doing so, ideology prevents detection of the operation and materiality of its discourses.¹⁶

Enjoying his poetic use of “aestheticize,” I would add that when ideology “aestheticizes” itself in America, it does so to avoid the excruciating spiritual pain of facing up to a long established “politics of greed.” I propose that the “haves” (at some level) feel guilty about having material prosperity when they see “have nots” begging in the streets. To deal with their conscious or subconscious guilt, the “haves” manufacture “reasons” to “explain” why the “have nots” are so incredibly unsuccessful—e.g., laziness, genetic inferiority, etc. The

infamous *Bell Curve* by Hernstein and Murray may be just one example of spiritual pain manifesting itself as ‘pseudo-science’—hence, the trenchant lies of a politics of denial.

Zavarzadeh does not seem to consider the psycho-social dimension as I do in this dissertation, nevertheless we come to similar conclusions concerning politics and film. For one, Zavarzadeh observes that,

ideology critique violates the principle of uniqueness by demonstrating that the logic of patriarchal Eurocentric capitalism underlies seemingly different, heterogenous, and nomadic texts. Consequently it is attacked by mainstream film criticism and theory ostensibly on the grounds that it is a “reductionist” reading: it reduces the rich reversible plurality of the film and imposes a closure on it. The actual reason for these attacks, however, is that ideology critique displaces the individual by pointing out the global structures that in fact construct his seemingly “natural” uniqueness and freedom; it thus puts in question the very fundamental ideological grounds of contemporary capitalism. Protection of the uniqueness of the film (“individuality”) is thus the main purpose of all modes of bourgeois film reading—both by humanist (conservative) critics and by postmodern (radical) theorists.¹⁷

By “postmodern theorists,” Zavarzadeh apparently refers to what Rosenau labeled “skeptical postmodernists.” As a postmodernist, myself, I consider film in its multiconditional context. In other words, I think transrationally—I suspect that each film *paradoxically* represents a unique cultural artifact as it simultaneously fits into the inscrutable holistic puzzle multiculturalists call inherited culture.

In other words, from a *micro*-level perspective, which I liken to a close-up shot, each film is undeniably distinct. From a *macro*-level perspective, which I liken to a wide-angle shot, each film exists within, perhaps, an infinite plurality of contexts: social, historical, political, psychoanalytical, etc. Both macro- and micro-level perspectives are employed in

transrational time and space. This may be where Zavarzadeh and I part ways. To my knowledge, he does not explicitly propose incorporating both close-ups and wide angle shots into an ever-evolving appreciation of social “reality.” I do because transrational analysis offers more explanatory power to the critic interrogating cultural artifacts.

Unending Debate

Transrational analysis (a.k.a. “post-formal thinking”) suggests that academics and lay critics will advance additional criticisms “countering” each and every perspective engaged throughout this dissertation. These academics may never fully recognize that *no perspective is without bias*, that it is relatively easy to find fault with each and every point-of-view, especially those which are transrational. Albert Einstein foresaw this theoretical face off between competing notions of “reality” when he proposed that,

In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison.¹⁸

So, each and every theory, each and every paradigm, each and every critical approach or pedagogical method, even the absence of all paradigms and the absence of all theories—are all saddled with uncertainty. There can be proof of nothing in an impermanent world where creatures with only five senses try to make sense of an indeterminate “reality.”

Habermas (1987: 279-81), in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, cautions against substituting local “truths” for universal “truths” when one gripes about the *real* possibilities of knowing social “truths.” Nietzsche (1979) was even stronger, he proposed that both “truth” and “lies” are figments of our imagination. He carried humanity’s epistemological football through the rain-swept contestations of the gridiron to the ontological mud of midfield. When Foucault (1975) stated, “We are subjected to the reproduction of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth,” he acknowledged the simple fact that human beings made up the game of football. When Derrida (1979: 103) stepped into the fray and added, “There is no such thing as a truth in itself. But only a surfeit of it. Even if it should be for me, about me, truth is plural,” he focused wide-angle lens on the fact that there were spectators in the stadium. But, regardless of who thinks what about the game of football, we all know that there are political winners and there are political losers. The game of epistemological football does not end in a draw. Marx knew this when he and Engels made their, now famous, statement: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Cultural Critics have to understand this because they are the last line of defense against cultural hegemony and political power. When the game is over, let us not be in the dungeon awaiting execution.

The Politics of Epistemological Privilege

At the risk of over-simplifying complex philosophical issues, let me argue that (1) Nietzsche reminded us that life is a game, (2) Foucault informed us that the rules are

manmade and, (3) Derrida insisted that everyone has his/her own view of the game. In the color commentary we can argue that “truth” is ultimately unknowable (which it is), but this is politically analogous to saying that the game of epistemological football doesn’t exist while everyone is in the stadium rooting for their favorite team and vendors are selling hotdogs while coaches throw chairs and referees throw flags. There is a massive paradox here that needs to be resolved—those who propose that there is no absolute “truth” cannot possibly make this claim without speaking with a forked tongue. When coaches (i.e., philosophers) argue with the referees that “truth” does not exist, this can never refute the empirical fact that their epistemological football teams just committed a paradoxical violation of universal rules of existential and phenomenological engagement.

In other words, Nietzsche makes a truth claim when he states that “reality” is but an interpretation or that “truth” and “falsity” are fabrications. Foucault makes a truth claim when he argues that power determines “truth.” Derrida makes a truth claim when he says that “there is no such thing as truth in itself.” We apparently cannot function without laying some claim to a “knowable truth” which is, paradoxically unprovable. Transrational analysts make “truth” claims but these claims evolve over time. The bottom line is that in any communicative act, we need a **reference point**, a scrimmage line, where we can place the football each time we get down to the nasty business of playing epistemological and ontological football. We cannot simply talk about the game of life without assuming that “truth” exists. And, to ignore *some* kind of “truth” seems to invite a political point of view that either reinvigorates the status quo or weakens resistance to pseudo-Nazi hypotheses.

Anyone who utters a single word in defense of an argument makes a truth claim, even if s/he denies the possibility of making such claims. The game of epistemological football takes place in an ontological stadium, even if we acknowledge that that stadium was constructed by human beings, even if we argue that each spectator believes her own version of the game, even if we confess that an omniscient extra-worldly being did not invent the rules. We simply cannot live as social beings without making some very useful “truth” claims. Life requires at least a minimal amount of faith for us to collectively negotiate social “reality.” If we cannot (or will not) differentiate between a rock and an apple, we are in a whole heap of philosophical trouble. In other words, to argue that we have no *theories* about “reality” is to argue that we cannot tell the difference between a rock and an apple. Theory making is, perhaps, as intrinsic to the human condition as consuming nutrients is to every known form of life.

Concretizing Epistemological Thinking

Thinking (or theorizing) only takes you so far. You have to use “common sense” versions of intuitions to get the rest of the philosophical way to where you are going. Only canonized Greek philosophers can afford to walk in circles for all eternity. Today’s armchair philosophers, today’s transrational analysts, *who wish to make a political difference*, must continuously bridge the gap between the here and now of their readers’ lived experiences. We must speak in common terms (as much as this is possible) and produce a common sense picture of social “reality” because we wish to be understood *by the oppressed*. Those who

theorize about oppression but speak in academic tongues cannot possibly help others escape the philosophical fetters of Plato's cave.

Alan W. Watts (1957), one who ostensibly embraces what I call "transrational analysis" and what Kincheloe & Steinberg call "post-formal thinking," writes that,

The problem of "what" the mind is can now be seen to be the same as the problem of "what" the real world is. It cannot be answered, for every "what" is a class, and we cannot classify the classifier. Is it not, then, merely absurd to speak of the mind, the *citta*, at all if there is no way of saying what it is? On the contrary, the mathematician Kurt Godel has given us a rigorous proof of the fact that every logical system must contain a premise which it cannot define without contradicting itself.¹⁹

We must, if we are to somehow gain useful philosophical ground, think paradoxically, as M. Scott Peck suggests. Kincheloe & Steinberg suggest that we must devise a "new way of seeing."

Continuing in this vein, I propose that epistemological football is the only game in town. To play it means to interact symbolically and socially. It means to create a *meaningful experience* that resonates through the crowd like a "people wave" passing from one side of the stadium to the other and back to its starting point. To leave our epistemological stadium in pursuit of an absolute "truth" is to seek yet another game, different, perhaps, as Nietzsche seems to suggest, but nevertheless, still a socially constructed game. To resolve the complex paradoxes that great thinkers such as Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault set before us, we do well to use transrational analysis, which is to accept that each philosophical position we take, each theoretical perspective we choose, probably contains a kernel of "truth." To chart a middle ground between competing truths is to establish, albeit tentatively, a multi-

perspectival, multiconditional intersubjectivity—a floating “reality” (like the blimp that circles the stadium).

For example, as Derrida posits, each spectator sees a “different” football game. One may blame the coach for losing the game. Another blames the quarterback. Another, yet, blames the weather or believes that his team “really” won, that the “refs threw the game!” And so, it is probably quite true, *in some respects*, that each spectator does indeed see a “different” game. But, all of the spectators in Beaver stadium, if their eyes are focused on the gridiron, see a *football* game, not an Italian wedding. This we must never forget, for no matter how philosophically tempting it might be to contest the score, there is nearly always an absolute victory.²⁰

“Anything goes,” therefore, is not a theoretical perspective that explains our ability to purchase a hotdog in Beaver stadium and have it knocked out of our hands by an over enthused physics major. In other words, our interaction with each other and our environment(s) determines how far we can carry a football before “reality” tackles us and reminds us that we are living an *experience*, not an ontological illusion. When Derrida suggests that each spectator “sees” a different game, we must swallow his “hotdog” with a bit of skeptical mustard. If each spectator “sees” a different movie or reads a different book, then ideology problematically disappears like a donut or a hotdog down Homer’s status quo maintaining mouth. If there is no such thing as common understanding, then there can be no victor in a game of epistemological football. If there are no victors in the games we play, then there is no such thing as “ideology” and then there is no such thing as hegemony and then

there is no such thing as oppression. For oppression to exist in a *meaningful* world, there must be an ideology that feeds coherent oppression.

Henry Giroux (1993) argues that,

Racism is an ideological poison that is learned, it is a social historical and social construction that seeps into social practices, needs, the unconscious, and rationality itself. If it is to be challenged at the institutional level, at the very centers of authority, it must first be addressed as an ideological concern for the ways in which it is produced, sustained, and taken up within a cultural politics secured within wider dominant relations of power.²¹

Clearly, if ideology does not exist, then *all forms of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination* do not exist because prejudice, intolerance and discrimination are macro-level events that need the common currency of ideology to pay for its historically inherited social practices. Derrida's postmodern "truth" is like a wide-receiver who carries an epistemological football through the end zone, into the parking lot, into another postal zone and out of the country. Derrida, in a sense, carries a good thing (deconstruction) too far. Whatever partial "truth" he claims dissipates in his unbalanced abstractions. Perhaps, this is why Marx sought to *ground* his theories in material circumstances?

The "Politics of Academic Imbalance"

Postmodernism is not the problem; it is, as I stated above, really a question of "balance." For example, Rosenau (1992) observes that,

It is easy to make the case that post-modernism is a political phenomenon, but it is harder to make a convincing case that it is inherently left-wing (Cantor 1989) or right-wing (Foley 1985). Both cases have been cogently argued (Huyssen 1984: 49; Jameson 1984b: 55)...In 1987 and 1988 the

whole question of the dark side of the post-modern political orientation was brought to public attention by the Heidegger affair in Germany and France and the de Man affair in the United States. Heidegger inspired post-modern methods, and de Man is credited with bringing Derrida's formulation of deconstruction in the field of literature and literary criticism to the United States and indirectly influenced its application to the social sciences. What do we now know about these men? Both actively supported the Nazis. Both were found to have deliberately disguised or denied the extent of their Nazi involvement (Farias 1989; Weiner 1988; Lehman 1988). De Man never publically admitted his Nazi connection (Donoghue 1989: 39); neither he nor Heidegger ever spoke out to repudiate Nazism or Hitler (Atlas 1988:69). This raises the question, Is post-modernism itself somehow inherently biased, inherently right-wing, because of Heidegger's and de Man's influence on it?²²

Transrational analysis tells us that it is not necessary to pose the question that Rosenau poses: Is post-modernism itself somehow inherently biased? Yes, it is! Each and every position is inherently biased.

Let us examine the dangerous contradictions of Derrida's most notable "deconstruction" gone haywire. In a *New York Times* article titled "The Pro-Nazi Past of a leading Literary Critic," Michiko Kakutani tells us that,

In December 1987 a major academic scandal erupted when it was revealed that the critic Paul de Man had written for pro-Nazi publications during World War II. De Man, who died four years earlier, had been an enormously respected professor at Yale University; and he was also regarded as the foremost American proponent of literary deconstruction, an intellectual movement and much debated method of textual analysis that had become increasingly influential at American universities during the late 70's and early 80's. The revelations about de Man combined with the stubborn efforts of followers to explain away his past would result in one of the most talked about academic controversies of our time.²³

This scandal points to some very serious philosophical problems. When philosophers lean too far into abstraction, when they “push the envelope,” they actually destroy moral reasoning. Kakutani reports that,

In the most notorious of the *Soir* articles [Nazi publication], “The Jews and Contemporary Literature,” de Man argued that “Jewish writers have always remained in the second rank” and had therefore failed to exercise “a preponderant influence” on the evolution of contemporary European civilization. “One can thus see,” he goes on, “that a solution to the Jewish problem that would lead to the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not have, for the literary life of the West, regrettable consequences. It would lose, in all, some personalities of mediocre worth and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its higher laws of evolution.”²⁴

Clearly, this is a revolting conclusion to draw. To add insult to injury, de Man kept silent about the discovery of his “Nazi writings” and his supporters came to his rescue with what I would call a “politics of epistemological privilege”—*prima facie* evidence that reason is capable of tossing moral equestrians. Kakutani goes on to report that,

In using deconstructivist strategies to show that de Man’s wartime words did not necessarily mean what they appeared to say, writes Mr. Lehman [in his new book *Signs of the Times*], “the deconstructivists lifted the controversy to a new level of debate and aroused the very fears that they sought to dispel.” Indeed, their highly rhetorical defenses of de Man’s writings, which often defied all *common sense* [my emphasis] to suggest the presence of elusive coded messages, underscored many of the criticisms levied against deconstruction in the first place.²⁵

This notion that each spectator “sees” a different game, when carried to its logical excess, is indeed politically dangerous. The idea that each viewer “sees” a different movie denies

even the possibility of ideology. It denies the possibility of any cultural event having something we might call “collective meaning.”

Kakutani drives home this point when he writes that,

Deconstruction’s focus on language’s “unreliability” and the “indeterminacy” of texts, its relativistic vision of the world (there are no truths, only duplicitous texts, fiction within fictions), its repudiation of biographical and historical data, and its unwillingness to grapple with moral issues: such aspects of the theory, its critics pointed out, were what enabled its proponents to use it as a means of rationalizing de Man’s wartime writings.²⁶

Clearly, it is politically dangerous to argue that there are “no truths” and that texts (films included) have no “determinate” meaning. To play loose and fast with interpretation, as some academics do, may actually invite the next wave of Nazis to our shores.

In an article in *The New York Times* titled “Critics Attempt to Reinterpret A Colleague’s Disturbing Past,” Richard Bernstein writes that,

The suspicion—hotly disputed by the deconstructionists—is that there is something nihilistic about the mode of inquiry precisely because of its tendency to dismantle all ideas, and with them moral principles and values. In a 1977 article, M. H. Abrams of Cornell University, a longtime critic of deconstruction, wondered whether the belief that language cannot be used to communicate objectively might “open a cultural vacuum that will be filled by power-hungry authoritarians who have no doubts about what they want or scruples about how to get it.” In a world where all declarations are of uncertain meaning, Mr. Abrams seems to say, the powerful would be able to dictate what is true.²⁷

Derrida’s theory of radical deconstruction, *while partially true*, actually provides for the political disengagement of cultural critics. Any type of cultural analysis that proposes an immeasurable plurality of interpretations presents a huge political vacuum which dissolves

intertextual significance. This political erasure threatens to “aestheticize” society to future moral catastrophes.

There are some in the academy who may in fact contribute to future moral peril. For example, in referring to an “unavoidable slippage of meaning” [my phrasing], Stuart Hall (1997) concludes that:

Language, then, is the property of neither the sender nor the receiver of meanings. It is the shared cultural ‘space’ in which the production of meaning through language—that is, **representation**—takes place. The receiver of messages and meanings is not a passive screen on which the original meaning is accurately and transparently projected. The ‘taking of meaning’ is as much a signifying practice as the ‘putting into meaning’. Speaker and hearer or writer and reader [or spectator and movie] are active participants in a process which—since they often change roles [not in the case of women and blacks in Hollywood’s “inner circle” of CEO’s]—is always double sided, always interactive. Representation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue - it is, as they say, *dialogic*. What sustains this ‘dialogue’ is the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever—though attempting to fix meaning is exactly why *power* intervenes in *discourse*.²⁸

What Stuart Hall apparently fails to discern is that when one considers multiple levels of consciousness, the receivers of messages and meanings *can* be “passive screens on which” something similar to “original meaning is accurately and transparently projected,” while the very opposite of this may also be true. Transrational analysis allows us to “see” that representation is not just an issue of “shared cultural *codes*” but “shared values and ideals,” “shared ways of seeing,” and “shared philosophies of life.”

Returning to Epistemological “Balance”

The art and science of hyper-political film criticism, therefore, *must* conclude that there are *preferred* political readings, readings which reflect the historical, social and economic inequalities of the collectivity in which the cultural artifact was produced. Everyone “sees” a football game when Penn State goes against Michigan State in Beaver stadium. The trick is to understand the often subconscious political plays of the day. Politics is, largely, a subconscious social practice to those who do not interrogate inherited culture.

Through transrational analysis, I propose that many great thinkers are correct in their views, albeit “correct” by degree, not in any *absolute sense* of “truth.” For example, Foucault posits, in my hypothetical “Reason Bowl,” that the game of epistemological football was invented by a group of people whose rulings descended from a position of power. In this regard, Foucault is absolutely correct; however, he seems to forget that the rules change from time to time, for a variety of reasons, some of which have to do with what we might call “resistance.” Spectators, coaches, sports critics—all register a myriad of complaints with the “governing body” of “epistemological football,” a ruling coterie of elites who sometimes accede to demands and sometimes ignore the common will. *Generally* speaking, the rules are a given, determined by a select few, those whose *power* puts them in a position to regulate the game. Foucault is, as I’ve argued, “correct” even though he does not really address the paradoxical issue of “resistance.” But he does not really have to address this issue if his analysis focuses on an ordinary level of consciousness. His “knowing” that “knowledge is power” comes from his analyzing from a higher level of consciousness. Those who “resist”

can be said to be “resisting” because of their heightened critical consciousness or simply because their free will allows them to resist.

So, too, is Derrida, “correct,” even though I just “trashed” his argument. In his mind, each spectator shuffles an endless slew of signifiers, which means that each spectator sees a “different” game. To *some* extent, this is true, but it is politically *dangerous* to suggest that because there is variability of interpretation, there are no preferred political readings. This denies the possible of culture, ideology, representation and it, ultimately, denies the possibility that Hitler proposed an evil “Final Solution.” After all, if we buy Derrida’s position, what stops us from arguing that the Holocaust didn’t occur? Yet, we know that it occurred. Its historical memory is too recent to completely deny. There are still too many survivors and the museums have not yet been forgotten.

Nietzsche is also “correct” when he says that football is really a game that someone made up and that the rules are almost as arbitrary as the decision to buy one football souvenir over another. All three great thinkers mentioned above are “correct.” They say “truthful” things. The post-formal “trick” is not to take any of them too seriously. The “trick” is to realize that thinking paradoxically “solves” these unquenchable riddles. Quite ironically, we need to go beyond logic if we are to truly become rational beings. So, when Zavarzadeh argues that “aesthetic uniqueness” is a political ploy, an “alibi” for ideology, we see how transrational analysis both proves and disproves his point. Each film is both unique *and* part of an ideological trope. Each film exists as a compact unit being shown to hundreds, if not

thousands or millions, of spectators *while it simultaneously fits neatly into the puzzle of one's cultural inheritance.*

To chart a middle philosophical ground, an intersubjective domain of inquiry, a more egalitarian perspective, one must see that both close-ups and the wide-angles capture “reality.” If one stares at close-ups to the exclusion of wide-angle shots, one’s horizons of meaning are quite limited even if they may be somewhat “truthful” (that is, not distorted too much). Since Zavarzadeh is interested in *ideology*, a wide-angle concept, he simply *must* open up his mind to the greater possibilities of history, economics, politics and culture—all of these are macro-level constructs.

Bordwell seems to thrive on extreme close-ups. Because of this, he has developed what appears to be a *micro*-level appreciation of films, a view of how individuals cognitively interpret a film’s narration. To dismiss either Bordwell’s or Zavarzadeh’s point-of-view is to limit what one can ultimately “know” about films. If one is interested in politics, then Zavarzadeh’s wide-angle approach is a possible option. If one is interested in rhetoric and inference, then Bordwell’s extreme close-up is a possible option. Both are “true,” in the sense that close-ups and wide-angle shots exist from multiple locations in the web of social “reality.” One might catch a small part of wide-angle concepts in close-ups, but close-ups are not the best shots for catching a fleeting glimpse of macro-level social events.

When we use wide-angle philosophical lens, we do not have to cast modernity out of the window, as some *radical* postmodernists do. To do so would be just as foolish as it would be to cast affirmative postmodernism away as abject relativism. If I may liken the

difference between modernism and *affirmative* postmodernism to two football coaches with one having a set play for every offensive opportunity and the other running a free style offense where the quarterback reads the defense and makes split-second decisions, I might be able to argue that both styles of coaching have been shown to be effective in the game of epistemological football. Coaches utilize particular offensive styles for particular reasons. And so, in *A Brief History of Everything*, Ken Wilbur writes very cogently of modernity's "good" points:

The rise of modernity—and by “modernity” I mean specifically the rational-industrial worldview, and roughly, the Enlightenment in general—served many useful and extraordinary purposes. We might mention: the rise of democracy; the banishing of slavery; the emergence of liberal feminism; the differentiation of art and science and morality (which I’ll explain); the widespread emergence of empirical sciences, including the systems sciences and ecological sciences, an increase in average life span of almost three decades; the introduction of relativity and perspectivism in arts and morals and science; the move from ethnocentric to worldview morality; and in general the undoing of dominator social hierarchies in numerous significant ways. Those are extraordinary accomplishments, and the antimodernist critics who do nothing but vocally condemn modernity, while gladly basking in its many benefits, are hypocritical in the extreme.²⁹

Perhaps the time will come when “football coaches” utilize multiple “styles” of offense. That is the point of this dissertation—philosophical flexibility allows one to deal with more experiential and phenomenological contingencies than philosophical rigidity.

Perhaps it is time to accept that there are many ways to play epistemological football. Perhaps we need to study offense in general and stop focusing on how our favorite team plays the game. Perhaps we need a transrational point-of-view which successfully integrates multicultural lived experiences with theories of social “reality.” Along this line, M. Scott

Peck, M.D. remarks that “the fully mature spiritual person is not so much a clinger to dogma as an explorer, every bit as much as any scientist, and that there is no such thing as a complete faith. Reality, like God, is something we can only approach.”³⁰ The approach I propose is one which integrates the best of modernity with the best of postmodernity. Such a perspective is, of course, *transrational* since it “sees” from a position beyond modernity’s *rational-industrial worldview and beyond postmodernisms relativistic extremes*.

The Final Frontier—“Integration”

Zavarzadeh shows the limitations of close-up philosophical angles that eliminate much of what goes on in the “stadium”:

By turning away from the political economy of signification and focusing instead on the “immanent” formal strategies of signification, poststructuralist critics effectively cut off any relation between global political, ideological and economic structures and the “local” politics of signification. Poststructuralist theory, in other words, is as much invested in the defense of the “local,” the “cellular,” and the “nomadic” in film as is traditional criticism. Other theorists, who do not share the philosophical assumptions of the poststructuralists, also focus on the unique qualities of the film text. In his *Narration in Fictional Film*, David Bordwell, for instance writes: “If ideological analysis is to avoid vacuous overgeneralization, it must reckon in the concrete ways that narrational process functions in filmic representation” (1985, 335-36).³¹

Bordwell is, of course, conditionally correct. Analysis, whether it is rational or transrational, needs to be grounded in some sort of “reality.” However, to expect a wide-angle shot to expose as much detail as a close-up is patently ludicrous. Wide-angle shots expose more context than close-ups, which means that in a wide-angle shot one gets a unique opportunity

to draw inferences about much larger social events than one would even see in a close-up. Ideological analysis, therefore, examines how *social* units function, not how *individuals* function. True ideological analysis examines social effects through cross-cultural comparisons and other macro-level philosophical “tools” such as Horkheimer’s concept of negation. To truly study the effects of mass media, hyper-political cultural critics must social-psychoanalyze the nation within which cultural artifacts are created, distributed and enjoyed.

Footnotes

¹Combs, James (1993). Movies And Politics: The Dynamic Relationship, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., p. 6-7.

²Simon, John (1967). "A Critical Credo" published in Awake in the Dark, David Denby (ed.) (1977) New York: Vintage Books, Page 178-9.

³Bywater & Soback (1989) *Ibid.* Page. 5.

⁴Only a culture that is self-reflexive, by definition, can become "critically conscious." Economic forces—in the sense of newspapers having to "earn a buck" to stay in business—delimit the extent to which mainstream film critics can perform their moral function as critics. It is in this sense that economic structures are *deterministic*! Where cash rules, reason often waits in the rafters. Anyone who has seen political debates on TV knows that just when the argument gets interesting, there is "a break for an announcement from the sponsors"—a clear indication of what it is really important and what is secondary. Furthermore, political discussions are often hyphenated with "we need to hear from someone else" and "you have two minutes to summarize your argument." The public sphere has become infested with a consumer mentality that shrinks self-reflexivity into sound bites. The art and science of political film criticism is to understand this sorry state of affairs and reinvigorate the public sphere with substantive political debate by keying on the rarely recognized politics of Patriarchal white supremacy and other prejudice in U.S. films.

⁵Bywater, Tim & Thomas Soback (1989). An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Approaches to Narrative Film, New York: Longman. Page 4-5.

⁶Thompson, Kristin (1988). Breaking The Glass Armor, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 3.

⁷Thompson, Kristin (1988) *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸Bywater & Sobchack (1989). Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Approaches to Narrative Film, New York: Longman, Page 1.

⁹Bywater & Sobchack (1989), *Ibid*, Page 107.

¹⁰Bywater & Sobchack (1989). Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film, New York: Longman, Page 2.

¹¹Wood, Robin (1977), "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," Film Comment, January-February, Page 46.

¹²Wood, Robin (1977), *Ibid*, Page 46.

¹³Wood, Robin (1977), *Ibid*, Page 46.

¹⁴Simon, John (1967), "A Critical Credo," in Awake in the Dark: An Anthology of American Film Criticism, 1915 to the Present, Edited by David Denby (1977), New York: Vintage Books, Page 178.

¹⁵Zavarzadeh, Mas'Ud (1991). Seeing Films Politically, New York: State University of New York Press, Albany., Page 3.

¹⁶Zavarzadeh, Mas'Ud (1991), *Ibid*, Page 5.

¹⁷Zavarzadeh, Mas'Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 3-4.

¹⁸Cited in M. Scott Peck's (1993). Further Along the Road Less Traveled, Page 79.

¹⁹Watts, A. W. (1957). The Way of Zen, New York: Vintage Books, Page 74.

²⁰ Practically speaking, there must be limits to our ability to interpret social "reality." Giddens (1984) suggests this through his "structuration" analysis, which proposes that subjects' agency (or free will) and structure (the social formations that lead us to culture and history) are mutually constitutive—i.e., human beings blend with both culture and history to become both "active" and "limited" social beings. We can do what we want, but what we want is often socially, ecologically and, sometimes, subliminally suggested to us.

²¹Giroux, Henry A. (1993). "Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity," in Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern, Edited by Clin Lankshear and Peter L. McLaren, New York: State University of New York Press, Page 219.

²²Rosenau, Pauline Marie (1992). Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Page 155-6.

²³Kakutani, Michiko (1991) "The Pro-Nazi Past of a Leading Literary Critic" in The New York Times, Books of The Times series, Tuesday, February 19, 1991.

²⁴Kakutani (1991) *Ibid*.

²⁵Kakutani (1991) Ibid.

²⁶Kakutani (1991) Ibid.

²⁷Berstein, Richard (1988) "Critics Attempt to Reinterpret a Colleague's Disturbing Past," in The New York Times "Week in Review" Section E, July 17, 1988, Page 6.

²⁸Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, California: Sage Publications, Page 10.

²⁹Wilbur, Ken (1996). A Brief History of Everything, Boston & London: Shambhala, Page 69.

³⁰Peck, M. Scott (1993) Ibid, Page 79.

³¹Zavarzadeh, Mas'Ud (1991) Ibid, Page 4-5.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AESTHETICS VS. HERMENEUTICS

“Politics and music are much alike. The person who is off-key always seems to have the loudest voice.”

Aesthetic film theory cannot assist in transforming ones’ consciousness. As such, aesthetic theory takes on a sinister glow, a false consciousness that has traditionally spoken with a very loud voice in these United States. Aesthetics, as such, is a psycho-social projection that blinds viewers to the political discourse and hence the subconscious political effects of narrative art. In the following citation, Taylor (1990) argues that aesthetic theory “wedded” white supremacy when D. W. Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation* and so many critics chose to admire the film while disavowing its politics.

What *The Birth of a Nation* alludes to on the level of aesthetic theory, amid structures of denial, is the priority of its staged transcendence over the common psychological mechanism of displacement and projection. The critical and theoretical apparatus of film studies has inherited this unholy marriage of parasitic group fantasy—the wedding between transcendental Whiteness and aesthetic theory—as a double bind. It must persist in a willful critical blindness, which becomes more easily, casually willed as its blindness becomes conventional. Or, by perceiving the doubled, contradictory meanings of its monological aesthetic discourse, it must begin to rid itself of its founding false consciousness. And the longer it delays taking this second course, the more violent will be the traumas inflicted on its self-definitions and basic assumptions.¹

As a somewhat critically conscious individual, I puzzle over reviews that accepted vulgar stereotypes as though they were a part of a new set of Ten Commandments—Thou Shalt Stereotype Thy Neighbor And Love Only Thyself And Others Like Thyself.

I realize that some mainstream film critics, some academics, some students and many viewers are blind to issues of race, gender, age, class and sexual “orientation” in U.S. films. Some individuals block the pain of discrimination from their memories, from their everyday conscious awareness. Some individuals see themselves as “purely” objective human beings when they analyze films from the lofty precipices of their high-brow aesthetics.

Taylor observes that “the values encoded by the aesthetics—beauty, disinterestedness, purity, vitality—which have undergone change at historic crossroads, are nevertheless always the values by which Occidental imagination conceives of itself in its highest forms.” Perhaps it is time to step off the “high horse” of aesthetics. But this will not be easy because, as Taylor observes,

vast social, political, and economic interests have accumulated around the aesthetic as an institutionalized discursive history, much of it around the site of the established art-culture system. These interests manage to keep the aesthetic in operation, very much like a politics against political clarity, a mystifying ideology of autonomous art. In denying the political resonance of cultural works, this discourse in effect throws protective skirts around all sorts of political ideologies and nostrums couched within the representational form of “art,” not simply because it loves them, but because it must protect them in order to protect its own authority. *The Birth of a Nation* is an arresting case in point. ²

If we accept Warshow’s division of film criticism into two camps, the aesthetic and the sociological, then as hyper-political film critics we must shun aesthetic criticism as vulgar cultural privilege. All is not gloom and doom, for as Taylor suggests, changes are currently being made:

The many recent schools and movements of criticism that have attempted to modify this central doctrine [of the supposed “neutrality” of aesthetics],

arguing that the work cannot be interpreted and understood apart from its social, historical, and political contexts, have, sometimes laughably, failed to confront the fact that the serious inclusion of these contexts violates and invalidates the identifying claims of the aesthetic itself.³

In other words, *any* mode of film criticism which excludes the political, which divorces the psycho-social, historical, economic and spiritual contexts of any given film, also places itself within the submerged politics of epistemological privilege or the narcissistic ignorance of political denial. *Any* mode of cultural criticism which summarily excludes an analysis human sexuality, gender, race, class or issues of age, *any* mode of cultural criticism which dismisses the emotional resonance of films suffers from a politics of epistemological privilege. Critically conscious individuals recognize that American culture objectifies women, gays have been killed off as a matter of standard operating procedure, people of color have been ridiculed, offered up as murderers, drug dealers, rapists, criminals or goof ball “Uncle Toms.” Representation matters.

Formalist Criticism

Deeply entrenched forms of film criticism need to be ruthlessly interrogated. For example, Russian formalists, who were primarily, as their name suggests, interested in “form,” first proposed the study of narrative events in films in terms of a binary model which split the narration into two principle formal systems: “syuzhet [plot] and style,” as Bordwell (1985, xiii) observes. Formalists were innovators, not at first recognized as a political force by Russian authorities. Later, they were scorned by the government. Books were banned,

performances were labeled “Formalist” and were expected to be shunned by good communists. In a highly oppressive society, formalists were, perhaps, the only tolerable political resistance, one which subtly defied the logic of Socialist Realism.

In a nutshell, then, Socialist Realism, sanctioned by the authorities, was interested in *What*, not *How*. Formalists, on the other hand, are interested in “*How*, not *What*.” Formalists, I am told by my Russian friends, are artists who once “explored new ways of perceiving,” ways which the authorities, years ago, came to dislike because their brand of art implied anarchy. My friends explained that Russian formalists wrote novels without punctuation, poetry in which the visual presentation of the verse was, perhaps, equally important as the verse itself. Formalism, therefore, suggested more than Social Realism could ever suggest. It suggested, my Russian friends tell me, that realism was “untrue.” Formalism was, therefore, a “form” of political resistance that Soviet authorities, once they discovered its secrets, sought to eradicate.

In the hands of film critics, formalism becomes, perhaps, an entirely different animal.

Polan (1985) states that,

Formalism is an empiricism in search of a justifying theory. Enumerating, describing materials, formalism assumes that meanings, consequences, implications, of textual practices derive foremost from those materials themselves; all that is required of the human participant—the spectator, the observer, the theorist—is the pertinent point of view, the framework appropriate to the object. In other words, a given form—for example, the invisible cut—has in formalist understanding a meaning in general, a meaning which, as in all empiricisms, is a logical consequence of the nature of the empirical object itself: to know the nature of a cut is to know its meaning. While critics like Barthes and Kristeva inflect this formalism by an attention to plural reading, to those ostensible moments in which the text escapes the impositions of set form, this kind of productive reading is no

more than a modification in which the original formalism—generalities about the effects of narrative, about patterns of enunciation, about the tie between ideology and material objects—continues to hold sway.⁴

For our purposes, formalism represents just one side of a multi-sided figure. Its political advantage lies in what it potentially exposes.

Loosely speaking, the art and science of political film criticism endeavors to understand narrative films in terms of both “how” and “what” is actually portrayed on the silver screen. In other words, content is always as politically important as “how” that content becomes form. For example, when a character is ostensibly responsible (e.g., *Dyson in Terminator 2*) for dissecting a robotic arm from the future and by doing so enabling an army of robots to destroy humankind, it is equally salient “how” that character is portrayed on the silver screen as it is “who” that character is. If a black actor portrays that character, as was the case in *Terminator 2*, given the history of racism in the U.S., then form matters very much. The black actor, in this sense, becomes “form.” That this character’s “heroism” toward the end of the film is diminished by what he does—he blows up the robotic arm and the entire research complex by falling against a detonator, rather than by willfully pushing the detonator—is *politically significant*. The visual psychology of this scene is certainly *quite* significant in terms of its emotional resonance because we see a weak, fearful black man, who appears almost unwilling to pay for his “mistakes” (his blindly following the scientific marvels of future technologies). He literally collapses on a detonating device which destroys the entire floor he is on. The visual “form” that we see is a reluctant heroism. It really doesn’t make any sense until one considers race.

First off, it is politically significant that a character portrayed by a *black* actor *would or could be* responsible for world destruction if others, white others incidentally had not instructed him in his errant ways. Secondly, it is politically significant for *any* black actor or actress to do *anything* on screen, given the political saliency of “racism” in America and the relative paucity of black leadership in Hollywood. Similarly, it is politically significant every time an actor, who represents a group who is marginal, plays a character who does something negative. Given facts and figures of domestic abuse in this country and rampant violence against women, it is politically significant every time a woman’s face is slapped and every time she is called a “bitch” on screen. It is, likewise, politically significant each time a woman has sex on screen or it is implied that she had sex. This is so because ours is a culture that has yet to grant women their due civil rights. There is, presently, no movement to rewrite the Bill of Rights to include women. Given Matthew Shepard’s brutal murder and countless other acts of violence against gays and lesbians, it is politically significant every time a gay person or a lesbian does *not* have sex on screen or it is implied that “good” gays and lesbians are celibate. In the end, *form* matters as much as race matters as much as gender matters as much as sexual “preference” matters.

Polan argues that,

A continual battle slogan in the practice of contemporary theory has been that it is concerned “not with what a text means, but how it means.” I am suggesting that this change frequently does not confront the problem—that of the text as source, as origin, of meaning—but merely shifts attention from contents to structures, still seen *as attributes of a text itself*. Certainly, much of what in traditional film criticism passes for the study of meaning is little more than a kind of impoverished content analysis in which the presence of certain themes, subjects, values, is taken as a guarantee of the film’s meaning;

but the critique of content-analysis often redefines form as *really* being the content of a work and so proceeds within the same myth of objectivity.⁵

Content analysis, whether it focuses on *form* or *content* cannot provide a *complete* picture of a film's political resonance. This is not to dismiss content analysis as an apolitical method of cultural criticism. Content analysis can be an important part of hyper-political cultural criticism if the critic acknowledges the *emotional resonance* and the *historical significance* of images, values, ideals and attitudes in filmic discourse.

While the distinction between the *story* that is represented in film and its *form* can, perhaps, be traced back to Aristotle, it was, as stated earlier, Russian formalists, who, focusing on both "sociological form" and "aesthetic form," comprehensively theorized the difference between the two. Others advanced that notion that the causal-temporal relationships of filmed events (the story) and the way that story unfolds for spectators (the plot) are integral to a critical understanding of narrative films.⁶

But, "critical" does not necessarily mean "political," as I have argued throughout this dissertation. Bordwell, who focuses on "how film form and style function in relation to narrational strategies and ends,"⁷ does not adequately consider the politics of culture in his meta-theorizing on film. For one, his primarily cognitive approach isolates affect from the critical equation. As a black person who *felt* powerful emotions while viewing *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* and *Chasing Amy*, I cannot help but wonder why affect is so easily dismissed. Bordwell offers this explanation:

As a perceptual-cognitive account, this theory does not address affective features of film viewing. This is not because I think that emotion is irrelevant

to our experience of cinematic storytelling—far from it—but because I am concerned with the aspects of viewing that lead to constructing the story and its world. I am assuming that a spectator’s comprehension of the film’s narrative is theoretically separable from his or her emotional responses.⁸

As political film critics, we cannot push affect off the gangplanks of our epistemological projects. Much of the human condition is invested in what we *feel*. It is, therefore, critical to an understanding of the political and psychological effects of media that we interrogate affect.

If as Williams argues, mediated messages invoke mostly unconscious “structures of feeling,” then affect is crucial to developing a truly critical consciousness of popular culture. Form cannot, *should* not, be theoretically hacked away from affect or cognition. Transrational analysis, of course, refuses to separate the two. Because we are human, because we feel all the time, *form* is as crucial to an understanding of the politics in popular culture as are our *emotional experiences* with films. In other words, the “story” as well as its “form” is politically significant. Neither should be excised from an understanding of media effects. Because I *feel* all the time and I have never experienced a conscious moment where I did not feel *something* (even if that something was ambivalence or emotional confusion), my comprehension of film’s narrative is theoretically *inseparable* from my emotional response! Indeed, many times I *felt* and therefore I understood (forgive me, Descartes).

Still, the division of narrative components into *syuzhet* and *style* or *story* and *discourse* nevertheless falls short as critically conscious political film criticism because, as Mas’Ud Zavaradeh (1991) puts it:

[narratology], even when it deals with (immanent) politics, however, is unable in the end to address the question of the effectivity of film as a cultural act of exchange and communication that provides the viewer with a grid of understanding on which the real of social practices is located. *It is ultimately descriptive (rhetorical) and not explanatory (political).* [my italics] Films are not enclosed constructs, as neonarratological models assume, but are instances of cultural acts in terms of which the viewer negotiates his way through the realities of daily practices—all of which are organized, in the last analysis, to confirm the dominant social relations. The final outcome of these cultural acts performed through films is to situate the viewer in a subject position in terms of which his daily practices are seen as significant and he is perceived (by himself and others) as their author and origin.⁹

In other words, from a political point of view, narratology is non-*critical* if it is *descriptive* (as it is in Bordwell's use of it) rather than *being explanatory*.

Zavarzadeh notes that,

If film criticism and theory is to be more than a mere formal analysis of the organization of the internal space of narrative, then it should investigate the ways in which film performs its cultural role as the producer of class subjectivities. In such an investigation, the narratological project—with its immanentism of story and discourse—will not take us very far. We need to go beyond narratology.¹⁰

As political film critics, we are interested in form, affect, cognition, causal, spatial or temporal links in the narration and any other feature of a film which brings its political *meaning* into sharper focus.

What Films *Mean* to Spectators

Zavarzadeh concludes that, “unlike traditional narratological inquiries,” he has “foregrounded the “tale” and focused not on the panhistorical immanent structures of

narrative but on the consequences of narrative.”¹¹ I would add that those consequences are psycho-social and they need to be examined in terms of their cognitive and affective demands, provided we make such an ontological split. Zavarzadeh proposes that his “notion of *tale*” allows him “to move away from the more recent neonarratological film studies that concentrate on the narrative’s immanent textual “materiality” (which actually means language) and instead to deal with its posttextual outcomes.”¹² From my perspective, “posttextual outcomes” refer to psycho-social effects.¹³

In writing about spectators’ interpretations of films, Zavarzadeh states that,

By the *tale*, then, I do not mean the events of the happenings or any other exclusively immanent aspects of the film. Rather the tale tracks the activities through which the spectator chains together the film’s signifiers on a cultural grid of intelligibility—an ensemble of assumptions and presuppositions about the “real”—into an account that makes the film socially intelligible. By making sense of the film, the spectator does not merely engage in an aesthetic act but a political practice: a practice that also enables her to make herself intelligible as a cultural entity—she achieves social “reality” as a “subject.”¹⁴

It is the film’s *social intelligibility* which points to specific philosophies of life of world hypotheses, which is not to argue that films are collectively indistinguishable from each other or to suggest that they are not sometimes riddled with internal contradictions. It is, however, to suggest that hyper-political cultural criticism *necessarily* focuses on the generalizable, the reducible, the common elements stitched into reality by the cohesiveness of a shared cultural signifiers.

Zavarzadeh implies, and I concur, that both the “text” and the “reader of that text” work together to create meaning. He is, ostensibly a constructivist who recognizes how

culture locates subjects “in the social relations of production.”¹⁵ That the spectator is a conscious, thinking, reasoning person who “plays” with texts is a crucial understanding to have when one is engaged in the art and science of political cultural criticism. A “text-only” view of culture breaks down at the site of resistance or struggle.

Zavarzadeh puts it this way:

The “tale” of the film constitutes the individual ostensibly as a “free person” (whose freedom is manifested in his “interpretation” of the film) but in actuality it situates him as belonging to a particular social class. The tale articulates the viewer through the process of sense making, locating her in the social relations of production. Constructing the tale, then, is a necessary cultural skill by which the spectator learns how to sort out the diverse codes of culture, such as gender, sexuality, class, parenting, and to establish a relation among them. In other words, in producing the tale, the spectator learns the ideological syntax of his culture (its class relations) and demonstrates his ability to provide coherent tales—as maps for dealing with the real—and thus proves that he is a symbolically competent and ideologically reliable person. *He can be trusted with positions of authority (employment)* [italics mine]. Cinema is an ideologically useful institution because it helps to produce tale-making subjects out of individuals—especially in a largely postprint, electronic culture.¹⁶

It is the authority of the “text” that most interests hyper-political cultural critics. The difficulty in cultural criticism is in discerning cultural authority, then defining it. The hyper-political cultural critic searches for values and ideals, assumptions and attitudes, images and sentiment that connect with historicized social practices. S/he looks for evidence of rhetoric, even if such rhetoric is shot full of contradictions. The text, in other words, is observed through multiple contexts for tendrils of rhetoric that pull together world hypotheses which ultimately serve a subconscious national psyche.

Zavarzadeh cautions that,

“my statement should not be conveniently read to mean that all viewers of a film produce exactly the same tale. Quite the contrary, the dominant frames of intelligibility provide a great deal of interpretive “freedom” and a latitude for differences among the tales produced by viewers. In fact, it is through this interpretive freedom of texts and culture (film as well as other cultural products) that the ruling ideology establishes its democratic legitimacy and consequently, without overt violence, secures its hold on the limits of our understanding.”¹⁷

So, the art and science of political film criticism is to recognize that ideology is not a monolithic force imposed “top-down” on subjects like the descending gases of Hitler’s death camps. Ideology is much more subtle, which consequently makes it much more dangerous. One must remember that supremacist ideology poured the philosophy of life which settled into the wicked foundations of Nazi atrocities.

Zavarzadeh goes so far as to suggest that polysemy is actually encouraged in a very ideological democratic state:

In the dominant ideology of the democratic state, the subject is represented as a rational (namely, overwritten by the logic of ideology) person who in the privacy of her consciousness can discover the “truth” of cultural texts such as films. Because it is the allegiance of the “free” subject that the state demands, differences in the interpretive construction of the tale (which in fact affirm the ideological “truth” about the “free” individual consciousness) are not only tolerated but in fact actively encouraged.¹⁸

Those who attack ideology and domination as “meaningless constructs” by referencing polysemy or multivocality as the “terminator” of monolithic rhetoric refuse to acknowledge the ideological consistencies in films, the propensity of films to act as generalized political discourse. These anti-ideologists claim, therefore, that ideology could not exist, since *all* spectators are not easily brainwashed. These henchmen of epistemological privilege actually

employ “all or nothing” reasoning to “refute” certain posttextual outcomes. There is a black and white theoretical world, one which excludes color by default and categorically denies gray spaces.

Interrogating the Gaze

Bell hooks objected to (mis)representations from a very early age. In her own words she observes that,

when most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that the mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images was to engage its negation of black representation. It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing an independent black cinema. Black viewers of mainstream cinema and television could chart the progress of political movements for racial equality via the construction of images, and did so. Within my family’s Southern black working class home, located in a racially segregated neighborhood, watching television was one way to develop critical spectatorship. Unless you went to work in the white world, across the tracks, you learned to look at white people by staring at them on screen. *Black looks, as they were constituted in the context of social movements for racial uplift, were interrogating gazes.* [italics mine] We laughed at television shows like *Our Gang* and *Amos n’ Andy*, at these white representations of blackness, but we also looked at them critically.¹⁹

The art and science of political film criticism, therefore, attempts to get students to develop *interrogating gazes*.

Bell hooks observes that *being aware of racism* and *developing what she calls “an oppositional gaze”*—which is really a political point of interrogation—are two different things. She remarks that “while every black woman I talked to was aware of racism, that

awareness did not automatically correspond with *politicalization* [italics mine].”²⁰ Clearly, one can be aware of racism in the media, as I was many years ago, before I systematically began to study racism in graduate school, but still not actively resist “dominant ways of knowing and looking.”²¹ Or, perhaps, one might actively resist only *some* of the ideological tenets of dominant discourse.

As a critically conscious black intellectual, hooks observes that, “We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels.”²² Communication scholars need to teach their film studies students to become such “critical spectators.” The methodology to do so is the subject of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

The Emotional Difficulties of Being a Cultural Critic

Walt Whitman problematized all manner of cultural criticism when he penned the following poem entitled “When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer”:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer;
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in
 columns before me;
 When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add,
 divide, and measure them,
 When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured
 with much applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
 Till rising and gliding out, I wander’d off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

Whitman points to the limitations of subject-positions that focus on matters of measurement and classification, i.e., analysis that comes from a “central abstract focus.” For film studies, we might argue that “proofs and figures,” “charts and diagrams,” etc., miss much of the peripheral mind’s appreciation of life.

Plato’s Cave, one who could not see the “poetry” of the human condition. Whitman apparently needed a much more human context in which to interpret “reality.” He needed room to experience the mystical, the magical, the emotional resonance of what it *means* to be a human *being* gazing up at the stars. Whitman needed to *feel* the stars vibrate in his soul. He “look’d up in perfect silence at the stars” because no collection of words, no *analysis* could capture the inscrutable essence of “reality” as it is experienced by a human being. Transrational analysts acknowledge that cultural critics should not limit themselves to theories, facts and figures, fancy diagrams and charts, explanations that make “sense.” By thinking paradoxically, transrational critics argue that a truly *critical* reading of any cultural artifact utilizes the Learn’d Astronomer’s “charts and diagrams” as well as Whitman’s silent humanistic appreciation.

If it could be said that Whitman objects to analysis per se, then he may render himself incapable of the benefits of structured thought. But this does not seem to be the case. We appear to be social beings that live, learn and experience social “reality” within the inscrutable emotional and institutional wrappings of human consciousness. Those who diagram and construct charts, those who reduce both nature and art to measurable abstractions, miss the greater contextualized complexities of what it truly means to be a

human *being-in-the-world*. *Hyper-political* cultural criticism is no “skill” that one learns (as Bordwell suggests), it is an experience, a way of eternally reaching for unattainable stars, a way of looking at the brilliant chaos of the heavens and seeing both confusion and pattern. There is a benefit derived from both modes of observing.

Critical consciousness does not come to those who memorize rules and procedures, it comes to those who “see” through both the “central focus of their intellects” and the “peripheral focus of their consciousness.” *Hyper-political* film criticism requires a brand of *heightened critical consciousness* that transcends analytical make meaning. Alan W. Watts (1957) observes that,

Lao-tzu said: “*The five colours will blind a man’s sight. The five sounds will deaden a man’s hearing. The five tastes will spoil a man’s palate. Chasing and hunting will drive a man wild. Things hard to get will do harm to a man’s conduct. Therefore, the sage makes provision for the stomach and not the eye.*” This must by no means be taken as an ascetic’s hatred of sense experience, for the point is precisely that the eye’s sensitivity to color is impaired by the fixed idea that there are just five true colors. There is an infinite continuity of shading, and breaking it down into divisions with names distracts the attention from its subtlety. This is why “the sage makes provisions for the stomach and not for the eye,” which is to say that he judges by the concrete context of the experience, and not by its conformity with purely theoretical standards.²³

Cultural critics who exclusively employ theoretical standards or those who have learned film criticism as a “skill” miss much of the context that fill in the gaps of our silent, mindless, appreciations. These critics miss the infinite subtleties of the human condition. They miss the opportunity to recognize that there will never be *perfect criticism*, that words will never define what the heart both feels and the mind knows in its peripheral musing.

Watts adds that, “However religiously “emancipated,” the technological mind shows that it has inherited the same division against itself when it tries to subject the whole human order to the control of conscious reason.”²⁴ *Hyper-political* cultural critics recognize that conscious reason is itself a bias. But if it is a bias, it is a bias that might, if properly utilized, enable one to transcend other biases. In other words, students who object to content analysis, comparative analysis, historiographical analysis or other forms of analysis, do not realize that *critical* analysis may eventually lead to an even *greater* appreciation for films, as I have learned in over four years of graduate study. Indeed, it is just this question of who gets to expand his or her *critical consciousness* and/or political appreciation of popular culture that Jeanne Hall (1994) raises in “The Introductory Course And the “Ethnically Embarrassed” Text: Toward a Multicultural Approach To Teaching U.S. Film History:”

The danger is not, as Haskell claims, that we will “cease to consider formal and aesthetic questions and concentrate on political ones” (ix)—nor, I think, that we will fail to confront the political and ideological nature of aesthetics ourselves—but rather, that we will reserve such discussion for honors students, graduate students, and those who actively seek to engage in them by enrolling in special topics courses on representations of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity in American film, that we will “spare” the “average” or “ordinary” student a multicultural perspective on American film history, unwittingly perpetuating the canon and maintaining the status quo by teaching the “masses” and preaching only to the converted (p. 106).²⁵

As one of Hall’s graduate students I must add that Jeanne Hall did not expect any of us to be “converted” to any specific or particular conclusion or particular constellation of conclusions but, instead, we considered ourselves, for the most part, to be “converted” to the notion that politics, morality and art are inextricably intertwined and that analyzing and critiquing films

is not only an incredibly complex self-reflexive process it is also a most necessary spiritual process.

Regarding Whitman's poem, a multicultural question one might ask astronomers is: "Why did early sky gazers see Sagittarius (The Archer)? Canis Major (The Great Dog)? Or the massively known Big Dipper? Where these formations particularly salient to observers who named heavenly constellations? Put another way, where early sky gazers in some way *psychologically primed* to see such forms? A constructivist understanding of the human condition poses self-reflexive questions. The art and science of political film criticism, therefore, engages the critic in a culture-reflexive inquiry which might ask the following questions: Why do various filmmakers choose particular subjects? Why do screenwriters (and ultimately directors) chart particular consequences for characters who represent marginal subject-positions? If an actor(tress) who is a member of a discriminated upon group portrays a character in a film, is it possible to ignore what happens to that character in the course of the narration? I would argue that it *does* matter, that fictional events possess both a **modeling function** of normative values and ideals and a **psychological function** as affective and cognitive reinforcement of dominant political discourse.

It is one thing to argue that astronomers miss the emotional and humanistic "magic" of comets and shooting stars simply because they diagram and categorize celestial movements, simply because they "see" primarily through the "central focus of their minds." It is another thing to underscore the need to *re-humanize* the analytical project so that *intuition and emotional resonance* need not be extracted like an abscessed tooth from our

understanding of both nature and art. It is another thing to encourage those who critique art to utilize both the “central focus” and the “peripheral focus” of their minds. Perhaps Whitman asks us not to lose sight of the fact that the best part of observation is the **affect** we feel while we are in the process of living. Perhaps Whitman asks us not to be so mechanical that we ignore the rapture that awaits a mind free of analytical bias. Perhaps Whitman asks us not to forget that the essence of our experience as a human *being* cannot be defined in words or analytical observations.

We do probably risk a bit of “scientific” clarity as we stray further and further away from facts and figures, diagrams and charts and into the mixed-up “looking glass” domain of self-reflexive cultural criticism. Yet, it is both theoretically premature (because we do not yet know enough about human perception) and politically irresponsible (because *not* to analyze ostensibly maintains the status quo) to conclude that specific analytical projects are doomed to missing most of what matters to human beings simply because analysis, per se, cannot appreciate the complexities of the human condition. Analysis falls far short of the expectations we have for it, but analysis is ultimately what enables us to navigate the seas of our political despairs. Analysis is ultimately what enables us to travel to distant planets and return without getting lost in the endless spirals of stars. Analysis allows us to glimpse our own delusions.

The art and science of political film criticism, therefore, is the art of *sensing*, the art of *feeling*, the art of *intuiting* the political significance of culture. *Hyper-political* cultural criticism is not undertaken purely as a *science*, in the positivist interpretation of this word,

but also as an *art*, which means that hyper-political cultural critics recognize that criticism is a uniquely human undertaking and, secondly, because it is interpretive, *hyper-political* cultural criticism is as imprecise as is any other human endeavor. Watts (1957) notes that,

By far the greater part of our important decisions depend upon “hunch”—in other words, upon the “peripheral vision” of the mind. Thus the reliability of our decisions rests ultimately upon our ability to “feel” the situation, upon the degree to which this “peripheral vision” has been developed.²⁶

In the beginning, *hyper-political* cultural criticism starts out as a science, but as the critic progresses in her ability to perceive through her “peripheral vision,” she drifts more and more into the art of political cultural criticism or a blend of equal parts science and equal parts art. In the end, the *political* cultural critic has not learned a “skill” comparable to carpentry or plumbing, but a *skillful art*.

Watts (1957) puts it this way: “To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it.”²⁷ Unfortunately, meta-theorists such as Bordwell fall prey to their own obsessions with “charts and diagrams,” they become used by science.

To criticize from a political perspective is to embark upon an examination of the social, historical, economic and psychological contexts within which we appreciate “texts.” To criticize popular culture is to see cultural curricula as constituting a pedagogy of values and ideals wherein dominant elites instruct the masses. The art and science of political film criticism is, therefore, to examine one’s personal constructs with a view toward discovering the dominant philosophy of life that undergirds political discourse. Media critics must be

imaginative and creative in their struggles to uncloak the politics of culture. The last word ultimately belongs to those who are marginal for theirs is the site of political contention. The difficulties of hyper-political cultural criticism are, perhaps, as daunting as the iceberg that sank the unsinkable Titanic. Nevertheless, our moral function as critics must always be to “perfect the power to perceive,” even if this takes a life time (and beyond). In the remaining chapters I will set forth the elements of a new approach to cultural criticism and I will suggest several ways in which to raise students’ awareness of political discourse in mediated communication.

Footnotes

¹Taylor, Clyde (1990) *Ibid*, Page 36.

²Taylor, Clyde (1990) *Ibid*, Page 33.

³Taylor, Clyde (1990) *Ibid*, Page 32.

⁴Polan, Dana Bart (1985). The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde, Michigan: UMI Research Press, Page 9-10.

⁵Polan, Dana B. (1985), *Ibid*, Page 10.

⁶ Such as Bordwell, who, in Narration in the Fiction Film (1985) expressed interested in how “films cue spectators to frame hypotheses and draw inferences” (1985, xiii), Gennete, who added *narration* to story (*histoire*) and plot (*recit*), Christian Metz, who in his The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema (1982) added psychoanalysis.

⁷Bordwell, David (1995). *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press., Page 49.

⁸Bordwell, D. (1995) *Ibid*, Page 30.

⁹Zavarzadeh, Mas’Ud (1991). Seeing Films Politically, New York: State University of New York Press, Page 10.

¹⁰Zavarzadeh, Mas ‘Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 10-11.

¹¹Zavaradeh, Mas’ Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 11.

¹²Zavaradeh, Mas ‘Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 11.

¹³ Everywhere one looks one can observe these psycho-social effects. If the “text” exhibits racial segregation, as most American texts do, then posttextual outcomes will be the immorality, the disunity, the lack of compassion, etc., that derives from segregation. If the “text” exhibits materialism, as most American texts do, then posttextual outcomes will be hedonism, rugged individualism, crime, etc.

¹⁴Zavarzadeh. Mas Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 11.

¹⁵Zavarzadeh, Mas Ud (1991) *Ibid*, Page 11.

¹⁶Zavarzadeh, Mas'Ud (1991), Ibid, Page 11-12.

¹⁷Zavarzadeh, Mas ' Ud (1991), Ibid, Page 13.

¹⁸Zavarzadeh (1991), Ibid, Page 13.

¹⁹Hooks, bell (1996). Reel to Reel: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies,
Page 199.

²⁰Hooks, bell (1996), Ibid, Page 210-211.

²¹Hooks, bell (1996), Ibid, Page 210-211.

²²Hooks, bell (1996), Ibid, Page 211.

²³Watts, Alan W. The Way of Zen, New York: Vintage Books, p. 27.

²⁴Watts, Alan W. (1957) Ibid, p. 21.

²⁵Hall, Jeanne (1994), p. 106.

²⁶Watts, Alan W. (1957), Ibid, p. 15.

²⁷Watts, Alan W. (1957), Ibid, p. 11.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RACISM AND CONSUMER CAPITALISM

As men emerge from time, discover temporality, and free themselves from “today,” their relations with the world become impregnated with consequence.¹

Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*

There is something unethical in the use of other people as an example of generalized depravity or negative behavior (Cose, 1993)²

Molefi Kete Asante, *Identifying Racist Language*

This chapter attempts to tie together a rather complex tapestry of ideas, many of which push the limits of commonly accepted notions of social “reality.” We are not quite accustomed to looking at history as paradoxically a “causal” instrument and a reconstructed “memory” that can never be proven. We are not quite accustomed to thinking of “reality” as something that can never be proven. And, to make matters worse, throughout this dissertation I have been harping on slavery as though it were taking place in our moment in the sun, as though slave traders and slave owners were apparitions, secretly in charge of Hollywood’s filmic discourse. I have collapsed time as though *it* did not exist. In a sense, I have argued that the ideals and values of slave owners and slave traders have, unfortunately, survived the Black Holocaust, albeit in altered form. In a nutshell then, both time and space are social constructions. We exist in an ever present “now.” Do we experience anything but “now?” So how can we talk of the “past” if it isn’t in some way connected to “now?”

The “shadow” of this possible “past,” that of the Black Holocaust, that of patriarchal white supremacy, is evident in the fact that we are still the penultimate *meritocracy* where entrance to the very “best” universities, trophies for outstanding athletic achievement, career advancement and literary awards mark a type of consciousness that defines success in terms of some sort of “superiority.” As for Hollywood, the Academy Awards focus the frenzies of excellence on the “superior” craftsmanship of films and “superior” acting, etc. The fact that Hollywood is, itself, a firm that is overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly white only adds fuel to the flames of gender and race-related meritocracy. If anything, Academy Awards should be showered on films like Julie Dash’s repertoire (e.g., *Daughter’s of the Dust*) which “tear away the veils due to wont and custom.” If the awards considered spiritual matters, many films that have won academy awards would have to turn them back in, which is not to argue that Academy Awards should go *only* to avant garde narrative films. It is, however, to argue that spiritual matters, apparently, have little influence on who wins awards these days.

If we *must* think in terms of “time,” then it is “time” to must free ourselves from the tendrils of today that tie us to the ignominy of yesterday. Meritocracy has no place in a moral future, a world where the Third Reich utterly proved its moral failings and slave labor created massive wealth for an immoral class of people calling themselves “capitalists.” When a society divided by class and separated from material prosperity reaches into the mysteries of biology to define its hierarchies of benefit, then that society has mirrored the malignancy of the so-called “master race” that defined evil for the Twentieth Century and that society perpetuates the evils of meritocracy. Is a handicapped person not as “valuable” as one who is not so “challenged?” Slavery was a huge part of our nation’s immoral past. Its disgusting

shadows linger in the present and suggest an ignoble future if we do not alter the mediated images that flicker into our living rooms and flood our local theaters.

Racism is no deceased mystery, it is the undying creature of slasher movies who straddles the lynched bodies and beaten backs of blacks whose progeny survives to this day in the ghettos of North America. White supremacy is alive in these United States, sublimated in “righteous” concepts of merit. Those who succeed, did it all on their own. In this respect, racism is communicated as though it were a righteous Protestant work ethic when in reality Nazi Germany learned from North America how to handle its greed and it has nothing to do with work, it concerns wickedness in the form of a superior ego.

Molefi Kete Asante (1998) points out that,

in the United States, the communication of racism is fundamentally the communication of Whiteness as status property. On the other hand, Blackness in its reference not so much to color as to former state of enslavement communicates a lack of status. This is why color alone does not account for the historical racial discrimination against African Americans. A Black person may be genetically more akin to Europeans in color than to the general genetic pool of Africans and yet be discriminated against in the American society. On the other hand, people from other regions of the world with no history of being enslaved in the United States may be darker than African Americans and not be the victims of the same discriminatory behavior. So, the problem is not so much one of color as it is one of historical relationships based on values granted to racial categories.³

The South’s slave plantations no longer exist, but the eugenic mindset that spawned them thrives in both the North and the South. When we free ourselves from this “politics of merit,” we will open our minds to time eternal causes of oppression. If Nazi Germany built ditches with women and children, then these United States of America provided them reasons to do so when these United States incarcerated so-called “Native Americans” on reservations,

renege on treaties with people of the First Nation and built estates of excess on stolen labor that serve the rich to this day. Let us face the historical “facts,” North American prosperity was paid for with the blood, toil, tears and sweat of slaves and the vicious displacement of the original inhabitants of these United States.

Our values are not very different from Henrich Himmler’s because we, too, see our “blood” as being more important than other “types of blood” in God’s Global Village. Will we spill America blood to save women, men and children outside of our borders or economic interests? Perhaps. Like Himmler, we seem to devalue those who do not “merit” our attention, our concern. The poor in these United States are “welfare slobs” who can’t or won’t “pull their own weight.” Little is said about the politics that send rich kids off to prep school and poor kids to overcrowded bathrooms that serve as classrooms in urban schools (Kozol, 1991)⁴. The elderly are “old coots and ferocious hags.” Little is said about their tremendous sacrifices over the years. Gays and lesbians are “perverts.” Little is said about their inalienable rights as human beings. The “handicapped” have been raised a few notches to human beings who are “challenged.” Little is said about how problematic it is to decide *anything* on merit. Do we not merit something more important than communal awards by simply being God’s children?

Meritocratic judgment races through the heart of consumer capitalism and we mistake it for the moral blood that pulses through this great evolving democracy. Greed is, unfortunately, the systolic pressure which we measure to define material success. Whiteness is the diastolic pressure we measure to define social worth. Himmler might have been interested in ditches to save German lives, but here in these United States we build estates

for pleasure. We do not seem to be the least bit morally outraged that children of all “colors” go hungry throughout this land while billionaires burn up cash in the form of expensive Cuban cigars. If we did care about such inequities, we (as a nation) would see to it that every man, woman and child had food to eat and shoes to wear before federal taxes were ever cut or before inheritance laws ever returned cash to the super wealthy.

Turning our attention to media, it seems that Himmler’s ghost floats through every film that ignores the savage inequalities of a public education in these United States. If Hollywood does not *at some point* address poverty here in America, it does not perform its moral function as a producer of art that “perfects the power to perceive.” Similarly, if Hollywood does not *at some point* deal with sexism, homophobia, racism, ageism and other forms of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination, it does not live up to its *moral obligation* to produce pro-social art. Can morals survive the onslaughts of consumer capitalism? Apparently not, for consumer capitalism instantiates greed.

Where values and ideals are cloaked in verisimilitude, there is no such thing as mere entertainment, which is not to argue that *every* film has to address “savage inequalities.” It *is* to argue that hyper-political cultural criticism *considers* cultural discourse in an unending continuum of multiple-dimensions. It refuses to focus on one drop of culture from the spigot of time when a lake floods the plains of social “reality.” And so, the meritocratic pulse of this nation is taken each and every time a patient lies down on our cultural couches for a psycho-spiritual check-up.

When Sigmund Freud, author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “anticipated the emergence of masses who would be manipulated by a dictator,” he probably did not foresee

our present spiritual conundrum. He died before television was invented and lived only through the very beginnings of film. Today, we are the masses who are manipulated not by a dictator but by an intertextual dream that interprets us. The “dream” is our Führer and it goes by the name of “consumer capitalism.” Hollywood is undoubtedly a part of our meritocratic “consciousness” as a nation. As such, it is Hitler’s “Final Solution” in a more palatable permutation. Hollywood’s messages, along with those flickering through televisions all across this land and those in various print media, have become our collective cultural “superego.” We are beginning to goose-step to an obsessive materialism that flickers into our minds like ghostly confetti from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of Will* celebrating a new permutation of greed.

Moreover, Hollywood has consistently used non-white Others as examples of “generalized depravity or negative behavior” (e.g., Italian mafiosi, Latino drug dealers, etc.). This is a starkly immoral practice that reeks of a “politics of biological purity.” There are so many negative stereotypes in mediated messages these days that it may be decades (if ever) before the psychological effects of these stereotypes can be mitigated or eliminated. Asante reminds us that,

the aim of the racist is to invalidate the other by attacking the character of the other or by denouncing the ideas brought by the other. One invalidates the other’s existence by claiming either in the verbal assertion or in the action that the person is nonhuman. It is this dehumanization of the other that introduces the most dangerous aspect of racist communication.⁵

The Third Reich used stereotypes to fill its gas chambers. Do we metaphorically desire to fill U.S. streets with little Hitlers? The tragic shooting in Littleton, Colorado by two Neo-Nazi

crazed youths ought to wake us up as a nation, not to mention the other killings across the nation. Should we really continue producing films that dehumanize women, Blacks, Asians, Latinos, differently abled individuals and other marginalized groups? As film critics, do we want to uncritically review such films? Do we really want movies like *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* and the so-called “New Jersey Trilogy” of Kevin Smith to flicker away in movie theaters uninterrogated? If we are film studies instructors, do we want to discuss only the aesthetics or the “formal features” of films while patriarchal white supremacy continues its deadly reign?

The New Dictator is “Greed”

Communication scholars need to interrogate a national psyche which has evolved a brand of capitalism that continually shifts and adjusts to parry the political thrusts of those who desire to kill a very unequal status quo. Political-economic analysts focus on the concrete structural practices of the economy and, by doing so, they can observe “causal” connections between social practice and those who have a hand in guiding such practice. Political practice in these United States attempts to deflect or “parry” the civil and moral rights of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and women. Marxism puts these social practices under a microscope. Baldwin (1998) correctly argues that,

Marxism can be used to describe other intolerances as well. White males are seen to dictate the structures of labor (e.g., who is hired, who manages, what the policies are) and are the dominant force in media politics, education and religion. This gives them the power to shape (intentionally or not) the notions of family, sexuality, and business leadership—indeed, the whole culture—in such a way that women are maintained in a subordinate role with less choice over their bodies and less influence over society. Thus, Knowles and Mercer

(1992) propose, “Capitalism, colonialism and patriarchal social systems are frequently identified as producing inherent race and gender inequalities which, in various ways, serve the needs of the systems they perpetuate” (p. 110).⁶

With sabers in hand, politicians and intellectuals who support the status quo lunge at the heart of Neo-Marxism. They disavow cultural analysis, claiming that it does not pass muster as a political weapon. They obfuscate the causal factors which (Neo-)Marxism brings to light by throwing dirt in the face of intersubjective reason. They challenge (Neo-)Marxism’s macro-level perspective because they are used to dueling with reading glasses strapped to their noses. Theirs is a particularistic world view which interrogates only theoretical “close-ups.”

In other words, anti-Marxists use specifics to “refute” generalities. They argue that there are no “generalities,” that (Neo-)Marxism is overly reductive. But, which theoretical stance is not in some way reductive? Which analytical perspective is capable of seeing every angle of every condition from an all-knowing center? The question that anti-Marxists *really* propose is: Do dominant elites agree in *everything* that they do? Of course not. It would be absurd to expect such. Yet, “All or Nothing” thinking demands that *all* capitalists act as a unit for them to be considered of a like mind. Clinical psychiatrist, and cognitive theorist, David D. Burns, author of the best-seller *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, writes that “All or Nothing” thinking refers to the “tendency to evaluate” social reality “in extreme, black and white categories” and adds that “absolutes do not exist in this universe.”⁷ It is very telling that “all or nothing” thinking is also referred to as “black or white” thinking. Perhaps race as a concept is to be attributable to such narrow-minded thinking? Burns adds that those

who suffer mental illness regularly employ “all or nothing” thinking amongst ten other “cognitive distortions.”⁸

Argumentation Through Nazi-Like Simplicity

Theorists who claim to “refute” (Neo-)Marxist analysis or political economy as a valid cultural perspective by arguing that there is no “monolithic ruling class” are actually brandishing a form of “All or Nothing” thinking. Either *all* corporate executives and *all* corporations act in concert *or* one can not theorize a “ruling class.” Either *all* cultural artifacts act as a monolithic ideological force (for *everyone*, adding another level of distortion) *or* one cannot theorize a “dominant ideology.” Burns argues that those who employ “All or Nothing” thinking do not see “shades of gray.”⁹ Yet, most of us will agree that the universe is composed of many shades, many hues, many perspectives—all of which might be helpful, if they can be tied in some fashion to concrete social realities or individuals’ lived experiences.

Freire observes that “human relationships with the world are *plural* [my emphasis] in nature.”¹⁰ Therefore, I would like to argue that it is through a plurality of perspectives that we heighten our critical consciousness and produce the possibility of spiritual enlightenment. Transrational analysts constantly shift between a variety of reductive positions, each of which hopefully offers grounded explanations of social situations and social practices. Theorists who mean well but cast aside history as a hopeless enterprise forget that history is embedded in the marrow of our bones. They forget that the “past” lives within the present moment as a continuous “now” in transrational analysis. There is no truly distinct past. Our bodies

stretch out in a continuum of time to time eternal. Just as psychoanalysts interrogate the analysand's "history," transrational analysts should interrogate national history (and before). Psychoanalysis, as psychotherapy, would be transrational except that it, unfortunately, "forgets" cultural context and multi-*generational* history.

The plain "truth" is that dominate elites *act* as a unit when their economic and political practices are juxtaposed against the backdrop of a "politics of historical privilege" which conveniently forgets the lived experiences of those who are oppressed. The economic structures of consumer capitalism work to maintain a very unequal distribution of wealth, period. All but a fool would deny this. For political reasons, there are those who wish to "parry" such conclusions. They argue that ideology is a fiction, that no conceivable group of people produce cultural artifacts, that ideals and values are free-floating signifiers whose meaning shifts with the wind. These harbingers of a Neo-Nazi simplicity employ all-or-nothing thinking to obfuscate the multiperspectival and multiconditional significance of social "reality." They push various theories one or more steps beyond their social utility. As we saw in the previous chapter, Derrida used "deconstruction" as a "parry" when he argued that Paul De Mann, who wrote articles sympathetic to Nazi ideals, was *really* writing anti-Nazi material for a Nazi paper. Derrida's abstractness or obtuseness in picking apart signifiers (in eternally "deferring" their meaning) is a prime example of *political confabulation*.

Aligning the Political Economy with Social Practice

(Neo-)Marxist theory has given us a macro-level perspective which aligns the psychological formulations of political economy with social practices—social practices, which like dominoes fall one after the other in very discernible historic configurations. Marxist or Neo-Marxist theories explain the inscrutable political decisions of government. For example, David C. Korten (1995), in *When Corporations Rule the World*, makes the following historical observation:

In 1886, in a stunning victory for the proponents of a corporate sovereignty, the Supreme Court ruled in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* that a private corporation is a natural person under the U.S. Constitution—although...the Constitution makes no mention of corporations—and is thereby entitled to the protections of the Bill of Rights, including the right to free speech and other constitutional protections extended to individuals. Thus corporations finally claimed the full rights enjoyed by individual citizens while being exempted from many of the responsibilities and liabilities of citizenship.¹¹

By focusing on *economic* structure, one can more clearly discern how a particular a particular consciousness is instantiated in the means and relations of production. Like a piece of an epistemological puzzle, the *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* decision of 1886 “fits” the kind of thinking that *could* reify corporate entities. Like a construct falling neatly behind its assumption, it makes “sense,” i.e., it appears both “logical” and “reasonable” that corporations *could* be “entitled to the protections of the Bill of Rights.” But, it is not logical and reasonable because as soon as corporations enjoy the full rights of individual citizens, those who control corporations have the upper hand.

I do not mean to argue that the means and relations of production determine *every* aspect of one's consciousness, *every* aspect of one's social practice, *every* aspect of one's social existence. I do, however, suggest that *the means and relations of production, as social practice, informs the constructs, consciously articulated or subliminally sensed, that individuals employ to make sense of their social worlds.* From this perspective, from this syncretic view of constructivism and Marxism, The means and relations of production is a “deterministic” force, albeit a “deterministic” force which is qualified by one's level of critical consciousness. Those who recognize the connections between social practice and consciousness necessarily work to change social practice that is inherently oppressive. That is the nature of a consciousness that is both spiritual and empirical.

From a syncretic angle of inquiry, then, economic structure “determines,” for those who lack critical consciousness, both political rights and, *generally speaking*, a national philosophy of life. Economic structure, by means of normalized social praxis, limits, to a certain extent, what “makes sense,” what political entities *can* do in terms of rendering practical decisions and prescribing “logical” social action—action that does not openly appear to be bizarre to most citizens. *In this sense, economic structure “determines” not only a generalized collective consciousness, but also future generations of consciousness because citizens are, for the most part, born into economic structures.*

For example, regarding the *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* decision of 1886, Korten concludes that,

In being guaranteed the same right to free speech as individual citizens, they [corporations] achieved, in the words of Paul Hawken, “precisely what the Bill of Rights was intended to prevent: domination of public thought and

discourse.” The subsequent claim by corporations that they have the same right as any individual to influence the government in their own interest pits the individual citizen against the vast financial and communications resources of the corporation and mocks the constitutional intent that all citizens have an equal voice in the political debates surrounding important issues.¹²

The Court, in this decision, *reified* economic structure through the common economic interests of capitalists. The Court, from a certain perspective, allowed economic power to wrestle political power from the hands of the common people and place it with corporate entities that exist in the privileged forums of capitalism. The American people, therefore, loss a great portion of their political and economic autonomy when corporate entities were allowed to influence collective political fate. Individuals gathered together in political unity is not the same as individuals gathered together in economic unity. Those gathered together in economic unity are inextricably separated from a “politics of spiritual unity” because morality (or spiritual unity) can be no part of economic privilege (by definition, because such privilege should not exist).

One of the nation’s outstanding economists, Milton Freedman (1962), in *Capitalism & Freedom*, observes that,

Political freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men. The fundamental threat to freedom is power to coerce, be it in the hands of a monarch, a dictator, an oligarchy, or a momentary majority. *The preservation of freedom requires the elimination of such concentration of power to the fullest possible extent and the dispersal and distribution of whatever power cannot be eliminated—a system of checks and balances.*[my emphasis] By removing the organization of economic activity from the control of the political authority, the market eliminates this source of coercive power. It enables economic strength to be a check to political power rather than a reinforcement.¹³

Economic strength *does not check* political power, it *controls* political power. Friedman was worried that “political authorities” would dominate and control organizations of “economic activity.” It is the other way around. Organizations of “economic activity” have become reified in U.S. politics to the point where corporations have more rights and privileges than individual U.S. citizens, because corporations have more resources to bear on changing public policy.

In these United States, political coercion has become “subtle” in that it has disappeared behind the ministrations of an economic structure that has satisfied most basic human needs and created artificial “needs” (e.g., TV, film) to lead U.S. citizens around like farmers who use carrots to direct their donkeys. Donkeys are not critically conscious enough, nor smart enough, to recognize that they are being lead. Even if they do recognize this fact, they might not care because they are getting what they want. But for humans, most of us have the capacity to be self-directive irrespective of extrinsic rewards. We have the capacity to filter even our intrinsic rewards. Yet, because we are satiated, we allow epistemological traps to push us into a very dangerous new millennium.

“The Dictator’s Silent Sermon”

By dominating public thought and discourse through mediated communication, corporate elites achieve not only political control over the masses the way Hitler’s propaganda machine did years ago but *hegemonic* control as they subliminally influence the personal constructs that individuals all across America (and, perhaps, worldwide) unconsciously assemble to negotiate social “realities.” The captains at the helm of Corporate

America steer this nation toward a philosophy of life and a **subconscious national psyche** which defines and reifies values and ideals supportive of patriarchal consumer capitalism. The evidence is overwhelming for those who choose to acknowledge it. Only those who lack a critical consciousness or those who hide behind an openly feigned naivete will miss this abundant evidence.

There are those who (for political reasons or a dire lack of self-reflexivity) contest the notion that dominant elites have any more of a voice than “average” citizens. Bettig (1996) identifies some of these as “pluralists” and concludes that,

Pluralists assume that there exist countless numbers of organized interest groups in society, including those representing capital and labor, and that these groups, or interests, compete on essentially equal terms preventing any one of them from holding permanent power or advantages. Though pluralists may concede that an upper class does indeed exist in a capitalist society, they would not agree that it somehow dominates public opinion, policy planning, and policy-making or that it is able to hold absolute sway. From this perspective, the upper class is simply one more “interest group” competing for its share of the pie.¹⁴

Clearly, the Supreme Court’s decision in 1886 that private corporations are (from that point on) “natural citizens” afforded with all of the rights under the U.S. Constitution paved the way for corporate elites to shape state policy through their ever-expanding financial influence, as well as to shape the national psyche, in later years, through their control and dominance over the production and exhibition of cultural artifacts (e.g., films). The court’s decision, itself, testifies to a national psyche that is already capable of shifting political power without individuals recognizing this shift. A critically conscious individual, on the other hand, recognizes the causal “realities” of specific political acts such as reifying corporations

and investing them with all the rights and privileges of U.S. citizens. A critically conscious individual recognizes that economic structure, in a sense, “determines” social “reality” when one is not conscious of one’s epistemological and ontological assumptions.

From the perspective of developing a heightened consciousness, pluralists are either not self-reflexive enough to “see” how economic structures influence social perception and social practice or they see this but they are politically expedient in that they simply choose to ignore what they know in their hearts to be true. They do so for economic gain. This is not to argue that structures of the economy exert a *physical influence* on “social reality” or that they exert a *wholly deterministic influence* on all concepts; but, instead, my argument is that structures of the economy exert a primary *ideational influence* on one’s *tendencies* to perceive social “realities” from within a specific constellation of personal constructs—those which fit the social practices within which consumer capitalism derives its name. And, consumer capitalism, as an economic and social practice, “determines,” in so far as individuals inauthentically follow social prescriptions, social relations.

Bettig (1996) offers a more holistic analysis of state theory which, in a sense, fleshes out my argument that corporate elites exert *tremendous* political and cultural influence in the U.S. through communicative practices such as the creation and exhibition of filmed-entertainment. Bettig proposes three general spheres of state theory to explain such political influence: (1) “the first of these, dealing with the relation between the capitalist class and the state, is often characterized as an ‘instrumental’ approach, for it seeks to show how the ruling class is able to use the state as an instrument of domination,” (2) “the second general sphere...draws attention to the relationship between the logic of capital and state policies,”

and (3) a theoretical position, “what Carnoy called ‘the class struggle theory’ and Jessop labeled the ‘class theoretical position.’”¹⁵

Regarding the first sphere of political influence, Bettig states that the “instrumental approach” tends to,

emphasize human agency at the level of consciousness; it remains near the level of surface appearances as it seeks to explain *how* members of the ruling class are consciously able to protect and extend their interests through the exercise of power in private (market) and public (governmental and nongovernmental) institutions. The focus here is on the constitution of the ruling class, its control of the corporate sector (including media firms), its influence on the U.S. polity, and its relationship to state officials in the policymaking process.¹⁶

What this means for the art and science of political film criticism is that mainstream film critics ought to be ever conscious of how films communicate the interests of the ruling class, which is not to argue that anti-capitalist films cannot or will not be produced and distributed. Capitalists, to some extent, believe that, as the saying goes, “resistance is futile.” What does it matter that there is minuscule resistance when the majority are mesmerized by materialism?

Partnership with the Devil

For example, films such as Paramount’s *Trading Places* (1983) might, at first, appear to contradict the values and ideals of the ruling class by suggesting that rich folks are self-centered, that they play around with people’s lives as though people were instruments of their pleasure. A critically conscious “reading” of this film unearths the following anthropological discoveries: (1) only two rich individuals appear to be “nasty” (Ralph Bellemy and Don

Ameche portray these characters), (2) nothing in the film suggests that *capitalism* is the problem—that avarice, rugged individualism and obsessive materialism collectively problematize consumer capitalism from an intersubjective moral position, and (3) Eddy Murphy (playing a black con artist) serves as a “from poor to riches” exemplar that instantiates the fairness of consumer capitalism by suggesting that anyone can “make it” if he or she tries hard enough. This film argues that economic success awaits all who can figure out how to play the market. *Trading Places* demonstrates that it is not a question of money making money, it is a question of being “street smart” on Wall Street. Murphy is just the guy. He’s got savior faire. And, with this in mind, the subliminal (to some extent) political motif of *Trading Places* is that “all you need is *smarts* to become rich in America.”

Films are not, however, the only media to misrepresent the political problems of class. Bettig and Hall (1998), in an article titled “The Hole in the News,” address “how the subordination of the news hole to the advertising groundfill affects the quality of information essential for citizens to be active participants in a democratic society.”¹⁷ They observe how news media ignore issues of class structure in the U.S. and become willing partners to the ideas of the ruling class. They note that,

the editors of *Forbes* regularly come up with tortured interpretations of their list of “the 400 richest people in America” to perpetuate a myth of classlessness. The introduction to their 1996 survey, for example, assures us that we can: “Forget America’s 50 families. Forget old money. Forget silver spoons. Great fortunes are being created almost monthly in the U.S. today by young entrepreneurs who hadn’t a dime when we created this list 14 years ago.” Even if that were true, at least half of those on the list started out with \$50 million or more—the equivalent of a good lead-off from third base. Finally, we have to agree with the folks at United for a Fair Economy, who read the report and concluded that “the key to great wealth in America is still choosing wealthy parents.”¹⁸

Bettig and Hall conclude that “the Forbes 400 reinforces false notions of upward mobility in what is actually a very rigid U.S. class structure.”¹⁹ They astutely point to Bill Gates, top dog on the infamous Forbes list for five straight years, and argue that journalists should not so easily “forget the silver spoons” that feed the rich and (in)famous. In very plain English they make their political point:

Not so fast. Gates started on first base. Son of a professional couple, he attended Harvard, where he met Paul Allen (#3, worth about \$22 billion) before dropping out. His big break came in 1980 when IBM contracted him to develop the operating software system for its first PC. *Gates and Allen did not develop that software—they merely bought QDOS for \$50,000, renamed it MS-DOS, and rode to fortune on the backs of Big Blue.*[my emphasis] With MS-DOS in at least 80% of the world’s PCs, Microsoft used its market power to stifle competition. Contrary to popular belief, much of Gates’ estimated \$58 billion is based not on smarts, but questionable business practices. Most of it, moreover, is the result of contributions to computer technology produced by scholars and researchers and funded by taxpayer money.²⁰

Money makes money here in America, it has been that way from the start. To suggest otherwise is pure hypocrisy. The evidence is everywhere. One only has to look. Media “experts” such as journalists, film critics and communication scholars need to become critical *researchers* because mediated messages can so easily become the *software* to our souls.

Bettig argues that the second general sphere of capitalist state theory includes “several variants” which stress,

the unconscious, structural determinations that organize and shape human activity within the capitalist economy and the state, and they seek to penetrate the level of surface appearances to explain *why* the state intervenes into

economic matters and *why* the objective structures that reinforce class domination and inequalities work as they do.²¹

These “unconscious, structural determinations,” help individuals, as does any part of their lived experiences, to form personal constructs which, in turn, organize and shape *how* they perceive social “realities.” In a nutshell, then, Bettig suggests that the second general sphere proposes that “the state derives its form and function as it responds to market failures.”²² From this perspective, the state responds to the economy in a way that assists the ruling class. For simplicity’s sake, one might just say, “The state is not in a habit of biting the hand that feeds it.” Neither, I should add, is an individual who derives happiness from a particular economic system likely to psychologically bite the philosophy of life that creates his demands and then satisfies them (to a certain extent). More reasonably, one would expect that an economic structure which satisfies basic human needs would survive for a long time, as has consumer capitalism.

Bettig argues that the “third general sphere of capitalist state theory” points to what “Carnoy called ‘class struggle theory’ and Jessop labeled the ‘class theoretical position.’”²³ Such a position, Bettig observes, sees the “state as part of an ideological apparatus that serves to legitimate existing class relations by obscuring them” and adds that “Mosco argued that through the interaction of strategic forces and state structures the state becomes a ‘vehicle for maintaining class power, without appearing to do so,’ precisely because of its structural bias toward capital.”²⁴ Communication scholars need to problematize mediated communication as “discourse from above,” as ruling ideas that filter down through reified corporate decisions into the actual decision-making practices of government. An examination

of *who* finances films and *who* finances political parties is crucial to the development of critical consciousness in film studies students. For mainstream critics, the art and science of political film criticism is to interrogate class struggle (or the *lack* of it) in Hollywood's filmic discourse. Films which *could* effectively interrogate class struggle, such as *Trading Places*, need to be discussed in terms of the erasure of the state's complicity in obscuring the politics of class.

Regarding class struggle, Bettig concludes that "Giddens was correct when he criticized structuralist approaches for eliminating the human subject by reducing human individuals to bearers of structural determination."²⁵ A more holistic and therefore more complex view of how the political economy affects the national psyche is to recognize that social practices reify what is considered "natural," "correct," "proper" or otherwise "acceptable" to the majority as they simultaneously reflect a potential that has chosen such a "reality." It is not that economic structures *determine* politics in a "black and white" sense of direct *cause and effect where there is nothing but cause and nothing but effect*, but rather that economic structures carry with them their own personal constructs, their own "logic," which subconsciously as well as consciously influences the formation of values and ideals congruent to such economic forces. Therefore, if an individual's personal constructs are not congruent with the eco-political base of a given culture, that individual is much more likely to radically oppose the government or "misfire" within its "norms" because s/he does not *understand* or appreciate "the system."

If popular culture is an integral factor in the creation and establishment of a "national psyche," to interrogate popular culture from the vantage point of the political economy is to

examine film criticism and film studies within the political dimensions of classism. In a very particular sense, prejudice, intolerance and discrimination are psychologically and philosophically *built into* the economic structures of consumer capitalism. This might sound a bit strange, but it begins to make more sense when one tries to imagine the same levels of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination in America in an eco-political system in which *wealth* is equally distributed amongst the populace and *political power* is *not* concentrated in the hands of an oligarchical elite.

Social Alienation and Issues of Class

One of the most prevalent “isms” of social alienation in U.S. culture is **classism**, which Hecht et. al (1998) loosely define as *the social structures and forces which reproduce and maintain class inequality*. Class inequality, as it is used in this dissertation, refers to economic and political *differences* whereby an identifiable group maintains a privileged social position over other groups, which I have been referring to as “those who are marginal.” The marginal include but are not restricted to gays, people of color, women and the financially disenfranchised.

Regarding the “communication of classism” in U.S. culture, Moon and Rolison (1998) state that they “follow Hall (1981b) and Bourdieu (1979/84) in departing from the primacy of the economic to suggest that the cultural also is constitutive of class.”²⁶ A more holistic or inclusive analysis of social “reality” would paint a “wide-angle” portrait of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. This is not to argue, as Moon and Rolison appear to argue, that cultural analysts benefit little from positing the *economic* as a preeminent

definition of class. Economic structures play a very *critical role* in defining not only social relations but the national psyche.

The hyper-political cultural critic is a culture-analyst which loosely parallels a psychoanalyst. The difference is that a culture-analyst looks into the cultural past not the personal past. By taking this perspective, one can readily imagine how alternative economic structures employed at the very birth of this nation might have changed our *perspective*, our personal constructs, our values and ideals, our social expectations, our national psyche. Herein lies the paradox—as hyper-political film critics we must first isolate and play with variables and ideas, then we must reconstruct the whole and examine it in its greater existential and phenomenological essence. We paradoxically look through particularized lens to observe generalized social “realities.”

For example, if everyone had equal access to capital, if basic human needs (e.g., health care, sustenance, environmental protection, etc.) were satisfied without exception, if there were no impediments to the free exchange of ideas and products throughout the globe, it would be hard for a rational individual to imagine the current state of affairs, where rugged individualism is an ideal, where (generally speaking) each “person is out for herself,” where prejudice, intolerance and discrimination fit the economic puzzle of consumer capitalism like a dictator fits unmitigated social and economic privilege.

Consumer capitalism, in other words, proposes too many contradictions for political theorists to dismiss economic structure as an *overly*-reductive angle of academic inquiry. True, each angle of inquiry imports its own bias. Yet, to eliminate bias is to eliminate a thorough investigation of any given issue. Knowledge is *never* without bias. So, the question

arises: How might one angle of inquiry be legitimately eliminate another? When an angle of inquiry is invested with the contradictory lived experiences of those who are marginal, that angle of inquiry needs to be seriously questioned. By interrogating the lived experiences of those who are marginal, cultural analysts formulate more complex portraits of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. An angle of inquiry is disconfirmed when social experience demonstrates its spiritual failings.

In a nutshell then, the economic structures within which societies operate form behavioral templates which both inculcate and instantiate the values and ideals that adhere to those structures. By narrowly focusing on economic structure which is, itself, a macro-level angle of inquiry, culture analysts observe the “causal” connections that others miss.

A Politics of Abstraction

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, in *The German Ideology*, noted that in class societies,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of a society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, *generally speaking* [my emphasis here!], the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.²⁷

Their observation is qualified by the phrase “generally speaking,” which goes a long way toward deflecting the arguments of some intellectuals who insist that since “false consciousness” (i.e., failure to understand one’s authentic human interests) does not infect *everyone* equally, it must not therefore exist. Those who wish to ignore economic structures

will also, likewise, ignore a level of consciousness that arises out of examining oppression from within the political economy of a given society.

This is another form of bias that we might call a “politics of epistemological privilege.” Those affected by this bias fail to discern that no particular ideology or perspective, by itself, accurately reflects the world. Each angle of inquiry offers a potentially valuable contribution to an understanding of how people behave relative to the social conditions of their lives *and* their cognitive, affective and spiritual experiences. A “politics of epistemological privilege” is rather complex, in terms of heightened levels of consciousness but, in a nutshell, I would suggest that it defines situations in which individuals either cannot or will not “step into another’s moccasins,” cannot or will not seriously consider the validity of a point of view (or angle of inquiry) because they deem that perspective to be “imperfect” and its perceived benefits to be “insignificant” or “invalid.” By adopting such politics, individuals become *too abstract* in their analytical project. A heightened consciousness, a *critical* consciousness seeks the middle road. A critical consciousness seeks to balance abstract thinking with the common sense of collective human *experience*. This balancing act is admittedly difficult, but critical consciousness (for many) does not come easily.

Admittedly, a narrow focus on economic structures misses many other “causal” aspects of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. But, that is not the point. The point is that both language and reason are imperfect means, i.e., reductionism is unfortunately unavoidable but paradoxically not without value, when it is constantly grounded in concrete lived experiences. In the end, cultural anthropologists both profit and lose by restricting their

focus. Their “profit and loss” statements actually disclose the research intervals they share in common with multiple contexts. Culture-analysts profit by observing the macro-structural aspects of social practices grounded in real lived experiences, they simultaneously lose by missing out on micro-structural aspects of human experience, which various psychological theories and alternative ways of knowing (e.g., spiritual) might more effectively elucidate.

By continuously shifting between powerfully reductive and enlarged holistic analysis, cultural anthropologists elevate their critical consciousness to “critical mass” where multiple social realities define a complex social world, one in which *paradox* disappears and reappears in evolving intervals of insight. In other words, economic structures both determine and contribute partially to oppression. Because of “free will” (a psychological factor), individuals can escape the “intellectual force” of the ruling class. As Marx and Engels stated: “*Generally speaking* [my emphasis], the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to the [ideas of the ruling class].” Hopefully, the “mental programming” of mediated discourse can be undone. It is our nature as human beings to resist control. But just because we *can* resist (to some degree) does not mean that we *will* resist. We resist social conformity relative to our respective levels of critical consciousness which is why the academy as well as mainstream cultural critics have a moral obligation to help “perfect the power to perceive.”

Social Context as a Producer of Personal Ideas of the World

Marx and Engels imply *why* an analysis that focuses on economic structures is so critical to our understanding of oppression. They argue that,

If now in considering the course of history we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence, if we confine ourselves to saying that these or those ideas were dominant at a given time, without bothering ourselves about the conditions of production and the producers of these ideas, if we thus ignore the individuals and the world conditions which are the source of the ideas, we can say, for instance that during the time that the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts honour [sic], loyalty, etc. were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie the concepts of freedom, equality, etc. The ruling class itself on the whole imagines this to be so...For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aims, to represent its interests as the common interest of all members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.²⁸

The implication is that by ignoring economic structures one also ignores certain elements of human motivation. The ruling class is highly motivated, to say the least. They also have the most to lose, materially speaking. To understand their *motivation*, their political drive and their hegemonic practices one must not turn away from fact that economic structures are loosely held in place by popular consensus.

The plain fact of the matter is that without some measure of consensus, all governments dissolve. If each oppressed person was willing to die (like Patrick Henry claimed he would when he said, "Give me liberty or give me death!"), then there would be revolution in the streets and consumer capitalism would be no more. The possibility of heightened self-actualization (through one's critically conscious "free will") opens up this possibility each and every day. One's *consciousness* ultimately determines whether one will formulate a revolutionary praxis or not, whether one will act to change the status quo or

simply tolerate it. Marx understood that *consciousness* is, indeed, a critical force in social praxis. In his own words he states:

In the social production of their means of existence men enter into definite, necessary relations which are independent of their will, productive relationships which correspond to a definite state of development of their material productive forces. The aggregate of these productive relationships constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a juridical and political superstructure arises, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life. *It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social condition that determines their consciousness.*²⁹

Human beings are obviously born into *social situations that they have not devised*. They do not have a say in how their worlds are organized. It is therefore, to a certain extent, **predetermined** how individuals will fathom social “reality.” In other words, social consciousness is, to a certain extent, predetermined. This is, however, not to argue that one’s consciousness can never be altered or it does not evolve over time.

George Kelly’s (1955) *Commonality Corollary* to his *Fundamental Postulate* proposes that “a person’s [cognitive] processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events” states that “to the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person.”³⁰ From this, it follows that (again, *generally speaking*) consumer capitalism is a consciousness into which we are born and one in which we are raised *To a certain extent, we think alike*. To notice epistemological and ontological similarities in one’s personal constructs is to recognize what Marx was driving

at: *the material conditions of one's life influences one's consciousness*. The social behaviors one observes throughout ones' so-called formative years conditions one's "social, political and intellectual life." Can one overcome such "conditioning?" Obviously, or Marx could not have theorized his theory of worker alienation. To truly understand Marx, one needs to have a mind that sees the gray spaces of culture. Black and white thinking obscures Marx's meaning. No wonder Marx said, "I'm not a Marxist." Too many people apparently viewed his theories from an "either-or" mentality.

As a matter of theoretical precision, should we say that economic structures "influence" social, political and intellectual life? The reader might have noticed that in the citation above Marx specifically states (if we are to trust the translation) that, "The mode of production of the material means of existence *conditions* [my emphasis] the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life." Marx's use of the word "conditions" might be construed to soften what some have called the rigidly deterministic cause-and-effect relationship Marx *supposedly* perceived between the economic structure and the superstructure, the economic structure and a capitalist consciousness. To interpret Marx as one who proposed that economic structure "determine" consciousness in an *either-or* fashion is to interpret Marx from a very limited view of communicative and psychological processes. Transrational analysts do not interpret social "reality" through such *overly* reductionist lens.

Marx need not (and, indeed, *should* not), nor need any theorist, be interpreted so rigidly. We should not expect *any* theorist to represent social "realities" *perfectly*. Post-formal thinkers never look for such precision. Having such expectations actually negates each and every argument because there are no *perfect* theories, no *perfect* representations of

reality. Those who reject Marxist theory as “overly reductive” without recognizing its contributions to our understanding of human behavior, may even employ a “politics of epistemological privilege” to further their own political expediency. Some will not recognize Marx’s contributions simply because they are not critically conscious enough to do so.

Moon and Rolison’s perspective steps into the *gray intervals* between culture and economics and offers, as a consequence of this “slippage,” a unique analysis which, in my opinion, should not be dismissed, even for its obvious shortcomings. To ignore their argument or to ignore Marx’s argument is to miss the intervals where they intersect in transrational enlightenment.

Moon and Rolison (1998) suggest that,

styles of consumption come to define and communicate class and further posit that the roots of classism are partially to be found in the contestation, communication, and evaluation of what we call “class-culture commodities.” Although this frame is akin to Jameson’s (1984) analysis of culture in the postmodern era, we extend it to suggest that *cultural commodities inculcate and reproduce class relations of domination* [my emphasis]. Following Hall (1981b), they become a modality through which class and class relations are lived and through which class domination and the reproduction of class inequality (which for the purposes of this chapter, we term “classism”) is manifested.³¹

In addition, Moon and Rolison note that there are “three working principles that are useful in thinking about how class and classism work at a variety of levels.”³² The first of those three principles they call “hypervisibility,” which refers to the “invisibility” or “hypervisibility” of those who are economically and culturally marginal.

Moon and Rolison (1998) state that,

Institutionalized classism functions to make lower valenced class groups *invisible*, and thus unworthy of recognition (e.g., “nonpersons” such as janitors and maids), or *hypervisible* and marked as symbols of ridicule (e.g., “rednecks,” poor “White trash”), disdain (e.g., welfare recipients), and/or fear (e.g., the underclass, gangs). Rather than a dichotomy, invisibility and hypervisibility are simply inverted strategies of the same type in that they objectify dominated class subjects. In other words, they are strategies that allow the treatment of certain class subjects as “persons of no consequence” (Folb, 1994).³³

With this in mind, the art and science of political cultural criticism is to examine, to analyze and to confront the invisibility/hypervisibility of those who are economically and culturally marginal. Political film criticism examines popular culture and comments on Hollywood’s propensity to ignore class or to portray class as an event without social cause. Film studies teachers and mainstream film critics need to interrogate the commodities that Hollywood produces with a view toward explicating Hollywood’s intertextual obliteration socio-economic class.

Shirley Steinberg (1997), while researching and writing her dissertation entitled “The Cultural Curriculum: Youth Pedagogy and Film” discovered that, as she became a critically conscious cultural anthropologist, she could not ignore issues which, essentially, rose up out of the political economy. Her observations regarding class and “acceptable” social behavior are quite startling:

Recalling films of the 1980’s, films that I defined as “empowering youth films,” I decided I would investigate the misbehavior of high school youth in hopes of creating a pedagogy of empowerment through misbehavior. I went so far as to announce that, indeed, I was creating a pedagogy of misbehavior, a way of making meaning from teaching that would incorporate the playful misbehavior in the films I was so taken by. However, twelve years had passed since my first viewing experiences of these “empowering youth films;” [her definition of the films she saw] who I have become in those years was a different viewer, a different consumer. Consequently, my plans for creating

the *new pedagogy* were thwarted, instead; my political and ideological self revealed to me that indeed these films were of misbehavior, a misbehavior that is privileged and exclusive to one particular group in our society. This group is the one that “gets away with it,” and recovers a way of life that is dedicated to the oppression of women, non-Whites, poor and other disenfranchised people. This group of misbehavers [young, white, male and privileged] is allowed, indeed, *entitled* to misbehave, with sociopathological fervor in perpetuating the dominant culture.³⁴

As *hyper-political* cultural criticism, Steinberg’s observations reveal a consciousness that empowers middle—and upperclass white males while it simultaneously disempowers “women, non-Whites and other disenfranchised people.” The art and science of political film criticism is to culture-analyze films in relation to their historical, social, psychological and political contexts. It is to recognize patterns.

Steinberg noticed a *pattern*—that young white males were allowed to “get away with it” while others (in mainstream filmic discourse) were not. She employed the art and science of political film criticism to unearth the subliminal undercurrents of power. Had she not been critically conscious, she would not (on her own admission) have noticed *the patterns of social interaction* that she did notice in a collection of U.S. films from her youth. She would not have observed “hidden” class relations in the intertextual marketplace of representations. She would not have observed the *invisibility* of certain classes and specific marginalized “others” in so-called “empowering” narrative situations.

Freire observes that “the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created.”³⁵ Steinberg, in this regard, was no mere spectator. As a critically conscious pedagogue, she unearthed several of the hidden “myths” of class—that race, gender and socioeconomic privilege are

ultimately covalent elements of class. In other words, race, gender and socioeconomic privilege share common phenomenological bonds with the “genetic manifest destiny” of middle—and upper class white males. Race, gender and socioeconomic class reflect the prevailing patriarchal white supremacy in contemporary American culture.

Moon and Rolison’s (1998) second principle of how class works in U.S. culture defines “who we are *not*.”³⁶ They call this principle “Alter-Ideology and Difference” and propose that,

what we call ourselves and others as well as how these other groups are described plays a role in establishing and maintaining hierarchical, valenced relationships. But it is not just self-definitional, particularly when a group has less power than others. What a group is called and how it is described by other groups, particularly those in power, plays an important role in social relations.³⁷

Representation in films (and other media, of course) is crucial to the development of critical consciousness. Film studies students need to see how media structure social relationships, how narrative discourse sets the stage for political disenfranchisement, how political discourse frames social issues so that the privileged are portrayed as valiant, righteous rulers (with a few quirks) or their true power is never revealed. Because films are perceived in their existential particularity—that is, each film is perceived as a unique narrative structure telling a specific story essentially unrelated to the historicity of Hollywood—those films that actually do portray the privileged or ruling classes are absorbed into a consciousness that focuses on dramatic principles of difference rather than narrative principles of similarity. Critically conscious individuals, like Shirley Steinberg, see beyond specific instances of

empowerment to the grander levels of patriarchal white supremacist empowerment in the macro-conceptual flow of culture.

By way of example, Moon & Rolison (1998) provide the following example of expedient political discourse, discourse which should be considered part and parcel of what Aaron D. Gresson III (1995) calls a “recovery rhetoric”:

One of the more popular discourses put forth by right-wing politicians is the so-called empowerment of the poor. As Herman (1996) explains, “The poor have been enslaved by the liberals, who lured them into dependency on government handouts from which they cannot extricate themselves without the help of compassionate politicians” (p. 10). Thus, in the interests of “Christian charity,” the “slaves” must be released and be allowed “free” choice. One such act of “emancipation” is New Jersey’s Right to Choose Act, which forces “former slaves” of welfare into a labor market woefully unprepared to incorporate them.³⁸

The art and science of political film criticism must address this propensity of the privileged to continually (re)define social “reality” in terms of their own personal constructs of privilege.

Psycho-Social Growth

Aaron David Gresson III (1995) in *The Recovery of Race in America* characterizes the constant (re)defining of social reality, as **rhetorical reversal**: “*a pivotal tactic with a most interesting logic. It pertains to the power to name, define, and negotiate reality.*”³⁹ For one to truly achieve enlightenment, one must continually struggle with one’s beliefs and continually redefine the social world in ways that *expand* meanings through multicultural

dialogue rather than “reshuffle” meanings to suit a very particular “philosophy of life.” To clarify my meaning, I turn to George Kelly’s Theory of Personal Constructs which is,

based upon the philosophical position of **constructive alternatism** [my emphasis], the notion that there are many workable alternative ways for one to construe his world. The theory itself starts with the basic assumption, or postulate, that a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events. This is to say that human behavior may be viewed as basically anticipatory rather than reactive, and that new avenues of behavior open themselves to a person when he reconstructs the course of events surrounding him. Thus a thoughtful man [sic] is neither the prisoner of his environment nor the victim of his biography.⁴⁰

Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory suggests that those who employ a “recovery rhetoric” fail to reconstrue their social worlds to achieve greater reconciliation between their philosophies of life and multicultural “realities.” They are, in a sense, prisoners of their expectations. They live with such contradictions as “all men are created equal” while some are slaves and others are not. Because such “prisoners” have very negative views of people of color, women or other groups that are marginal, it is easier, or psychologically expedient (if you will), for them to reconfigure social events to fit their expectations than reconfigure their world hypotheses. A synthesis of Gresson’s and Kelly’s insights suggests that “rhetorical reversal” is, perhaps, an unconscious (or automatic) attempt to avoid **cognitive dissonance**, what Leon Festinger (1957) defines as the psychological tendency to maintain a coherent set of beliefs.

A good example of Gresson’s idea of a “recovery rhetoric” is Michael Douglas’ *Falling Down* (1992) in which Douglas portrays an angry white man who has reached the limits of his patience. He has been “dumped on” all of his life, or ever since his days in Vietnam. The last few straws are heaped on his overworked back at the start of the narrative.

He is stuck in traffic on a sweltering summer day. All around him, are threatening minorities and urban congestion. He is accosted by Hispanic youths, ripped off by an Asian clerk (or store owner), threatened by a very “queer” Neo-Nazi. It is, of course, politically significant that Douglas portrays a white man who “fights back” but one who fights mainly non-white Others. The art and science of political film criticism fully interrogates such “recovery rhetoric.”

Hyper-political film criticism recognizes the dominant elite and observes how this group is represented in films. It does not always matter which economic class is portrayed in a movie. That “whiteness” can represent *all white people*, regardless of their class, indicates the ability of constructs to represent, on various levels, particular sets of expectations and/or particular world hypotheses. Film studies teachers need to discuss the political dynamics of films such as *Falling Down*. They can do so by getting their students to question various representations.

For example, film studies teachers might ask their students to mentally rewrite *Falling Down* so that Michael Douglas’ character, the personification of whiteness, encounters more than just “oppressive” minority characters. **Rewriting** is a powerful pedagogical strategy that enables students to *create* ideology. As a conscious and purposeful act, *rewriting* engages not only the critical intellect but the subconscious fantasies that accompany the writer’s often uninterrogated social expectations. Such a process encourages students to reconfigure their personal constructs in more holistic terms. And, because it does this, it will be an emotionally exhausting cognitive enterprise for many students. Educators should tell their students that rewriting, with specific goals in mind, will not be a simple

process nor an easy one. The student will very much be challenged by the task. But so too should the popular press film critic re-write in her mind each movie she reviews. In this fashion, her critique becomes culture-reflexive because she consciously considers the political message(s) of the films she reviews.

Noticing Rhetorical Reversal

In a variety of ways, the ruling class continually struggles to maintain its privileged position. To do so it must also continually *redefine* parameters of political conflict. In other words, the ruling class continually diverts attention from the real substance of disenfranchisement by continually suggesting alternative “solutions” to the unavoidable contradictions of consumer capitalism. There are no *true solutions* except to dramatically alter economic structures. Mainstream film critics and film studies teachers need to be vigilant enough to recognize when films achieve *rhetorical reversal*, when narrative discourse defines privilege as the penultimate reward of sacrifice, intelligence or fortuitous inheritance, thereby theoretically eliminating the political, social and economic structures which sustain such privilege. A **politics of privilege** “force fits” the social, political and economic forces which govern prejudice, intolerance and discrimination into a philosophy of life that supports patriarchal white supremacist political practice.

The third principle of how class works in U.S. culture Moon & Rolison (1998) call “Unidirectionality: Marking Difference.” They hold that,

whereas members of any class culture may express *class prejudice* (i.e., in the form of personal attitudes), *classism* is a top-down practice made possible by class privilege (i.e., unearned advantage and conferred dominance) and

power. This claim is supported by the ways in which difference tends to be marked in general. For instance, recall that the alter-ideologies always express who we are not. This marking of who we are not tends to work unidirectionally in the sense that dominant classes tend to mark difference in relation to those classes situated below. In short, difference always is marked *against* those whom one fears being conflated. This marking of difference carries an evaluative component in that who we are is conceived as superior to who we are not.⁴¹

With respect to mainstream U.S. comedy, the art and science of political film criticism interrogates the American comedic fixation with ridicule, which is, perhaps, the most powerful psychological method (for white people) of marking who “they are not.” The art and science of political film criticism asks the following questions (1) “Do programs such as *The Simpsons* and films such as *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* inculcate xenophobia?” (2) Does the ruling class benefit from such ridicule? In what ways? and (3) How does the ruling class play this “we-belong-and-they-don’t” card to maintain the status quo?

Moon & Rolison argue that classism is not “an attitude,” not some sort of “false consciousness” that resides solely in misguided “ideas.” They propose that,

by focusing on classism as false consciousness, we participate in dominant hegemonic discourse, which suggests that egalitarianism is a shared American value and that prejudice is seen as a *deviation* from American ideals (Wellman, 1993). This line of reasoning suggests that once individuals’ faulty assumptions about others are corrected, they no longer will maintain prejudicial beliefs. Again, this approach deflects attention from social arrangements that produce and reproduce unequal class relations and reflects an untested and, we would argue, a historically unsupported assumption about the order of U.S. society. We argue that investigations of social class, classism, and class privilege need to be closely tied to analyses of structural arrangements and/or social discourses about class.⁴²

While I agree with Moon & Rolison that classism is much more than a faulty “attitude,” that classism is instantiated, as they argue, in the structural arrangements of consumer capitalism and, furthermore, propagated in somewhat homogenized social discourse, I disagree with their apparent rejection of the need for simultaneously developing an emancipatory praxis based on heightened levels of critical consciousness which fully recognize the attitudinal thrusts of patriarchal white supremacy. Their point that cultural criticism is more than just focusing on “false consciousness” is, of course, accurate and well-taken. Transrational analysts know that both attitude and structure are covalent bonds of social privilege. It is not an either-or situation. Multiple “truths” exist in a multidimensional social “reality.”

“False consciousness,” as I am using it in this dissertation, refers to a naive consciousness, a state of being which is *anything but self-reflexive*. Paulo Freire states that, “For men [sic] to overcome their state of massification, they must be enabled to reflect about that very condition.”⁴³ I propose, as does Paulo Freire, that to develop critical consciousness we need to continually question our personal constructs. I believe that “massification” is a psychological condition which transfers responsibility from economic or social structures to so-called genetic or biological fictions. I propose, as does Paulo Freire (although he does not use the following terms), that we need to change our personal constructs so that we more readily see the ways in which economic structure and political practices inform massification. Freire argues that “critically transitive consciousness is characterized by...refusing to transfer [such] responsibility.”⁴⁴

And so, those who ignore the political economy in their analysis as well as those who do not acknowledge levels of consciousness (some of which may be “false”) transfer the

political economic responsibility of consumer capitalism for oppressive social practices to other “systems” or social practices. Economic structures organize acceptable behavior according to those values and ideals, beliefs and attitudes which sustain those economic structures. Baldwin (1998) states that,

strict Marxism looks at intolerance in terms of the means and relations of production. Marx held that social reality (e.g., religion, culture, family relations, education) is based on the most important aspect of one’s daily life—work. If one were able to own one’s own tools and implements of production (i.e., “mode of production”), then one could have a complete and fulfilled life. But in a capitalist system, the owners took over the spinning wheels, the sewing machines, and the factory equipment. This gave them economic power over the workers, which in turn “alienated” them from the products of their own hands (see “Capital” in Tucker, 1978; Smith & Evans, 1982).”⁴⁵

Relations and means of production inform one’s social reality in that a good portion of one’s time is invested at work where the cyclical performance of certain tasks serves as a phenomenological ritual that reinforces powerful political and rhetorical means. By merely conforming to social practices such as work schedules, hierarchical relations of power, and weekly pay ratios based on hours worked, workers tacitly accept social practices that continuously reinscribe the values and ideals of consumer capitalism. Economic structure cannot be divorced from a consciousness that does not flat out refuse it. A consciousness that politically refuses the economic structure works to alter or remove that structure. By definition, then, we are a nation mesmerized by our economic and social practices.

Film studies teachers might show Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) as both an example of worker alienation in an oppressive capitalist society *and* “resistance” that seeps through capitalist channels of communication because it is “resistance” that is, perhaps,

in its most tolerable form—comedy. The Cinema Arts Review of August 1 - September 3, 1998 states that *Modern Times* is,

A hilarious satire about the tragic dehumanized control of the work process in which the individual worker is viewed merely as another cog in the assembly line of production. Except for automation, this film mirrors the conditions of work for many today.⁴⁶

Students might discuss whether comedy can *ever* be effective political or moral rhetoric. Might comedy not “lighten” political arguments in some way, making oppressive issues appear less onerous? Could viewers watch *Modern Times* and conclude that their lives were not quite as bad as Chaplin’s, so why lament so much?

Adorno, in correspondence with Benjamin, actually makes a direct reference to *Modern Times* (1936), writing that “the laughter of the audience at the cinema...is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism.”⁴⁷ Chaplin’s physical comedy, it seems for Adorno, essentially subverted order with its manifest content only to restore it with its latent suggestion that comedic hyperbole is all humor, exaggeration. Comedy, as a counterhegemonic *tool*, may actually be the weakest possible moral rhetoric, unless it somehow blatantly ridicules the “ends” without provoking significant questions about the “means.” “Sadistic bourgeois art” in the form of comedy, on the other hand, is quite effective indeed because there are external economic and political practices to subconsciously bolster its visible social effects.

Films such as *Life is Beautiful*, an Italian comedy about the Holocaust, focuses attention on a very instructive part of history that some are now choosing to deny. Because *Life is Beautiful* acknowledges the Holocaust, it is pro-social art. Because it “speaks” of the

horrors of the Holocaust through several scenes in which the protagonist's child asks questions about the gas chambers and other atrocities and because it shows a mountain of emaciated bodies, it does not really slight the horrors of the Holocaust and it can appropriately, in my view, be considered pro-social art.

In terms of its political pedagogy, *Life is Beautiful* is narratively positioned to introduce immature minds to a self-reflexive psychology. In a sense, the film can be considered psycho-mediated therapy. The *Centre Daily Times's Weekender & More* section (March 12-18, 1999) describes the film thusly: "Roberto Benigni co-wrote, stars in and directed this tragicomic fable about a happy-go-lucky [Jewish] bookseller who, for his son's sake, pretends the Nazi concentration camps are an elaborate game, thus turning a death-defying experience into a life-affirming story." The film demonstrates the human capacity for **denial** and as such it offers a wonderful pedagogical moment to film studies teachers and parents who wish to teach immature minds (minds of an ordinary consciousness) about psychoanalytical insights such as "defense mechanisms." Educators might remind students that those who are against affirmative action *deny* the historical relevance of slavery and its relationship to contemporary racist social practices. Those who *deny* that there is any such thing as hegemonic discourse fail to see the intertextuality (i.e., the historicity) of cultural artifacts. Those who *deny* white privilege fail to see generation after generation of disenfranchisement.

Life is Beautiful may be faulted for its failure to turn to religion or spirituality for comfort in humankind's darkest hour but it cannot, in my mind, be faulted for "poking fun at the Holocaust." It clearly does not do this. One could, however, argue that *Life is Beautiful*

implies that one could survive the most heinous atrocities if one simply “keeps up one’s spirits through **denial**.” If the protagonist had prayed once in a while, those who object to the film on spiritual grounds *might* be more willing to accept its “life-affirming story.” As such, hyper-political cultural critics balance the “consciousness” cultural artifacts bring to the political arena against the narrative weaknesses they project. Considering that we are imperfect creatures producing imperfect artifacts, the hyper-political cultural critic makes allowances for such imperfections and does not condemn that which ultimately serves something of a pro-social purpose.

Each and every cultural artifact can be condemned just as easily as any theory can be condemned. It is not a question of judgment but a question of judicial balance. Does *Life is Beautiful* address the horrors of the Holocaust? Yes it does. Does it ridicule “politically correct” things? Yes it does. The protagonist makes fun of eugenic discourse when he strips to his shorts and states that his belly button is “superior” to other belly buttons. When it comes to *denial*, parents and film studies teachers can point out that Hitler turned his head when Jesse Owens (a black athlete) won an Olympic medal. Comedy can be an effective pro-social tool. When it comes to *denial*, film studies teachers can point out how the root causes of classism are forever denied in Hollywood’s hegemonic discourse.

According to Baldwin, “Marxist theory has been applied to various forms of intolerance, but the arguments share a common core: The owners of production do what they must to keep control of production. Race, for example, is either invented or appropriated by the owners of production to keep labor cheap.”⁴⁸ This connection might be missed by cultural anthropologists who disavow the political economy of a region (or state) as a significant

determinant of its social relations. By focusing on economic structures, cultural anthropologists observe elements of social practice that conform to the “needs” of the ruling class, which is not to argue that Marxist theory is the *only* theory which bridges the gap between social practice and social cognition. Marxist theory highlights economic structures and offers a perspective which garners wisdom and insight which other perspectives cannot possibly garner.

Moreover, a Marxist analysis unceasingly recognizes the cyclical practices of greed. Racism, as we know it, was a psychological “crutch” with which this nation propped up its vast economic wealth. Today racism thrives and survives for many reasons but perhaps the most salient reason racism survives is that **equal opportunity** translates into fewer white males in corporate boardrooms and positions of political power and this scares the white supremacist “powers that be.” Equal opportunity also means that economic practices will change—this both terrorizes and infuriates an oligarchy that cuts and distributes the nation’s economic pies.

To dismiss Baldwin’s observation that racism serves an economic purpose as “impossible” given that *all* owners cannot possibly be rabid racists or stubborn sexists is to apply “black-and-white” thinking to the mix of eco-political colors that inform social “reality.” Of course there is no empirical “single mind” in the body of all owners of production that acts by strict consensus. There is no “single mind” in single individuals, so why should we expect single minds in a corporate body? We struggle within ourselves against competing possibilities, yet we are somehow each and every day very “real” to our existential “selves.” To call for unanimous consensus to validate the notion of a “ruling

class” is to slyly deflect attention away from the central tendencies of consumer capitalism by examining slight deviations from the mean.

The Marxist argument should not be taken as an inflexible monolithic determinism (i.e., as “pure” fact) but rather as a mathematical *propensity* for certain things to occur at certain historical periods based on reigning economic structures. Owners may profess anti-racist views but until they profess and implement anti-racist social practices they speak with forked tongues and act with venomous political, economic and social effect.

In other words, race, sexism, classism and ageism—all fit the economic structures of a Neo-Nazi capitalism wherein the idea of subordinate classes of people supports an eco-political status quo in which the young are valued as more productive workers than older folk, women produce, care for and train future workers of America, and “Others” serve as a biologically naturalized work force. Hitler’s template for a new “philosophy of life” fits all too easily and all too ominously over our present rhetorical, political, economic and social practices. As technology “improves,” obviously what constitutes a valuable work force changes with changing times. So, we should not expect that women will always be subservient, that people of color will always be second-class citizens, that the elderly will always be socially de-valued. Both women and people of color have made it into the Bourgeoisie; however, it is important to realize that class division will never change while capitalism exists because wealth cannot be equally distributed on a capitalist economic platform. Such a platform is, by definition and demeanor, inclined at a steep angle of entitlement. At this particular historical moment, racism, sexism and ageism serve the economic interests of the ruling class. White men overwhelmingly constitute the ruling

economic class in the U.S. and they have historically offered little objection to racism, (hetero)sexism and ageism because these prejudices assist them in their day-to-day avarice. The so-called “Texaco Jelly Bean Affair” is yet another example of corporate white supremacy dribbling through the closed boardrooms of corporate enterprise. We are, undeniably, a Neo-Nazi state simply because we live and die by social merit. As a nation, we inhale the vulgar repressions of race and we exhale the insidious ramifications of gender.

What is not likely to change over time is the need for subordinate classes of people to support capitalist avarice. So, while it is not by any means a certainty that racism, (hetero)sexism and ageism will survive evolutionary capitalism, it is however a certainty that classism will survive, in some form, because capitalism cannot exist without subordinate classes—this is the penultimate concrete example of how economic structure *determines* social practice! This is the ipso facto “causal explanation” for a *precipitate social reality* which those who disavow Marxist theory miss entirely.

Paulo Freire puts it this way, “The more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be.”⁴⁹ To ignore the political economy in theorizing prejudice, intolerance and discrimination is to miss the “true causality” that instantiates today’s divisions of power. Those who desire to maintain the status quo will, rather obviously, deny any and all theories which provide insight into the complex “causalities” of social domination. They will challenge each and every perspective which might heighten one’s critical consciousness. They will propose abstract theories which counter each claim that transrational analysis proposes because they stubbornly **deny** that their horizons of meaning ignore the immense contradictions of capitalism as it is pitted against a true

democracy and spiritual evolution. Dominant elites subvert, to the best of their abilities, any and all attempts to clarify the concrete economic, political and social determinants of oppression because these attempts suggest their “removal from office.”

Their stubbornness is itself a political act, one which they may never admit, one which might be an *unconscious* expediency but nevertheless propels the vicious, cutting blades of avarice. Such expediency suggests not a homunculus inside each person directing “recovery rhetoric” but a cognitive-affective proclivity to structure social “reality” through the very rigid organizational templates of Hitler’s original “philosophy of life,” borrowed from earlier social practices in these United States of America, perpetrated against First Nation peoples.

George Kelly would call these templates “maladaptive personal constructs.” Through my “wide-angle” lenses, I call these “maladaptive constructs” **culture**—culture in the sense that life is culture and life is informed by our respective “philosophies of life.” If popular culture is our inherited “philosophy of life,” as I argue it is, if popular culture ultimately defines the “moral” templates we use to order our social worlds, as I argue it does, then we live in a Neo-Nazi age with Neo-Nazi ideals and Neo-Nazi values. Were previous generations ruthless, cut-throat, degenerate or otherwise fiendish? Perhaps, yes. But this does not deflate World War II as the preeminent event of our age. Nazi Germany was an “evil empire” but it was only a permutation of our own interests. We all have the historical “facts” at our disposal, from which we may either learn and live or forget and die. Will we move into the next millennium with hope or fear? Will we create pro-social narrative art? Or, will we fear a future of ever-evolving Nazi-like permutations? Are we to fear a world where merit

is measured biologically and death is but a goose-step to the left or right of a constantly shifting but always “recovered” status quo? The “inevitable inconclusiveness of liberalism”, washes away in the vicious certainties of Nazi villainy. Exemplars of evil form the surest models of ontological ignorance. In the following chapter we will interrogate the “isms” that define oppressive political practice in these United States of America. Our goal, like in this chapter, is to define the elements of a new approach to cultural criticism.

Footnotes

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⁷Burns, David D. (1980). Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, New York: Avon Books., Page 32-33.

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²⁰Bettig & Hall (1998), Ibid, p. 5.

²¹Bettig, R. V. (1996), Ibid, Page 118.

²²Bettig, R. V. (1996), Ibid, Page 118.

²³Bettig, R. V. (1996), Ibid, Page 120.

²⁴Bettig, R. V. (1996), Ibid, Page 120.

²⁵Bettig, R. V. (1996), Ibid, Page 120.

²⁶Moon, Dreama G. and Garry L. Rolison (1998). "Communication of Classism" in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht, Ed., (1998) California: SAGE publications, Page 123.

²⁷Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, ed. C. J. Arthur (1970), New York: International Publishers, Page 64.

²⁸Marx & Engels (1970 reprint), Ibid, Page 65-66.

²⁹Karl Marx, "Preface," in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, trans. N. I. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), pp. 11-12.

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³²Moon and Rolison (1998), Ibid, Page 135.

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³⁴Shirley Ruth Steinberg (1997) "The Cultural Curriculum: Youth Pedagogy and Film" Dissertation (Ph.D) The Pennsylvania State University, Murry R. Nelson, Thesis Advisor.

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CHAPTER NINE

A MECHANISTIC VIEW OF “REALITY”

Many persons, bound to a mechanistic view of reality, do not perceive that the concrete situations of individuals conditions their consciousness of the world, and that in turn this consciousness conditions their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality. They think that reality can be transformed mechanistically, without posing the person’s false consciousness of reality as a problem or, through revolutionary action, developing a consciousness which is less and less false. There is no historical reality which is not human. There is no history without humankind, and no history for human beings; there is only history of humanity, made by people and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them. It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their conditions as objects by the status of Subjects—the object of any true revolution—requires that the people act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed.¹

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

When Americans tell me the language I use is for the Third World, I tell them you have a Third World in your First World. It is enough to go to Indian reservations and ghettos to know that.²

Paulo Freire, at 72 years of age.

Meaning is lost as our lives and institutions are decontextualized by a form of social amnesia. Severe political consequences emerge from this amnesia, this atrophy of memory. When the past is forgotten, its power over the present is hidden from view.³

Joe Kincheloe, *Toil and Trouble*

The consequences of Kincheloe’s “social amnesia” are various forms of recycled oppression: racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, and ageism—all the major “isms” of this century. More will probably be added as post-formal thinkers unfurl more emancipatory flags of political insight. What does it mean when Americans ignore the ghettos, the reservations, the inner cities and the social chaos of the lower classes, as Freire suggests? It means that

their *consciousness* is not sufficiently raised for them to discern the political and spiritual effects of macro-level structures of symbolic interaction. It means that most Americans have conveniently forgotten a hundred years of slavery. It means that most Americans have conveniently forgotten the struggle women endured to get into college, into the courts and into politics. These are just a few examples of “social amnesia.”

Particularly troubling is that *many* Americans shift through the stiff gears of Paulo Freire’s “mechanistic view of reality” as they head toward Kincheloe’s “severe political consequences.” The fact of the matter is, we have always had a Third World in our First World but our philosophy of life has taught us to ignore it. We think of ourselves as a classless society even though we occasionally speak of the “middle classes” and the “filthy rich.” Our narrative art reflects all the trappings of a middle-class life. The poor are essentially reduced to the occasional beggar in urban streets and the filthy rich, if we ever get to see them, are often ridiculed or portrayed as vicious money-grubbers (e.g., *Dallas*) that fight amongst themselves. No matter how “progressive” our narrative art gets, it rarely explains or demonstrates how the rich exploit the poor. For narrative art to perform its moral function, it must perfect the power to perceive exploitation. If it does not do this, in all likelihood, it serves the status quo.

As interesting as it is, perhaps, terrifying, Kincheloe (1991) argues that “social amnesia” has allowed a bit of white supremacy to survive in our public schools:

In his studies of the eugenicists and their influence on the way educators came to view intelligence and school performance, Steven Selden traces how social visions shaped eugenicist research design. Ideological conceptions of what constituted civilization, human progress, and a good society could not

be separated from the formulation of eugenicist research. *What is ironic in this case, is that many of the instruments devised by eugenicist researchers to measure learning, intelligence, and ability are still employed in modern education.* [my emphasis] Thus, at an unseen level the value assumptions of the eugenicist movement are embedded in contemporary educational practices (Cherryholmes, 1988:115; Selden, 1984:282).⁴

When the past is forgotten, its power over the present is formidable. If we are to become critically conscious we must recognize the political muck that spawned our quotidian obsessions. We must be able to trace the origins of two centuries of “hand-me-down” politics, economic and social practices that generated the ever-present “Us” vs. “Them” mentality that has infected our spiritual sense of justice.

In *personal* psychoanalysis, Miller and Dorpat (1996) argue that,

the organization and content of a person’s mind are the products of his or her actual, interpersonal history and that the interactions he or she forms with others as well as his or her interpretations of these interactions reflect this developmental history.⁵

As for *social* psychoanalysis, I suggest that we ought to look at our history as a nation in terms of intergroup interactions to see how these might reflect our psycho-social developmental and the meanings that we attach to our politics. The fact that the value assumptions of the eugenicist movement is still a part of contemporary educational practices points to repetitive patterns of a very vulgar political point of view.

Joseph W. Slap and Laura Slap-Shelton (1994), who envision a schema model of *personal* psychoanalysis, assert that “patterns of experience and fantasy are replayed repetitively throughout life and are the proper focus of clinical exploration.”⁶ Likewise, I

argue that intergroup experiences throughout our nation's history and white supremacist fantasies are the proper focus of critical exploration of narrative art. Hyper-political cultural critics, I argue, should focus on repetitive motifs that reflect political attitudes toward those who are marginal. Slap & Slap-Shelton continue their analysis by drawing upon the language of two other respected social science researchers:

Teller and Dahl (1986) assert that the credibility of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline lies in the study of the repetitive elements in the clinical data. They write (as Arlow has often observed), "In the patient's account of the events of his life...he repeats endlessly, as every clinician knows, though the cast may change, and the situations may differ, the plots endure with structural tenacity" (p. 765)⁷

This bricolage of schema theory and *personal* psychoanalysis I carry into my rendition of *social* psychoanalysis by suggesting that certain "plots" historically endure throughout filmic narration. These enduring "plots" or "political motifs" suggest that we as a nation manifest a mechanistic view of reality. Moreover, I suggest that social amnesia regarding the one hundred-year history of the peculiar institution and its attendant horrors propels the collective monotony (generally speaking) of our creative imaginations. The repetitiveness of our collective mechanistic view of reality will be discussed in the following chapter, which concerns itself with negative stereotypes that have survived the formative years of film to this day.

Incidentally, from an empirical standpoint the repetitiveness of our mechanistic view of reality lends *social* psychoanalysis its claim to being an empirical "truth," just as the repetitive elements of clinical data provide empirical support for clinical (as opposed to

theoretical) notions of psychoanalysis. For the remainder of this chapter, however, I will redefine “false consciousness” as pathogenic schema that “function spontaneously and pervasively color” our nation’s “perception of events and relationships”⁸ and I will offer pedagogical practices to alter such a mechanistic view of reality.

“Neo-Positivism” as “False Consciousness”

Unfortunately, most of us have been raised and nurtured on a steady diet of epistemological and ontological assumptions some have called “neo-positivism” (Kincheloe, 1991). “Neo-positivism” is a mechanistic view of reality that proposes four major themes. Kincheloe calls these: (1) **Scientism**, which holds non-science in disdain, dismissing “ways of knowing such as religion, metaphysics, and ideological issues” as “unverifiable nonsense,” (2) **The positivist conception of science**, which maintains that “science should be concerned with the explanation and prediction of observable events” to the exclusion of that which is unobservable [emotions, affect, intuition, etc.], (3) **The doctrine of scientific politics**, which states that “arguments in politics should be settled in the same way that arguments in engineering or medicine are resolved. Engineering and medical arguments are settled not on the basis of personal values, nor on the basis of the status of the proponents or opponents, nor as a result of the oratorical prowess of the disputant; indeed, the positivists argue, they are settled on the basis of objective aspects of the subject in question.” and (4) **Value freedom**, which contends that the “knowledge that emerges from inquiry should be value free. Indeed, values are the nemesis of facts and are viewed as potentially irrational

responses. . . . Methodological choice should proceed outside the realm of values, and the researcher should aspire to value-free inquiry.”⁹ These four “themes” comprise a view of reality that ignores a tremendous amount of context. In this sense, we can be said to have a “false consciousness” even as we paradoxically exercise “free will.”

Kincheloe (1991) provides a rather brutal example of social science research conducted within the false consciousness of neo-positivism:

When positivistic research ignores the wider context and the multitude of other variables which attend it, the conclusions drawn from such studies typically suggest innate differences (often hierarchical) between the sexes. Studies, for instance, that look only at gender differences in math achievement might discover (accurately) that boys do better than girls on particular standardized math tests. *By not examining results contextually, not pursuing explanatory factors, positivistic researchers fail to consider the panoply of reasons for the different scores* [my emphasis]. Appealing to the accuracy of their statistics as authority, researchers fail to confront the quick and dirty simplicity of their research design. Thus, ‘what is’ appears to be only what has to be; the public is provided with further ‘proof’ that boys are naturally better than girls in math (Jayaratne, 1982:152-3).¹⁰

Likewise, film critics who ignore historical and intertextual contexts and the multitude of political, social and economic variables that inform the production and consumption of film, they create “accurate” horizons of meaning but not *contextually significant* horizons of meaning. The quick and dirty simplicity of their research design levels off the status quo by “assuring” us that a-political film criticism is valid, moral, scientific, honest and truly “objective” while it is just the opposite. Continuing with Kincheloe’s four major themes, positivists’ concern with “explanation and prediction of observable events,” the number “2” theme, undoubtedly governs those critics who exclusively employ “textual schemata” and

other methods of analyzing form to the exclusion of approaches which interrogate the emotional resonance and the political significance of narrative film.

The “False Consciousness” of Race

A mechanistic view of reality stands behind a very hypocritical construction of “race.” For example, Operario & Fiske (1998) report that,

Although most people cannot agree on a singular definition of race, most members of U.S. society can easily generate a list of races. Many standard lists commonly include Asians, blacks, whites, and Latinos. Some lists might also include native Caribbeans, Australian aborigines, Arabs, and Malay or Pacific Islanders. Yet others might refer to Mediteraneans, South Asians or Indians, and Hews as distinct races. *The categories on any particular list are likely to depend on one’s cultural context* [my emphasis], one’s prior experiences with out-group members, and one’s own racial identity. Indeed, a lack of a singular definition of race contributes to the inconsistency between people’s ideas of racial categories. This confusion exists because *racial categories are human inventions with weak scientific validity* [my emphasis]. Individuals with their own biases created the taxonomies that we call racial categories; over time, societies have accepted these human-made taxonomies as fundamental truth. But the arbitrary and fallible nature of racial taxonomies is evident throughout history, as racial criteria change constantly over time, and different cultural contexts invent their own racial categories (Omi & Winant, 1986).

What is truly significant, *from a political perspective*, is that it is apparently easy for some to see macro-level views of “race,” yet they cannot turn themselves around to see macro-level views of “ideology” and “culture.”

Interestingly, David Theo Goldberg (1993), author of *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, believes that racism is unique to our modern age. Apparently, the very same mechanistic view of reality that fragments and structures the world according to

universal laws also produced *racial* differences between human beings. That geneticists have difficulty finding “race” genes, doesn’t seem to matter to some radical politicians. In looking at the historical evolution of “race,” Goldberg observes that,

if premodernity lacked any conceiving of the differences between human beings as racial differences, modernity comes increasingly to be defined by and through race. The shift from medieval premodernity to modernity is in part the shift from a religiously defined to a racially defined discourse of human identity and personhood. Medieval discourse had no catalog of racial groupings, no identification of individuals or groups (or animals for that matter) in terms of racial membership; by the mid-nineteenth century, on the other hand, Disraeli could declare without fanfare in *Tancred* that ‘all is race’. In three and a half centuries the world had of course become dramatically different, and a central strand of that difference was the growing impression of race upon human self-identity and upon identification, human and animal.¹¹

When one *truly* observes the universe, one “sees” chaos as well as “order.” Post-formal thinking considers that although we may be able to formulate general “laws” which describe the universe, these “laws” probably exist only in the sense that observable events are infinitely overdetermined, which is to suggest that equilibrium or homeostasis is the direct observable result of immeasurable variables implying “order” in relatively short stretches of time-space.

Stereotyping as a “Mechanistic View of Reality”

Today, if we wish to discover an ever-evolving intersubjective morality, we must discover the biased ways in which we perceive. We have but five senses. Some say six. One may be underdeveloped in the majority of people. With these five limited senses, we presume

to know our social worlds and the universe at large. It is when we recognize the “scaffolding” of our mechanistic views of reality that we actually transcend the “logic” of our senses. Perhaps the easiest mechanistic view of reality to study empirically is the act of *stereotyping*. Social psychologists argue that group stereotypes are maintained by “biased” cognitive structures (Hantzi, 1995; Maurer, Park & Rothbart, 1995; Kunda & Oleson, 1995; Hewstone, Macrae, Griffiths, and Milne, 1994). One of the elements of a hyper-political approach to cultural criticism is to consider interdisciplinary evidence for such “cognitive bias.”

In E. Bruce Goldstein’s (1989) college-level text titled *Sensation and Perception* he writes:

one of the messages of this book is that there is not always a 1 to 1 correspondence between physical properties of stimuli and our perceptual response to these stimuli. Familiar examples of this lack of correspondence are provided by visual illusions like the Muller-Lyer illusion in Figure 1.8 and the Wundt-Hering illusion below. Although the physical stimulus in the Wundt-Hering illusion contains two straight, parallel lines, we see these lines as being curved. It is, therefore, important to distinguish between the physical stimulus and our perceptual response to the stimulus.¹²

Dr. Goldstein, an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, who was also a post-doctoral Research Fellow in the biology department at Harvard University, writes in Chapter 1 that “much of what we take for granted in perception is really very complex and, in some cases, not well understood.”¹³

One of my arguments in this dissertation is that an “ordinary consciousness” unknowingly employs *schemata*, which are patterned ways of perceiving social reality. A heightened “critical consciousness” attempts to transcend such patterned ways of perceiving

social “reality.” Few of us have not experienced “mis-perceptions” (we thought we saw something and later concluded that we had been mistaken). Our brains appear to pattern or “structure” what we perceive so that we *can* miss many “invisible” contexts, many of which might overburden our sensibilities. In other words, some social science researchers hypothesize that at the psychophysical level of “reality” the relationship between stimuli and perception appears to be *mediated* (channeled) through neural structures or “scaffolding” that organize what we perceive. These neural structures can be used to understand mechanistic views of social “reality.”

It is this *mediation* that is of great interest to social psychologists who study **stereotypes**, which are, more or less, often ridiculous attitudes that people have about other people. Henwood et. al (1993) states that,

The term stereotype is derived from the Greek words “stereos,” meaning form or solid, and “typos,” meaning the making of an impression or model. It referred, originally, to a metal plate, cast from a mold taken from a body of movable type, which was used in printing (Miller, 1982). In its social scientific usage, the term was first introduced by Walter Lippman in 1922. He described stereotypes as “pictures in our heads,” or phenomenological simplifying devices which play an important role in enabling people to make sense of an otherwise “too busy, too complex, and too fleeting” (P. 16) external world as it impinges on our senses. This latter meaning of the term persists in social psychology today, together with general acceptance of the idea that stereotypes represent the cognitive component of attitudes held toward human groups or social categories.¹⁴

Social psychologists, therefore, believe that we simplify our environment by “categorizing” or “clustering” objects into groups.

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When *people* become the object of such cognitive “categorizing,” **stereotyping** rears its ugly head. Gilbert & Hixon (1991) report that we categorize more often when we are “preoccupied.” Bodenhausen (1991) reports that we do so when we are “tired.” Biernat (1991) reports that those who are too young to appreciate diversity tend to categorize. And, Kaplan et al (1992) reports that we categorize more often when we are “pressed for time.” Whatever the reason, stereotyping is a mechanistic view of reality which many social psychologists agree is “hard to shake.”

Goldstein uses an “ambiguous figure” to demonstrate to his college students that “perception is not only influenced by the properties of the sense organs and the physical properties of the stimuli reaching the receptors, but it is also influenced by the subject’s past history and experience with the world.”¹⁵ I invite you to study Figure 1.13 below, then to close your eyes (as suggested by Goldstein to his students). Now study Figure 1.17. Do you see a “rat?” Goldstein suggests that if you had seen Figure 1.18 first, a “man version” of the “rat,” you would have been more likely to perceive Figure 1.17 as a “man.”¹⁶ It seems quite reasonable to suggest that a positivist mentality teaches us to look for patterns.

Moreover, it is truly astounding that the observer’s role in creating his own social “reality” apparently does not even have to be conscious! John A Bargh, from New York University, and Paula Pietromonaco, from the University of Michigan, wanted to determine if social stimuli presented subliminally (beneath subjects’ awareness) would influence conscious judgment. In a 1982 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Bargh & Pietromonaco (1982) exposed subjects to a hostile-word list, presented

on CRT screens, then asked them to rate a “stimulus person.” The words were presented for 100-msec followed by a 100-msec masking string of Xs. Subjects were later tested to determine if they had consciously perceived the hostile-word list to which they were exposed. Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) concluded that, “the pattern of results strongly suggests that the impression subjects formed of the stimulus person was directly related to the amount of hostile information to which they had been [subliminally] exposed. The more hostile information to which rate-condition subjects were exposed in Experiment 1, the more negatively they perceived the stimulus person.”¹⁷

Izard (1991) points out that,

differential emotions theory proposes that emotion is the most fundamental organization of sensation that has meaning or experiential/motivational significance....Special states of consciousness characterized by certain combinations of interest and joy facilitate intuition, tacit knowing, and the receptive mode....The theory holds that the basic quality of an emotion feeling is invariant and that some emotion is always present in consciousness, influencing perception, cognition, and action.¹⁸

This theory supports Damasio’s findings with brain damaged patients who acted “irrationally” because they could not connect with any particular affect. When one combines Damasio’s findings with differential emotions theory and Bargh & Pietromonaco’s study, one begins to form a very complex composite picture of how media might exert powerful subliminal and conscious effects on viewers.

So far, we have considered, in very general terms, what I choose to call “cognitive bias” at (1) the psychophysical level, probably mediated by environmental context and experience, (2) the level of “expectations” derived from a subject’s past history and

experience with the world, (3) the self-reflexive level of “knower” vs. what is “known,” and (4) the subliminal level, which suggests that subjects are not aware of the ways in which they construe “reality.”

“Cognitive bias” and differential emotions theory combine to explain why Duncan (1976) discovered that individuals perceived a black man “violently shoving” a white man in one experiment and when the researchers reversed the “shove,” a white man was perceived as having done nothing more than “horsing around,” even though the “shoves” were identical.¹⁹ Apparently, perceptions of social “reality” change relative to one’s schemata and one’s emotional tie with certain beliefs, expectations and assumptions. Adolf Hitler once said, “Only after the simplest ideas are repeated thousands of times will the masses finally remember them.”²⁰ Could he have had stereotypes in mind when he said this? We now know that the Third Reich reveled in negative stereotypes of Jews. Hilmar Hoffman reports that, in any event,

Totalitarian propaganda also took possession of the deepest recesses of the subconscious. The ideal Nazi would never indulge in formulating his own arguments or critical judgments. He internalized prepacked role models and standardized beliefs and acted in uncompromising conformity with them. According to Hermann Glaser, the real aim of propaganda was to “erase people’s identity and individuality.” People were to be manipulated “like a bundle of reflexes on the basis of their instincts, urges, and ‘gut feelings.’” Nazi propagandists felt they were operating the control panel of the human psyche.²¹

Americans, too, knew all too well (if not subconsciously) how to operate this “control panel of the human psyche.” Donald Bogle reports that,

after **The Birth of a Nation** was released in 1915, there came the great public furor against its racism....an underground movement gave rise to a group of independent black filmmakers who flourished in the late 1920s and the 1930s. They tried to present realistic portraits of black Americans, but more often than not were trapped by the same stereotype conceptions as their white competitors. And always they were plagued by financial, technical and distributing problems.²²

On some level, people of color recognized the power of these vulgar racist images and culturally oppressive filmic discourse. They did not know anything of stereotypes, subtyping and subgrouping because these terms and their related theories were not yet devised. It was after the horrors of World War II that intellectuals devoted their energies to discovering what was wrong with certain philosophies of life (before the new nuclear world came grinding to its conclusion).

“Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders,”²³ said Paulo Freire, recognizing that “simple ideas” repeated over and over actually sink quite deep into the crevices of a nation’s psyche. Freire’s “oppressor consciousness” is exactly what the Nazi political machinery demanded of its citizens nearly half a century ago. Germans during the Third Reich were to imbibe “prepackaged role models and standardized beliefs” until all were goose-stepping to Hitler’s new philosophy of life. But, is there a tremendous difference between the “inauthenticity” of Nazi Germany and the “inauthenticity” of these United States? The historical *results* of the Third Reich’s “inauthenticity” were horrendous because the Third Reich decided to follow its philosophy of life to its “logical” conclusions. Millions died. Here, in America, such conclusions (for the time being) may be politically unacceptable

to most people even though our history is vulgarly oppressive. Millions of slaves died. Millions of indigenous people (a.k.a. Native Americans) were slaughtered or displaced to concentration camps known more euphemistically as “reservations.” We believe cultural lies but we will not, presently, follow them to gas chambers or concentration camps as vicious and vulgar as the Nazis’. Reservations will do. Unequal opportunity and education will suffice, for now.

Critical consciousness is not a political nor is it a philosophical given, even in a land that *proclaims* its justice is a sea of civic pride that washes over one and all in equal waves of civil rights. This proclamation is a profound lie. Gays and lesbians who have partners for life must fight for domestic partner benefits at work. Blacks must fight to get into so-called “good schools” and women continually crack their skulls against a glass ceiling that gets polished more than it gets noticed. We are not a free country, even if our Bill of Rights and our Constitution demands such freedom. We are a nation that does not know its own mind because our culture speaks with a forked tongue.

Hilmar Hoffman (1996), historian of the Third Reich, reports that,

according to Goebbels, the cinema was “one of the most modern means of mass persuasion” and therefore “could not be left to its own devices” (Goebbels, 9 February 1934). These principles led Goebbels to pronounce his infamous credo: “We are not one of those secretive types with a silly childish fear of words like ‘propaganda’ and ‘overtly political (*Tendenz*)” (Goebbels, 5 November 1939). In 1933 the Nazi film propagandist Hans Traub defined “pro-active propaganda” as the “intentional application of overtly political means to achieve a political end, to make a [particular] ideology (*Gesinnung*) a goal.”²⁴

Today, of course, producers of mediated messages are “those secretive types” with a sophisticated fear of words like “propaganda” and “stereotypes.” Some even argue that ideology does not exist, that notions of propaganda are silly, if not absurd.

Recent broadcasts of *The Simpsons* go so far as to ridicule the very notion that television might affect its viewers. For example, one episode has Bart and Lisa watch TV violence, then go about destroying everything in sight. This is *ridicule* because it implies that social modeling is patently absurd. On one level, it oversimplifies how media affects viewers and it consequently trashes the idea that violence on TV has macro-level social effects. Most individuals who watch TV realize that they will not murder and maim like TV characters do. Yet, they do not consider that mass media actually create a national psyche. In other words, those who “refute” the psychological harm of violence in the media do so by stating that everyone who watches violent content does not commit violent acts. These media “experts” do not consider that there are moral injunctions and legal injunctions against committing such acts (as well as viewers’ free wills) which mitigate against a one-to-one correspondence of media effects. These “experts” do not consider the social effects of “attitude.”

Hoffman (1996) reports that,

Goebbels, like Hitler, was fond of displaying his interest in the cinema. He demonstrated this during an evening function, held fourteen days after his appointment as propaganda minister, to which he invited the *Filmwelt* or the top representatives of the German cinema. These included the *Dachorganisation filmschaffender Künstler Deutschlands* or DACHO, the industry’s official trade union, the *Reichsverband deutscher Filmtheaterbesitzer*, the cinema owner’s association, and the *Spitzenorganisationen der Filmwirtschaft* or SPIO, the industry’s main professional representative body. That evening Goebbels praised himself as a man “who had always had a close relationship to the German film.” In fact,

he was “an inveterate film addict.” Of course, he also issued a clear warning: “Should the cinema develop in a dangerous direction, the state has a duty to intervene and take matters in hand.”²⁵

Goebbels recognized the power of film, the power of a mechanistic view of reality defined through filmic images and filmic discourse.

We truly consider *degree*, not substance, when we differentiate between the Nazis and any other oligarchical regime. All governments are suspect, ours especially since we live by the patriarchal hypocrisy that “all men are created equal,” never once pausing to pencil women into the Bill of Rights. Today, in America, we do not have Goebbels and Hitler, we have Global Corporations and Politicians Owned by These Corporations. We have the same kind of greedy elitism that made Nazi Germany so politically and spiritually dangerous. What has history taught us? Not much if we do not consider the mortal dangers that lie in cultural practices such as stereotyping, subtyping and dehumanizing those who are marginal. Not much if we do not consider that morality is as much a political issue as it is a philosophical or spiritual issue. Not much if we do not envision a pedagogy that develops critical thinking skills, one which raises the critical consciousness of the next generation to a level where future world leaders recognize that the patriarchal white supremacy of Corporate America and the politicians it has purchased wholesale is a substitute for the mechanistic hypotheses of Goebbels and Hitler. Corporate Capitalism is ultimately liable for many of our social ills because Corporate Capitalism holds the keys to our collective cultural unconscious. We might wrest those keys from this Goliath of Greed ever so often, but he controls those keys with the monstrous magnets of his will. Those who live by stereotypes, ultimately kill by

stereotypes. World War II proved this for the world. Slavery proved it for these United States.

“Simple Repetitive Ideas” & A Pedagogy of Love

For film studies teachers *not* to discuss stereotyping, subtyping and social representations of so-called minorities is morally bankrupt whether students, administrators, colleagues or parents object to such a discussion or not. It is morally bankrupt for those who produce narrative films and TV programs *not* to attempt to eradicate stereotypes. It is rather plainly the *moral duty* of mainstream film critics and film studies instructors to both *know* common stereotypes and *to take issue with these* as they flicker through narrative films and TV’s repetitive discourse. Mosse (1996) argues that,

Stereotypes came into their own with the modern age as part of a general quest for symbols in order to make the abstract concrete within the bewildering changes of modernity. Modern stereotypes did not exist in earlier ages, even if appearances mattered and men were supposed to walk and stand in a proper manner....The building blocks of modern masculinity existed, but they were systematized, formed into a stereotype, only at the start of the modern age.²⁶

Along with a new vision of masculinity, Mosse suggests that the new mechanistic view of reality, also known as “modernity,” reduced individual difference to its bare minimum:

Stereotyping meant that men and women were homogenized, considered not as individuals but as types. The fact that stereotyping depended upon unchanging mental images meant that there was no room for individual variations. Moreover, the new sciences of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in their passion for classification sought to analyze men in groups rather than as individuals.²⁷

This said, it is easier to see how mass production as a material economic process might contribute to a consciousness in which stereotyping was likely to evolve.

Given that machines produce copy after copy of the same product, it is no wonder that a global consciousness evolved that followed suit. Similarly, the commodification of art probably could not help but contribute to the canonization of both uniformity and conformity. In other words, social practice must be examined as an historical process, as the constitutive text of one's consciousness, if humans are to truly become self-reflexive. There are, apparently, subtle ways in which *what* we do informs *who* we are. Can we ever truly exist apart from our actions?

In addition to examining economic and social practice throughout history, critically conscious individuals investigate the social construction of legends. Mosse (1996), investigating stereotypes employed by the Third Reich, reports that,

typically enough, the legend of the "wandering Jew," which took its modern form in the seventeenth century, obtained a new lease on life. Gustav Dore, famous illustrator of the Bible, in 1852 made a woodcut of the Wandering Jew with a red cross on his forehead, spindly legs and arms, huge nose and blowing hair, and staff in hand that popularized this image (Figure 4.1). The Jew was now co-opted by anti-Semitic propaganda, whereas originally he had moved with some dignity. The legend itself concerns a Jew who refused to shelter Christ on his way to Golgotha and was condemned to wander about for all eternity. The anti-Semites in nineteenth-century Germany called him the "eternal Jew," emphasizing restlessness as the punishment for sin—the Jew as an eternal vagrant. (The Nazis made a film and staged an exhibition using "the eternal Jew" as its title).²⁸

Again and again, we observe how a very subjective “morality” proposes a “politics of exclusion.” In Nazi Germany, Jews were implicitly compared to the snake that had to slither for all eternity because it contributed to Adam and Eve’s downfall in the Garden of Eden.

The key to understanding the political power of stereotyping or essentializing others is to acknowledge that, as Mosse states, “racism simplifie[s] recognition of the enemy.”²⁹ Stereotyping or essentializing was, and remains, a social practice that resonates with modern notions of racial purity and political plans to privilege one group over others while slyly hiding behind the “moral” banners of newly evolving social sciences. Classification of human beings into various racial groups is a “science” that, from an intersubjective position, is not only politically vulgar, it is morally unpardonable. Yet, from a political perspective, we cannot simply stop essentializing if the status quo is ever to be altered. In other words, racial essentializing is so deeply entrenched in the national psyche that it seems unlikely it can be eliminated tomorrow without it paradoxically being utilized today. According to Mosse (1996),

Jews, blacks, and Gypsies were all singled out as the sworn enemies of the health and well-being of the Aryan race. Following the passage of the Nuremberg racial laws, which defined who was or who was not an Aryan, semiofficial commentaries on these laws classified Gypsies along with Jews and blacks as people with “alien blood.” But even here there was a clear-cut hierarchy that made the Jews the root of all evil. However, others who did not necessarily belong to a so-called inferior race also helped to undermine Aryan society; they were established as countertypes as well: homosexuals, vagrants, habitual criminals, beggars, the handicapped, and the feebleminded—all those who were unable to so-called productive work or who had no established place of residence. These the Nazis called “asocials,” and defined them broadly as people who could not be integrated into the community of the *Volk*, and who lacked the generally accepted norms that

guaranteed so-called productive work within a settled community, be it the family or the state.³⁰

The Nazis are a good starting point for any instructors wishing to demonstrate how far astray of moral decency one might go by stereotyping others. A class project might be (1) to formulate and interrogate Hollywood stereotypes of students or (2) to examine what it might mean to be a student given representations of students in such films as *Animal House* and *Higher Learning*. Students might form “culture circles” to examine and define the following paradoxes: (1) How do students differ from other students? (2) In what ways are students no different from non-students? and (3) How do magazine ads, TV commercials and other mass media stereotype students?

Mainstream film critics and film studies teachers must *become critically conscious* of the historicity of stereotyping in narrative films. They must be able to contextualize this ignominious social practice. Bogle (1973), for instance, in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* puts it this way:

When I checked into what had been written on [black film history], I found only one formal piece of work, by an Englishman, Peter Noble. Written in the 1940s, Noble’s *The Negro in Films* proved disappointing because it was so much the typical, unintentionally patronizing, white liberal “tasteful” approach. He deplored—rightfully—the stereotyping of Negroes in American movies. But what he clearly failed to see was what certain black actors accomplished with even demeaning stereotyped roles. Noble was ready to dismiss Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen as mere mammy and pickaninny. But anyone who had seen them in *Gone With The Wind* and left the theater with no more than that impression really missed or ignored the strength of the performances, and at the same time denied black America a certain cultural heritage. In the opening sections of the book, I have had to cover the same historical territory as Noble. But what we have each gotten from the experiences of blacks in American cinema has been vastly different.

From my point of view, the history of blacks in American films is one in which actors have elevated *kitsch* or trash and brought to it arty qualities if not pure art itself. Indeed, the thesis of my book is that all black actors—from Stepin Fetchit to Rex Ingram to Lena Horne to Sidney Poitier and Jim Brown—have played stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype.³¹

To deny the “resistance” that people of color mustered to fight both an “oppressor consciousness” and rampant political oppression is to consciously or unconsciously feed the evil stereotype which pictures blacks as either dumb, docile slaves or (when they are not fully whipped into submissive gestures) violent, angry abusers of both civil and moral law. Post-formal thinkers recognize that resistance can become a part of submissiveness. One might submit on one level and resist on another.

Those who teach about the immorality of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* without ever mentioning black reaction to the film at the time of its release play into the stereotype that blacks are dumb and could not possibly discern how to politically care for themselves. Conscientious film studies instructors report, as Bogle does below, that,

The Birth of a Nation’s blackfaced baddies aroused a rash of hostilities. At the film’s New York premiere, the NAACP picketed the theater, calling the movie racist propaganda. Later the Chicago and Boston branches of the NAACP led massive demonstrations against its presentation. Other civil rights and religious organizations were quick to protest. Race riots broke out in a number of cities. Newspaper editorials and speeches censured the film. Black critics such as Laurence Reddick said it glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and Reddick added that the film’s immense success was at least one factor contributing to the great and growing popularity the organization enjoyed during this period. In the South, the film was often advertised as calculated to “work audiences into a frenzy...it will make you hate.” In some regions, the ad campaign may have been effective, for in 1915 lynchings in the United

States reached their highest peak since 1908. Ultimately, *The Birth of a Nation* was banned in five states and nineteen cities.³²

For film studies instructors *not* to mention the politics surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* is for them to blindly drift with the status quo mentality of a mechanistic view of reality.

The Paradox of Self-Actualizing in a Racist Regime

We all live in a consciousness of cultural limitations, which is to argue that we must work with the historical clay of inherited culture to reshape our moral character. The art and science of political film criticism is to recognize that analysis must proceed along a very complex path of political and philosophical balance wherein “resistance” is marked by its cultural probabilities not its absolute values. For example, let us turn to Bogle (1973) who reports that,

Hattie McDaniel [was] a massive, high-strung mammy figure. Often criticized because of her stereotype characters, she answered her critics just as tartly as she might have answered an employer in one of her movies, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” McDaniel’s statement gives a true picture of the options available to black performers of the 1930s. She played a fussy, boisterous, big-bosomed maid time and time again, using the stereotype figure to display her remarkable talent and affinity for pure broad comedy. With her fiercely and distinctively American aggressiveness and her stupendous sonic boom of a voice, Hattie created rich, dazzling characterizations.³³

To blankly dismiss bygone actors of color as meandering “stereotypical performers” without considering social and historical context is to apply a “black and white” rationality to a multi-colorful history.

Bogle (1973) notes that,

Audiences of the 1930s responded to [McDaniel's] excessive showmanship, her effrontery, and her audacity. She emerged as the one servant of the era to speak her mind fully, and the world of her eccentric characters was a helter-skelter, topsy-turvy one in which the servant became the social equal, the mammy became the literal mother figure, the put-on was carried to the forefront of the action, and the style of the servant overpowered the content of the script....With her enormous mouth, wonderfully expressive eyes, "pearly white teeth," and mammoth rounded face, Hattie McDaniel was one of the screen's greatest presences, a pre-Fellini-esque figure of the absurd and a marvel of energetic verve and enthusiasm.³⁴

With the "re-mastered" version of *Gone With The Wind* at local theatres and the prospect of a video version of it readily available, film studies instructors can easily show their students this revered "classic" and address several political questions: For one, why is there, apparently, substantial interest in "re-mastered" versions of so-called "classic" films? Are we living in an age of diminished creativity and receptivity? Secondly, does Hattie really pull off a filmic coup d'eta? Does she *really* show "some attitude?" What might this "attitude" mean in our own day? Were some possibly empowered by it in Hattie's day? If not, why would we think so?

A Paradoxical View of Historical Resistance

An ordinary consciousness does not see "resistance" in its many incarnations. Such a constricted view rarely recognizes the social value of counter-hegemonic visions. Bogle (1973) makes a rather insightful historical observation regarding such "resistance:"

What remains Oscar Micheaux's greatest contribution (and something revealed explicitly in *Gods' Stepchildren*) is often viewed by contemporary

black audiences as his severest shortcoming. That his films reflected the interests and outlooks of the black bourgeoisie will no doubt always be held against him. His films never centered on the ghetto; they seldom dealt with racial misery and decay. Instead they concentrated on the problems of “passing” or the difficulties facing “professional people.” But to appreciate Micheaux’s films one must understand that he was moving as far as possible away from Hollywood’s jesters and servants. He wanted to give his audience something “to further the race, not hinder it.” Often he sacrificed plausibility to do so. He created a fantasy world where blacks were just as affluent, just as educated, just as “cultured,” just as well-mannered—in short, just as white—as white America. Though Micheaux’s films—with their shameless promotion of the world of hair-straighteners and skin-lighteners—might embarrass many people today, they represent an important part of black film and social history.³⁵

If memory serves me, Micheaux *did* produce a film about race that was not appreciated by whites who controlled exhibition and the political machinery that sometimes gets people “legally” killed.

In many respects, a heightened critical consciousness appreciates the historical context within which Micheaux worked. It also takes a more complex view of accusations that Micheaux exhibited a “be-like-whitey” attitude. It transcends the “rational” view that orders social “reality” into either-or simplifications. It discovers a richer, truer, more colorful “resistance” in the wish fulfillment we call film. Will any narrative film possess a moral compass that points unerringly to the North Star of intersubjective ethics? No, there will probably never be such a film. Nor may there ever be a theory that surpasses its subjective notch in history. Filmmakers work within terrible limitations when they construct narrative films, the first of which is a national psyche that oppresses those who are marginal.

To escape such cultural “preprogramming,” artists must become enlightened to transrational “truths.” Each film, therefore, must be measured against its historical probabilities, for each film mirrors the unconscious tendencies of the national psyche that spawned it. Micheaux lived in an age of blatant racial oppression. Not as bad as slavery, for sure, but still several goose-steps closer to slavery than we could ever possibly know. Micheaux made pro-social films but it must be remembered that distribution and financial woes as well as threats of physical abuse taught him the crucial lessons of “successive approximations”—one step at a time.

To more fully grasp this concept of “successive approximations,” let us turn to *The Cosby Show*, a TV show that, according to Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992), “topped the annual ratings lists year after year in the second half of the 1980's, and, although it has been displaced from the number one spot in the 1990s, it retains an enduring place in the world of prime-time television?”³⁶ It is unlikely that those who go to see movies these days would have missed seeing *The Cosby Show* at least once. Jhally & Lewis (1992), nevertheless, provide a telling description of the show:

For those who have managed to avoid seeing it, *The Cosby Show* is a half-hour situation comedy about an upper middle class black family, the Huxtables. Cliff Huxtable (played by Bill Cosby) is a gynecologist and obstetrician, and his wife, Clair, is a lawyer. They have four daughters and a son; as the series has grown older, they have acquired in-laws and grandchildren. The Huxtable's attractive New York brownstone home is the setting for an endless series of comic domestic dramas. There is little in this description to distinguish this TV fiction from many others: we are used to a TV world populated by attractive professionals and their good-looking offspring. What makes the show unusual is its popularity, its critical acclaim, and the fact that all its leading characters are black.³⁷

In the “second half of the 1980s,” is it reasonable to conclude that narrative art, whether in film or TV, should deal with “racial misery and decay?” Is it reasonable to expect more than just a TV version of what has been (unfairly) called Micheaux’s “be-like-whitey” bourgeoisie?

Jhally & Lewis (1992) inform us that,

The most prevalent critical reaction, particularly during the first few years of the show, was to applaud Bill Cosby’s creation as not only a witty and thoughtful sitcom but also an enlightened step forward in race relations. After decades of degrading media images of black people in other shows, the Huxtable family presented black characters that black *and* white audiences could relate to. In this sense, the show was conceived in contrast to the stereotypical shows that preceded it. Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, an advisor to *The Cosby Show*, is highly critical of the black sitcoms of the 1970s—shows like *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford & Sons*, and *Good Times*, which are, argues Poussaint “full of jivin’, jammin’, streetwise style stuff that is the worst kind of stereotyping” (quoted in Hartsough, 1989).³⁸

From a hyper-political point of view, *The Cosby Show* fills a valuable moral void—it counters existing negative stereotypes of blacks, much the same way Micheaux’s films, decades earlier, slapped silly the stupid face of dumb black stereotypes.

However, as *The Cosby Show* garnered more and more viewers, Jhally & Lewis (1992) point out that,

Critics [began] to accuse the show of presenting a misleadingly cozy picture, a sugar candy world unfettered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation. Some have argued that the Huxtable’s charmed life is so alien to the experience of most black people that they are no longer “black” at all but, as Henry Louis Gates (1989: 40) puts it, “in most respects, just like white people.” Gates argument is not simply about whether *The Cosby Show* is “realistic”; he is also concerned about the show’s effect on its enormous viewing audience. The crux of his case is that these “positive images” can actually be counterproductive because they reinforce the myth of the

American Dream, a just world where anyone can make it and racial barriers no longer exist: “As long as *all* blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of “Cosby,” however, reflecting the minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished (Gates, 1989: 40).”³⁹

Gates opened up a huge political cauldron. How does one know when our national psyche is ready for a “face lift,” and by what degree? Is it still too early to shift into rigorously pro-social narrative art? Should the *Cosby Show* have dealt with racial issues? Or, was it apropos for Cosby to shun the politics of race? Is it still too early to expect a massive moral overhaul of our national psyche?

Bill and Camille Cosby, to their credit, financed Sut Jhally & Justin Lewis’s (1992) empirical study of audience reaction to *The Cosby Show*. The study was summarized and presented in a book titled *Enlightened Racism: “The Cosby Show,” Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. In it, the authors conclude that “the social and cultural context that gives [*The Cosby Show*] its meaning turns its good intentions upside down.”⁴⁰ They note that, “Among white people, the admission of black characters to television’s upwardly mobile world gives credence to the idea that racial divisions, whether perpetrated by class barriers or by racism, do not exist. Most white people are extremely receptive to such a message.”⁴¹ This receptivity may be evidence of political guilt.

Indeed, political guilt may *partly* explain *The Cosby Show*’s tremendous success. Perhaps the show psychologically assuaged a national psyche that *wanted* to believe in fair political play. That one avoids (or represses) guilt by denying injustice, inequality, etc., is as

clear as our cracked liberty bell. That *The Cosby Show* flew in the face of negative stereotypes is unquestionably true, as Michaeux's films did decades earlier. That both *The Cosby Show* and Michaeux's films also did very little to demonstrate that racism is(was) alive and thriving is, perhaps, their greatest weakness in performing their moral function to "perfect the power to perceive."

The danger of art that does not perform its moral function very well is illustrated by Jhally & Lewis's (1992) conclusions:

The whole notion of affirmative action has become a hot issue in contemporary politics. Republicans (with a few exceptions) use their opposition to it, as Jesse Helms showed during his 1990 senatorial campaign, as a way of mobilizing white voters. Our study is good news for these Republicans. It reveals that the opposition to affirmative action among white respondents was overwhelming. What was particularly notable was that although most white people are prepared to acknowledge that such a policy was once necessary, the prevailing feeling was that this was no longer so....Almost any social index will show that we live in a society in which black and white people as groups are not equal—not in education, health, housing, employment, or wealth. So why is affirmative action suddenly thought to be no longer necessary? Partly, we would suggest, because our popular culture tells us so.⁴²

"Entertainment is more than just entertainment," Yogi Berra might say if he were to read this dissertation. Perhaps Yogi is destined to become a twentieth century philosopher, given his propensity to recognize paradox. Who knows? The point is this, that art serves a political function, regardless of the expressed political views of the artist.

Artists who use the media must address inequalities and injustice everywhere they occur, if they are to fulfill their moral and spiritual obligations to humanity. Artists, in other words, must consciously become the moral compass of this dangerously shrinking global

village. Artists need not become religious ministers who blast viewers with the brimstone of doctrine, but they should become ministers of their own self-reflexive enlightenment, if they are to perform their moral duties. Then, they will benefit both themselves and those who view their art. Critics should take up the slack where artists fall short of creating provocative pro-social art. Will some art offend? Yes. It is society's duty to forever purge itself of such art? Not necessarily. Censorship may be worse than the art that it eradicates from the public view. Even though a piece of art may offend some or all; critics, educators and others can and should speak out against such art wherever and whenever possible. If art stimulates dialogue, it has served at least one of its moral obligations to society. In this respect, art should be allowed more freedom of expression than other forms of public communication. Once, however, it is agreed that some art is vulgar (e.g., ugly racist stereotypes), the public should be allowed to protest en masse, even though nothing might be done to "eliminate" the provocation.

The moral function of *narrative* art, in our age of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination, therefore, is to address race, gender, "sexual preference," class consciousness and the ever-continuing devaluation of "seasoned" citizens. Since *The Cosby Show* had plenty of opportunity (given its tenure on the air) to consider racial discrimination, it did not truly live up to its moral obligations "to perfect the power to perceive." It did, however, offer up positive black role models to its viewers and, for this, it cannot be too harshly criticized. Had it been produced during Micheaux's era, it should be presently evaluated as progressive,

pro-social narrative art because it probably would have provided much needed hope and self-respect through, albeit, *somewhat* fanciful images for the times.

In our age, however, *The Cosby Show* has shirked its moral obligations, ostensibly because those involved in its production did not possess a heightened critically consciousness. They are, of course, not to be blamed, for one should not blame the victim for her victimization. Only a Right-Wing Republican would do such a thing. Just because we are black does not mean that we somehow magically escape an “oppressor consciousness.” Just because we are female does not mean we have feminist genes mapping our social perceptions. Just because we are gay does not mean that homophobia never informs our attitudes.

Dyson (1993) believes that *The Cosby Show* could have done wonders to help the political plight of blacks in America. He suggests that,

Cosby has amassed a good deal of moral authority [with the exception of his cheating on his wife] and cultural capital and has captured the attention of millions of Americans who may have otherwise not tuned in or who would have categorized “The Cosby Show” as “just another black sitcom.” Thus, he is in a unique position to show that concern for issues of race need not be merely the concerns of black folk, but can, and should, be the concern of human beings. To the degree, then that his show is about an upper-middle-class family that “happens to be black,” his show, like others, bears part of the responsibility of dealing with social issues, which he has proven can be effectively done without sacrificing his large viewing audience or humorous effect.⁴³

The big difference between Michaelaueux and Cosby is their respective audiences. Because Cosby had wide appeal amongst blacks and whites, he is, therefore, more culpable for neglecting issues of race (especially after he gained the nation’s undivided attention).

Dyson (1993) argues that it is not truly a question of whether or not American audiences want to deal with heavy “social problems” in their entertainment. He believes that *The Cosby Show*, through its tremendous success, is living, breathing proof that entertainment can and should profess, what I would call “politico-spiritual values”:

“The Cosby Show” has consistently addressed the issue of sexism, creatively and comically showing how it should be debunked and resisted. There have been many humorously insightful encounters between Clair and her Princeton-educated son-in-law Elvin, a bona fide chauvinist, Cliff and Clair have continually attempted to counsel Elvin away from his anachronistic patriarchal proclivities, cajoling him, for example, about the folly of gender-conscious division of domestic labor. Also, Cliff has occasionally confronted the issue of misdirected machismo, promoting a fuller meaning of manhood and a richer understanding of fatherhood. He has influenced the husbands of clients who thought the responsibility of child rearing was “woman’s work”....Cliff is often seen in the kitchen preparing meals for the family. Such positive images of responsible male participation in all aspects of life on Cosby’s show reflect a real-life concern and no mean influence on such matters, as attested to by his best-selling book *Fatherhood*, and his new book on marriage. Thus, “The Cosby Show” has shown how a complex social issue such as sexism can be addressed in humorous ways, producing socially responsible entertainment. The juxtaposition of comedy and conscience is not impossible, nor does it necessarily cost ratings.⁴⁴

I was fortunate enough to meet one of the writers for “The Cosby Show.” He was white and told me, when I queried him about it, that all of the writers were white. Surprised by this, I commented that he must be making a fortune. He replied that he was added to “the writing crew” later, after the show had become a huge hit, and he wasn’t making anywhere near what the others were making.

Presently, I am thinking that “race matters.” I am thinking that if there had been more black writers, perhaps they would have been privy to the “sensitive situations and such” that

black people run into day in and day out. Perhaps, they might have been able (and willing) to creatively and comically debunk racism. Perhaps the call for more black writers in the media is related to the possibility of addressing subtle features of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. One's *experiences* are the necessary seeds from which pro-social messages grow, which is not to argue that white writers (or Asian writers) are *incapable* of writing from a "black perspective." I write about white people all the time. I write about women and I write about gays. This is what a writer does. But no matter what a writer does, if she hasn't had a particular type of experience, she is unlikely to write very *well* about it.

Returning to the idea of "relative resistance," it is easy to see that a heightened critical consciousness perceives the greater social complexities of various levels of "resistance" within any given oppressive regime. A critically conscious individual balances the "you shouldn't accept that acting job" against the political and economic backdrop of the times and the "real" political and philosophical probabilities of initiating social change. Sometimes social change needs a period of psycho-social adjustment. Lasting change, perhaps, is better accomplished by a gradual erosion of oppressive discourse, rhetoric and social practice. In other words, actors such as Hattie McDonald should not be judged strictly by today's notions of what it is to be considered "politically incorrect." As Bogle observes,

Hattie McDaniel plays [a Negro cook in *Alice Adams* (1935),] in a formidable and unorthodox fashion. From her entrance, she says things—amid some rambunctious gum chewing—that no other maid in the movies would ever have dared. When the mistress of the house tells her to serve the dinner soup, McDaniels counters, "But don't you think it's getting pretty hot for soup?" The weather proves too hot for soup, and later when she is asked airily by Alice to "Please take this dreadful soup away," McDaniel merely stops dead in her tracks and stares at the girl imperially, indeed contemptuously, as if to say, "I done tol' you so!" Used by director Stevens not only

for comic relief but to point up the pretenses of the Adamses, McDaniel's maid repeatedly makes fun of the family's foolish attempt to put on airs.⁴⁵

"In any liberatory pedagogy," says bell hooks (1990), "students should learn how to distinguish between hostile critique that is about 'trashing' and critique that's about illuminating and enriching our understanding."⁴⁶

Bell hooks was able to critique Spike Lee's work without "trashing" his efforts or his many achievements. The same "paradoxical attitude" must be applied by filmmakers to the process of creating moral forms of art. There are no perfect theories and there are no perfect films. Our goal as hyper-political cultural critics is to philosophically polish the medals we give narrative films so that each medal reflects the genetic political endowments of the film it emboldens relative to the historical period in which that film first flickered its "enlightened" images. We can no longer afford to grant medals that lack a biting political or spiritual edge. Still, we must be leery of being too judgmental and unforgiving toward those who struggled very hard with the consciousness that history painted in the maps of their minds.

Bogle's Surviving Stereotypes

The academic community, too, *must* train its students to perfect the power to perceive. Film studies instructors *must* teach their students to recognize stereotypes even though the most virulent forms of Bogle's stereotypes may not fully exist in contemporary cinema. Obviously, some of Bogle's stereotypes survive today in popular culture. For

example, “eye-ball rolling” blacks, campy “fags” and “dumb cheer girls” still denigrate our cultural horizon. We are by no means completely free of these boorish images. By training students to recognize the cultural genealogy of filmic stereotypes, film studies instructors can adequately prepare their students to discern contemporary permutations of these stereotypes and, perhaps, other forms of negative representation. In any event, stereotypes are dangerous, *especially in a society that does not inculcate a critical awareness in its youth.*

Bogle identifies the first full-blown stereotype as the “Uncle Tom,” deriving from Edwin S. Porter’s twelve-minute motion picture *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903). Bogle reports that,

Porter’s tom was the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. Always as toms were chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts.⁴⁷

Obviously, submissiveness is a good quality for a slave or those whom society treats as its slaves. Interestingly, Hollywood privileges white males as those who *do not have to be submissive*, as though they *must* be anything but submissive if they are to assume their rightful throne of leadership.

Contemporary youth films seem to say, “If you are white and you are male, you own the world, dudes.” This is what Shirley Ruth Steinberg (1997) discovered while researching “misbehavior” in films marketed for American youth. As she went about gathering materials for her doctoral dissertation, she noticed some rather peculiar “coincidences:” (1) that those

who got away with murder were white and, (2) they were overwhelmingly male. In her own words:

Recalling films of the 1980s, films that I defined as “empowering youth films,” I decided I would investigate the misbehavior of high school youth in hopes of creating a pedagogy of empowerment through misbehavior. I went so far as to announce that, indeed, I was creating a pedagogy of misbehavior, a way of making meaning from teaching that would incorporate the playful misbehavior of the youth in the films I was so taken by. However, twelve years had passed since my first viewing experiences of these “empowering youth films;” who I had become in those years was a different viewer, a different consumer. Consequently, my plans for creating the *new pedagogy* were thwarted, instead; my political and ideological self revealed to me that indeed these films were of misbehavior, a misbehavior that is privileged and exclusive to one particular group in our society. This group is the one that “gets away with it,” and recovers a way of life that is dedicated to the oppression of women, non-Whites, poor and other disenfranchised people. This group of misbehavers is allowed, indeed, *entitled* to misbehave, with sociopathological fervor in perpetuating the dominant culture. My creation of a *new pedagogy of misbehavior* was replaced by a desire to examine the meanings of these films and their implications both in and out of the public schools and across all cultural sites.⁴⁸

Clearly, film critics need to compare what white males say and do on the silver screen with what women and non-Whites do and say on the silver screen. This comparison must always be made since I assume that media’s greatest effects are both pedagogical and subconscious, which means that they are not easily measured.

Steinberg continues that,

the analysis of the cultural curriculum reveals that Disney films, movies in general, television programs, advertisements, music, and other manifestations of popular culture are not simply products but ideas about *the political structure and the values that surround them* [my emphasis]. Such ideas are the grist of the hegemonic ideology of hyperreality, as they covertly contribute to the ways individuals make sense of their race, class, gender, educational, vocational, and civic roles in culture.⁴⁹

In this context, we can see that if “empowering youth films” present mostly white males as empowered protagonists, they really present a rather subliminal or implicit intertextualization of white supremacy to viewers. These films *are really a taste of supremacist ideology* that echoes through the recessed corridors of our minds. Ironically, this brand of race-exclusive entitlement resonates throughout a country that struggled hard to defeat the Nazis. But, as Freire told us, a constricted consciousness does not recognize its own contradictions.

Steinberg’s expose of the “empowering” functions of certain films and her continuing research has led her to conclude that,

Misbehavior is one of the most popular [mediated themes that appeal to children and youth.] As children watch *Beavis and Butthead*, they identify with attitudes describing life as a state of being that “sucks.” Many adults have difficulty watching this particular show, however, it is essential to have an understanding of what it is that makes these two characters so popular with children and youth....No one is advocating becoming fans of shows like *Beavis and Butthead*, but I do advocate becoming fans of our students. What is it that makes them identify with these two losers? They appear gross, stupid and disgusting, yet students throughout North America seem to “get” messages from the show....It is interesting that the most popular films for youth tend to also have themes of misbehavior. When *Ferris Bueller* took his day off, thousands of students “ditched” school in sympathy. The movie also sends a message that what is truly important is what happens *out* of school. That frightens us as educators. The truth is frightening. Why do the five students on Saturday detention *Breakfast Club* discover essential meanings of life with each other? Adults are alienated from the conversation, indeed, the cause of much of the students’ problems is the fact that adults, both parents and teachers, spend more time criticizing than trying to communicate with students.⁵⁰

While it is true that *Beavis and Butthead*, *Rosesanne*, and other youth empowering cultural artifacts are politically subversive (in some respects) since they *appear*, on one level, to

ridicule societal values and ideals—such messages are really morally bankrupt because, on another level, they inform the “fatalism” that Paulo Freire was so preoccupied about in the final years of his life.

Fatalism Maintains the Status Quo Through Displaced Aggression

Fatalism flows freely through American comedy. For example, *Beavis and Butthead* obviously suffer throughout their ordeals—life “sucks” and there is nothing *Beavis and Butthead* can really do about it. We laughingly watch them flail away at a cold, comical world, knowing that more and more failure for them means more and more humor for us. We begin to root for failure. Subconsciously we confront our own failures, realizing the Buddha’s First Noble Truth, that life is suffering (*dukkha*). Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) tells us that,

the root meaning of the Chinese character for suffering is “bitter.” Happiness is sweet; suffering is “bitter.” We all suffer to some extent. We have some malaise in our body and our mind. We have to recognize and acknowledge the presence of this suffering and touch it. To do so, we may need the help of a teacher and a *Sangha*, friends in the practice.⁵¹

Beavis and Butthead are tragic heroes whose travails subliminally suggest that “it is futile to resist the power of the dark side,” which is really the world of bland social conformity that we have all inherited. *Ferris Bueller* and other white males get away with murder, as youth empowering films seems to suggest.

Regarding our suffering, Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) reports that,

the Second Noble Truth is the origin, roots, nature, creation, or arising (*samudaya*) of suffering. After we touch our suffering, we need to look deeply into it to see how it came to be. We need to recognize and identify the spiritual and material foods we have ingested that are causing us to suffer.⁵²

Buddhists meditate. They look deeply into suffering. They *transform* it by means of the Third Noble Truth, which “is the cessation (*nirodha*) of creating suffering by refraining from doing the things that make us suffer.”⁵³ Rugged individualism, ruthless competition, hedonistic materialism—these are Bourgeois practices that make us spiritually suffer. Buddhism would have us turn away from these practices. Bourgeois art, on the other hand, convinces us to shrug off life’s miseries with laughter.

If the Third Noble Truth teaches us that “healing is possible,” then the Fourth Noble Truth is the “path (*marga*) that leads to refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer.”⁵⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) says that this Fourth Noble Truth “is the path we need most. The Buddha called it the Noble Eightfold Path. The Chinese translate it as the ‘Path of Eight Right Practices’: Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.”⁵⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh adds, in a footnote, that “right and wrong are neither moral judgments nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial (“right”) and what is unbeneficial (“wrong”).”⁵⁶ Bourgeois art struggles to occupy our minds, to throw us off track so that we do not meditate or cogitate about our existential essence. We don’t change that which we don’t understand. In a sense then, Bourgeois art is a “politics of distraction.”

Ferris Bueller's Day Off is paradoxically both a "fatalistic film" and one which "empowers" white males. It represents an "attitude" even as it implies its own implausibility. But that "attitude" is still significant, just as "attitude" is significant in *Roseanne*, *Beavis and Butthead* and every other Bourgeois cultural artifact. To borrow from Vince Lombardi, "Attitude is not everything, it is the only thing!" The unuttered Bourgeois mantra is that "there is no hope." There is no hope of ever changing the self-generating muck and mire of materialism. One can never *really* live an actualized life apart from hedonism or materialism. It simply won't happen.

So, whereas submissive "Toms" model an attitude that all "good Negroes" should purchase, images of empowered white males represent a militant attitude that white males *can* readily adopt as their cultural inheritance. If all youth, black, white or otherwise, come to adopt permutations of such an attitude, via (hetero)sexist militant "rap" music, *Beavis and Butthead* philosophies of life or Ferris Bueller-like models of empowered white males, so be it. Nothing will really change because mainstream narrative films and popular culture, in general, do little to help viewers "perfect their powers to perceive." They do little, if anything, to help viewers develop a critical consciousness which locates political oppression in economic structures as well as hegemonic, materialistic ideology.

"Wild" behavior implies that life has to have some death-defying perks for it to be truly enjoyable. The dissolution of the family and the lack of spirituality attests to a postmodern malaise that looks for meaning in all the wrong places. And so, consumer capitalism leads us by the nose to a quiet, lonely desperation or a frenzied unconscious quest

for death. Quite understandably, Vietnam vets report that they never felt more vibrantly “alive” than when they stared death in its angry face and inhaled its vim and vigor. Is there nothing left in this artificial bourgeois life than to flirt with death? A life of thrill-seeking, of dare-devil stunts and limb-risking chicanery psychologically *displaces* the growing spiritual dissatisfaction with modernity and its automatizing miseries. We live in an era of pastiche and re-worked narrative puke. You see one commercial success on TV or on the silver screen and production companies clamor to duplicate its success. Artistic creativity has all but died in a mechanistic view of reality that has led to the spiritual dead-end of fatalism.

Mainstream film critics and film studies instructors need to recognize the historical, philosophical, social, economic and political context(s) of social “reality” so that they will better educate and enlighten their respective publics. Until then, the best that we can hope for is that both mainstream film critics and film studies instructors do not ignore the mechanistic consciousness of modernity that feeds itself on artificial homogenization such as stereotypes. In the next chapter we will examine certain stereotypes in terms of their immutable history in our lexicon of cultural values, attitudes and ideals.

Footnotes

¹Freire, Paulo (1995). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Continuum, Page 111.

²From an interview, cited in The Boston Globe, April 3, 1994, City Edition, LEARNING SECTION; Pg. A23, Byline by Jordana Hart, Globe Staff.

³Kincheloe, Joe (1995). Toil and Trouble: Good Work, Smart Workers, and the Integration of Vocational Education, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Page 110.

⁴Kincheloe, Joe (1991). Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment, New York: The Falmer Press, Page 165.

⁵Miller, Michael L. & Theo L. Dorpat (1996). "Meaning Analysis: An Interactional Approach to Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice," in Psychoanalytic Review, 83 (2), April, p. 219.

⁶Slap, Joseph W. & Laura Slap-Shelton (1994). "The Schema Model: A Proposed Replacement Paradigm For Psychoanalysis," in Psychoanalytic Review, 81 (4), Winter, p. 689.

⁷Slap & Slap-Shelton (1994), Ibid, p. 688.

⁸Slap & Slap-Shelton (1994) use this language to define the individual's perception of social "reality." I've borrowed their terminology to define our nation's collective perception of "reality."

⁹Kincheloe, Joe (1991), Ibid, Page 50-51.

¹⁰Kincheloe, Joe (1991), Ibid, Page 58.

¹¹Goldberg, David Theo (1993). Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., p. 24.

¹²Goldstein, Bruce (1989). Sensation and Perception, Page 14.

¹³Goldstein, Bruce (1989), Ibid, Page 1.

¹⁴Henwood et al. (1993). Affect, Cognition, and Stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception, Page 269-70.

¹⁵Goldstein, Bruce (1989), Ibid, Page 17.

¹⁶Goldstein, Bruce (1989), *Ibid*, Page 19.

¹⁷Bargh & Pietromonaco (1982). "Automatic Information Processing and Social Perception: The Influence of Trait Information Presented Outside of Conscious Awareness on Impression Formation" in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Page 446.

¹⁸Izard, Carroll E. (1991). The Psychology of Emotions, New York: Plenum Press, P. 87.

¹⁹Duncan, B. L. (1976). "Differential Social Perception and Attribution of Intergroup Violence: Testing the Lower Limits of Stereotyping of Blacks," in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58, Page 568-598.

²⁰Hitler, Adolf (——). Mein Kampf, vol. 1, p.6.

²¹Hoffmann, Hilmar (1996). The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism 1933-1945, Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, p. 94.

²²Bogle, Donald (1973). Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks, New York: Viking Press, p. 101-2.

²³Freire, Paulo (1995). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Continuum, p. 134.

²⁴Hoffmann, Hilmar (1996), *Ibid*, p. 95.

²⁵Hoffmann, Hilmar (1996), *Ibid*, p. 95.

²⁶Mosse, George L. (1996). The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 5.

²⁷Mosse, George L. (1996), *Ibid*, p. 6.

²⁸Mosse, George L. (1996), *Ibid*, p. 6.

²⁹Mosse, George L. (1996), *Ibid*, p. 178.

³⁰Mosse, George L. (1996), *Ibid*, p. 178.

³¹Bogle, Donald (1973), *Ibid*, p. x. (Preface)

³²Bogle, Donald (1973), *Ibid*, p. 15.

³³Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, P. 82.

³⁴Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, P. 82.

³⁵Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 115-6.

³⁶Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992). Enlightened Racism: "The Cosby Show," Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream, San Francisco, California: Westview Press, p. 1.

³⁷Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis, (1992), Ibid, p. 2.

³⁸Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992), Ibid, p. 2.

³⁹Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992), Ibid, p. 2-3.

⁴⁰Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992), Ibid, p. 132.

⁴¹Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992), Ibid, p. 135.

⁴²Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis (1992), Ibid, p. 135-6.

⁴³Dyson, Michael Eric (1993), Ibid, p. 83.

⁴⁴Dyson, Micheal Eric (1993), Ibid, p. 82.

⁴⁵Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, P. 84.

⁴⁶hooks, bell (1990). Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, Boston: South End Press, p. 7.

⁴⁷Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 5-6.

⁴⁸Steinberg, Shirley Ruth (1997) Dissertation entitled: The Cultural Curriculum: Youth Pedagogy and Film, The Pennsylvania State University, Murry R. Nelson, Thesis Advisor. P. 1-2.

⁴⁹Steinberg, S. R. (1997), Ibid, p.54-5.

⁵⁰Steinberg, S. R. (1997), Ibid, p. 234-5.

⁵¹Thich Nhat Hanh (1998). The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy & Liberation, California: Berkeley Press, p. 9.

⁵²Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), Ibid, p. 9.

⁵³Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), Ibid, p. 11.

⁵⁴Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), Ibid, p. 11.

⁵⁵Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), Ibid, p. 11.

⁵⁶Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), Ibid, p. 11.

CHAPTER TEN

RECYCLED NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

*So the Mickey Mousians of today will be the New Dealers of tomorrow,
whereas the Popeyesians will breed a race of fascists.*

William de Mille (1935)

Negative Black Stereotypes

Post-formal thinkers, of course, would not agree with de Mille. For one, he oversimplifies the problem even if he does hook on to the social psychological question: What exactly is it that mediated communication teaches its viewers? For two, it's not a question of *one* program brainwashing a nation, it is a question of a nation's past and a plethora of cultural artifacts reflecting trenchant ways of thinking. Andrew Sarris (1978), a well-known film critic, has this to say of the politics of cinema:

through the years most Hollywood movies have been castigated by the left for crimes of omission, for not treating the problems of *real* people, for not fighting the good fight against fascism, militarism, capitalism, and imperialism. For their part, the old Hollywood moguls squelched their critics with the stock answer: If you have a message, send it by Western Union. (Little did they know that Western Union's service was destined to go the way of the dodo.) Many movies were thus caught in a tug of war between edification and entertainment, between problem raising and happy endings. Under these conditions, relative few movies turned out to be overtly political.¹

As a social psychoanalyst, I am not only interested in *overt* politics, I am interested in *latent* politics. I am interested in macro-level politics that define our social parameters as a nation. Regarding this self-construction, I look at history for ruptures in philosophical and political

meaning. I examine long-lasting trends, tracing these back to possible sites of origin. And so, I have stumbled upon stereotypes as a profound marker of a new way of thinking, a way of thinking that has already proved to be morally problematic. As for America, we are a nation obsessed with race. Perhaps it is best to begin there.

First there was “Uncle Tom,” the Negro who, like an Oreo cookie, is black on the outside, white on the inside. Never mind that Harriet Beech Estowe’s original Uncle Tom was a hero who died for the cause. The very next of Bogle’s (1973) black stereotypes is “The Coon,” described as follows:

They appeared in a series of black films presenting the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon. They lacked the single-mindedness of tom. There were the pure coon and two variants of his type: the pickaninny and the uncle remus. The pickanniny was the first of the coon types to make its screen debut. It gave the Negro child actor his place in the black pantheon. Generally, he was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting. Thomas Alva Edison proved to be a pioneer in the exploitation and exploration of this type when he presented *Ten Pickaninnies* in 1904, a forerunner of the Hal Roach *Our Gang* series.²

The other “member of the coon triumvirate is the uncle remus,” who, according to Bogle, “distinguishes himself by his quaint, naive, and comic philosophizing.”³ Bogle observes that,

During the silent period he was only hinted at. He did not fully come into flower until the 1930s and 1940s in such films as *The Green Pastures* (1936) and *Song of the South* (1946). Remus’s mirth, like tom’s contentment and the coon’s antics, has always been used to indicate the black man’s satisfaction with the system and his place in it.⁴

According to Bogle, the “pure coon” as a negative black stereotype did not last forever:

before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.⁵

Today, arguably, subtle genetic features of “tom” and “the coon” survive in Hollywood’s narrative discourse and in the iconographic details of mainstream films and other mediated messages. One has only to turn to *In Living Color* to get a glimpse of a modern day “coon” who regularly “butchers the English language” for comedic effect.

The third figure in Bogle’s “pantheon” of black stereotypes is the “tragic mulatto,” making its earliest appearance in,

The Debt (1912), a two-reeler about the Old South. A white man’s wife and his black mistress bear him children at the same time. Growing up together, the white son and the mulatto daughter fall in love and decide to marry, only to have their relationship revealed to them at the crucial moment. Their lives are thus ruined not only because they are brother and sister but also—and here is the catch—because the girl has a drop of black blood!⁶

Bogle adds that,

Usually the mulatto is made likable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had she not been a “victim of divided racial inheritance.”⁷

In Nazi Germany, mulattoes were treated much more harshly, of course. George L. Mosse (1996) discovered that,

the Nazis arrested and killed most of the eight hundred or so offspring of mixed unions between German women and the black French soldiers who had occupied the Rhineland between 1921 and 1924. The Jews had brought

the blacks into the Rhineland, as far as Adolf Hitler was concerned, with the clear aim of ruining the white race (once again, the Jews were the root of all evil, the archetypal countertype).⁸

There is no good reason that film studies instructors all across America should shun the valuable lessons of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany to illustrate both the villainy of stereotyping. Germany's "politics of erasure" is a good place to start—kill everything that does not fit specific ideals. Nazi Germany has proven to be, therefore, the perfect exemplar of anti-Semitism, race hatred, homophobia, ageism and sexism—all of the major "isms" of our modern age.

Everywhere one looks in the history of mediated art, there is a scarcity of mixed couples. Put differently, one does not see very many Black and White, Asian and Caucasian, etc., characters *dating* or being "married with children" in American culture. Why not? As critically conscious thinkers, film studies students need to dialogue about this "politics of erasure." I come from a mixed marriage. My father was one-half black, one-half Cherokee. My mother is a full-blooded Italian. I remember the strange looks we got when we were out in public in predominantly white Commack, New York, in the late 60s and 70s. People were surprised, some shocked. Today, those looks are fading because interracial dating has become more acceptable. Brand new TV shows such as *Boy Meets World* show young people engaged in interracial dating with positive results. Times have changed. Still, one does not see very many happily married interracial couples as the focus of primetime TV or popular mainstream narrative films. Times are not changing fast enough.

Bogle's fourth black stereotype is "The Mammy," who,

is so closely related to the comic coons that she is usually relegated to their ranks. Mammy is distinguished, however, by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous. She made her debut around 1914 when audiences were treated to a blackface version of *Lysistrata*. The comedy titled *Coon Town Suffragettes*, dealt with a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a militant movement to keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home.⁹

One does not have to go very far to see subtle versions of “The Mammy” on TV these days.

Post-formal thinkers, ever conscious of self-construction, wonder if it may indeed be possible that years and years of these “bodacious happy mammy” stereotypes have culturally bred real-life counterparts, as with some of the other stereotypes. Who knows what psychological havoc media wreck throughout their tenure? Everywhere one turns, there are media “look-a-likes” and “act-a-likes.” It is far too simple-minded to conclude that media simply reflect the “stereotypes” that exist in *real* life because people do imitate things they see in the media. It’s not so much a question of which came first, the chicken or the egg, but a question of the egg *and* the chicken living side by side. Perhaps stereotypes both reflect *and* generate repetitious cycles of additional stereotypical behavior. Transrational analysts consider this complex paradoxical possibility.

The “Brutal Black Buck’s” Social Longevity

Last but not least, Bogle presents “The Brutal Black Buck,” first introduced by D. W. Griffith in his infamous tribute to the Ku Klux Klan entitled *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). According to Bogle,

This extraordinary, multidimensional movie was also the first feature film to deal with a black theme and at the same time to articulate fully the entire pantheon of black gods and goddesses. Griffith presented all the types with such force and power that his film touched off a wave of controversy and was denounced as the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released.¹⁰

The Birth of a Nation is a good place to start when one wishes to teach beginning film students the social power of stereotypes.

Bogle states that,

Griffith used three varieties of blacks. The first were the “faithful souls,” a mammy and an uncle tom, who remain with the Cameron family throughout and staunchly defend them from the rebels. By means of these characters, as well as the pickaninny slaves seen dancing, singing, clowning in their quarters, director Griffith propagated the myth of slave contentment and made it appear as if slavery had elevated the Negro from his bestial instincts. At heart, Griffith’s “faithful souls” were shamelessly naive representations of the Negro as Child or the Negro as Watered-Down Noble Savage. But these characters were to make their way through scores of other Civil War epics, and they were to leave their mark on the characterizations of Clarence Muse in *Huckleberry Finn* (1931) and *Broadway Bill* (1934) and of Bill Robinson in *The Little Colonel* (1935) and *The Little Rebel* (1935).¹¹

Those who concern themselves with the aesthetics of this film miss a vital pedagogical moment. By skipping America’s history of stereotyping blacks, film studies instructors remove a vital piece of context which film studies students might use to awaken their critical consciousness to the inter-generational influence of social values, ideals, attitudes and affect.

By allowing students to witness the evolutionary stages of stereotype formation, teachers allow their students to feel or sense macro-level connections between historical practice and cultural conditioning. At some point students might begin to use their peripheral minds to “understand” that they might laugh at certain images for a variety of reasons, some

of which might be related to prejudice, intolerance and discrimination consciously and unconsciously passed from one generation to the next. When students realize that they laugh at certain images *not because they are “naturally” funny*, but because there are historical *meanings* attached to those images, then they gather transrational clues to their social construction and possible ways in which they may be culturally “inauthentic.” The tremendous power we have over our own minds must be addressed if we are ever to become morally self-actualizing.

Bogle observes that,

Griffith’s second variety were the brutal black bucks. Just as the coon stereotype could be broken into subgroups, the brutal black buck type could likewise be divided into two categories: the black brutes and the black bucks. Differences between the two are minimal. The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audiences could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black brutes, subhuman and feral, are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage. They flog the Cameron’s faithful servant. They shove and assault white men of the town. They flaunt placards demanding “equal marriage.” These characters figured prominently in the Black Congress sequence, and their film descendants were to appear years later as the rebellious slaves of *So Red the Rose* (1935), as the revolutionaries of *Uptight* (1969), and as the militants of *Putney Swope* (1969).¹²

Film studies students who are critically conscious or on the verge of becoming so should be able to make the connections between these old movies and more contemporary movies such as *Grand Canyon* which, likewise, exhibits a slew of threatening minorities against the backdrop of a “noble savage,” played by Danny Glover.

Bogle concludes that,

it was the pure black bucks that were Griffith's really great archetypal figures. Bucks are always big, baadd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh. No greater sin hath any black man. Both Lynch, the mulatto, and Gus, the renegade, fall into this category. Among other things, these two characters revealed the tie between sex and racism in America. Griffith played on the myth of the Negro's high-powered sexuality, then articulated the great white fear that every black man longs for a white woman. Underlying the fear was the assumption that the white woman was the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride, power, and beauty. Consequently, when Lillian Gish, the frailest, purest of all screen heroines, was attacked by the character Lynch—when he put his big black arms around this pale blond beauty—audiences literally panicked. Here was the classic battle of good and evil, innocence and corruption. It was a master stroke and a brilliant use of contrast, one that drew its audience into the film emotionally.¹³

In a rather interesting footnote, Bogle observes that,

Lillian Gish's comments in the January 1937, issue of *Stage* verify the fact that Griffith was well aware of this contrast and that he used it to arouse his audience. Said Gish: "At first I was not cast to play in *The Clansman*. My sister and I had been the last to join the company and we naturally supposed...that the main assignments would go to the older members. But one day while we were rehearsing the scene where the colored man picks up the Northern girl gorilla-fashion, my hair, which was very blond, fell far below my waist and Griffith, seeing the contrast in the two figures, assigned me to play Elsie Stoneman (who was to have been Mae Marsh)."¹⁴

Film studies instructors might wish to juxtapose images of Lillian Gish being attacked by a big black buck in *The Clansman* (a.k.a. *the Birth of a Nation*) with images of Danny Glover's big black hand opening stall doors in *Witness* as a terrified little white boy, hiding, looks on. By closely aligning these types of images and discussing their emotional resonance, instructors can introduce their students to an evolutionary racism that lingers even to this day.

It is through culture-analysis, a review of a nation's formative years, that we truly begin to see historical threads of racism in narrative art.

Political film criticism is an exhaustive psychotherapeutic enterprise that is probably as emotionally challenging as psychoanalysis. Both psychoanalysis and political film criticism are *time-consuming* projects because look for *a transformation of consciousness*. The test of a good theory is generally its effectivity. But when it comes to psychoanalysis and social psychoanalysis or any transformative process, effectivity may be instantaneous in some rare cases but, more than likely, it will consume an inordinate amount of time. Unfortunately, patients often do not stay in psychoanalytical therapy long enough for them to transform their consciousness and students do not strenuously question the historical dimensions of their views for them to transcend the automaticity of culture. In addition, we could say that, in some ways, hyper-political cultural criticism is *more* difficult than psychoanalysis because hyper-political cultural criticism considers not only the history of the individual but the history of the nation and the greater political and economic contexts within which cultural prescriptions clash. So, we should not be too hasty about dismissing theories of transformative action as ineffectual. When one's goals are lofty one's measurement of success must be adjusted accordingly.

Where No Mega-Text Has Gone Before

Science-Fiction, as a genre, is certainly positioned to propose new political solutions to old political problems. Science fiction fantasies could conceivably demonstrate how new

social collectivites might be formed in which vastly different economic and political structures herald in a “brave new universe.” The potential is optimistically present, the practice is pessimistically not. Other-worldly fantasies, because artists draw them up from the creative wells of their oppressor consciousness, are more likely to splatter a mechanistic view of reality all over the silver screen than they are to wash away prejudice, intolerance and discrimination in successive waves of political and economic possibilities. Similar to psychoanalysis, culture-analysis interrogates science fiction as a “wish-fulfillment,” a reverie wherein savage extra-terrestrials subconsciously “stand in” for those who are America’s marginal, continually put in their proper political place by those who represent the righteous dominant regime—white males.

No where have I read more insightful criticism of science fiction than in Daniel Leonard Bernardi’s (1995) doctoral dissertation titled “The Wrath of Whiteness: The Meaning of Race in the Generation of *Star Trek*.” In it Bernardi proposes that,

Science fiction depicts the futuristic and the fantastic. In doing so, the genre foregrounds representations of bizarre aliens, distant space, wondrous technology and other odd and otherwise unique tropes. Nevertheless, as artifacts of popular culture and products of Hollywood, these science fiction tropes are based on real world signifiers. As Frederic Jameson has shown, science fiction tends less to imagine the future than to “...defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present...” Aliens, for example, are always already real world Others—signifiers of nations, cultures and identities—simply because there are no real space-time referents for actual extraterrestrials.¹⁵

Support for this contention can be seen in the relationship of color to characters and plot in the entire narrative *Star Trek* “enterprise” from TV series to movies, then, returning to TV for more of the “final frontier.” Bernardi notes that,

In trek texts, articulations of race [as it regards “real world Others”] can be as straightforward as darkening up an alien or alien species in a way similar to the blackface tradition of early cinema in order to make them seem more ominous and threatening. Indeed, most evil creatures in Trek are dark. It can also involve whitening an alien race so that they might appear benevolent or god-like. Most divine creatures in Trek are white. Whether it is the fear of invaders from “outer space” that marked the science fiction genre in the 1950's and 1960's or the decay of the crowded and multi-cultural inner city that marked the genre in the 1970's and 1980's, science fiction's regime of verisimilitude, its particular spin on the codes of realism, draws upon and engages contemporary history in order to construct a frightening or ideal future.¹⁶

Apparently, the collective unconscious imagination has recreated blackface for the late twentieth century, as Jung might have suggested had he lived to see both Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and Roddenberry's *Star Trek*. Clearly, a thorough historical examination of stereotyping in narrative films leads critically conscious cultural critics to conclusions they might not otherwise make. Blackface has survived nearly a hundred years of filmic history. What does that say politically about this country? If we were not interested in the politics of film's formative years, we would miss entirely this fruitful connection.

For those who have never watched *Star Trek*, let us turn to Bernardi's capsular description of the 177 plus TV episodes and the, to date, seven feature-length films:

Star Trek takes place in Earth's future, specifically the 23rd century. In this imaginary time, Earth belongs to the United Federation of Planets, a powerful interplanetary body that unites a vast collective of worlds. The Federation is similar to the federalist government of the United States [Wow! What

imagination!], with its power centrally controlled, as well to the United Nations, each member having an autonomous government. Given the structure of the *Star Trek* universe and the 1960's context in which it was produced, however, the interplanetary organization more closely resembles the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the real space-time alliance whose main purpose was to deter communist expansion. The Federation's main exploratory and military resource is Star Fleet Command, which includes the United Space Ship Enterprise as one of its flagships. Their mission: "...to explore new worlds and seek out new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before."¹⁷

The series seems to parallel most public school America history textbook interpretations of Columbus's journey to "discover" America. From this perspective, *Star Trek* is an American political phenomenon approaching mythic proportions. It subliminally and/or metaphorically speaks of the formation of our nation.

Continuing along the stereotypical parallels between early film and contemporary film, we can see that the "Uncle Tom" stereotype has been resurrected for our age. Compare the following descriptions of early films (taken from Bogle's work) with Bernardi's description of Spock's role in *Star Trek*:

Bogle's Descriptions: Two early toms appeared in the shorts *Confederate Spy* (c. 1910) and *For Massa's Sake* (1911). In the former, dear Old Uncle Daniel is a Negro spy for the South. He dies before a Northern firing squad, but he is content, happy that he "did it for massa's sake and little massa." In *For Massa's Sake* a former slave is so attached to his erstwhile master that he sells himself back into slavery to help the master through a period of financial difficulties.¹⁸

Bernardi's Description: Like Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*, Spock is an Other that is depicted as stoically and loyally withstanding the prejudice of others in the interest of serving the manifest destiny—the final frontier—of the Federation. He signifies the alien who can pull himself up by his bootstraps, so-to-speak, and steadfastly serve the interest of his white Captain and the mostly human Federation. Most of the episodes that feature the alien

character construct him as highly competent and extremely trustworthy. This devotion is represented as logical: his service to the Federation and Kirk (read whiteness) is rational and, of course, logical. By making the half-breed logically loyal in this way, the racial project-in-the-text displaces the liberal-humanist ideal of the rational man onto Spock so that the half-breed alien poses little or no threat to the Federation or white television.¹⁹

Spock is, of course, an emotional mulatto, although he is not really a tragic mulatto in Bogle's sense. But Spock is no ordinary alien, no blackfaced fool, no easy scapegoat for dumb alien jokes. Spock is a very smart, highly interesting character, even though he suffers some obvious "emotional handicaps." It certainly seems as though Spock is a symbolic good Negro in alien drag. He is a "subtype," in today's social psychological lingo.

The Uncle Tom "subtype" grew up in the days of *Confederate Spy* and *For Massa's Sake*. It reached "puberty," perhaps in the days of *The Lone Ranger* and *The Green Hornet*. And, like too many middle-aged American men, it "fooled around" in *Star Trek* when Uhura kissed Captain Kirk! What a wish-fulfillment—that "whitey" would always rule and "darky" would always be there to serve him! If this is not ideology, I do not know what ideology could possibly mean. On a deeper level, it really doesn't matter whether a character is a Negro or simply an "Other," the psychological effect given our mechanistic view of reality is the same—once a minority always a minority.

While we are making culture-analytical comparisons, let us examine the fetishized use of a Uhura, black woman, in *Star Trek*! Bernardi insightfully proposes that,

Racial and gender ideology is intertwined in the case of Uhura. As a singing, "highly female female" African, she is written as a performance, an icon, of Black Beauty. When Uhura makes it out from under the segregated space of 1960's TV, her physicality and dark skin are the motivation. In a 1967

interview for *TV Guide*, Nichols [the actor playing Uhura] comments on the problem: “My problem is being a black woman on top of being a woman.” Unlike white women who are also fragmented and fetishized in *Star Trek* [and most, if not all, mainstream science fiction], Uhura is only a part of narrative cause and effect when her parts—that is, her legs, cleavage and face—are made a scopic appeal. In “Mirror, Mirror (1967) for instance, the character is eroticized by the camera, as several scenes show her scantily clad body in tight close-ups: her legs, stomach and breasts are emphasized for their “exotic” beauty (figure 7). It is as if her blackness is made safe and appealing when it is performing in fragmented and fetishized forms: when, in other words, it is sexualized and eroticized.²⁰

But, it is not only women *characters* who suffer a fetishized or scopophilic “look.” Film critics have to consider every aspect of dialogue and every iconographic detail of each narrative film. Bernardi notes that in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*,

Admiral Kirk and Chief Engineer Scott (Scotty) take a shuttle craft to the new and improved Enterprise. The Engineer, true to his character in the television series, complains that he cannot possibly get the starship in final shape for this unexpected mission: “She needs more work, sir, a shakedown.” Kirk tersely explains the urgency of the mission, and orders: “Ready or not, she launches in twelve hours.” The feminine personal pronoun the spacemen use in identifying the starship, a pattern begun in the original television series, codifies their heterosexual romantic affections for the vessel.²¹

Admiral Kirk and Chief Engineer Scotty look into each other’s eyes, perhaps, remembering their fondness for the spaceship and the many “relationships” they have had with it over the span of decades they served The Federation. Physical objects, apparently, can represent women in these wacky androcentric United States.

Further along we read that,

the theme music crescendos slightly as the shuttle, a stubby short-range craft, departs from an orbiting space station toward the Enterprise. The scene continues for an additional five minutes without dialogue, temporarily halting

the progress of the narrative as it focuses on the Enterprise. We first see the starship in the distance, surrounded by a kind of scaffolding apparently used in remodeling and up-grading starships. Kirk and Scotty are shown looking out the shuttle's front window against the backdrop of a bright blue planet Earth, a stunning visual affect enhanced by the elongated wide-screen format. As the shuttle approaches the starship, slowly moving outside the scaffolding to track along its body, we begin to see glimpses of "her"—the stern, the outstretched warp nacelles (the twin exhaust-like engines that enable the craft to move faster than the speed of light), and parts of the hull. The specularized, fragmented shots of the Enterprise are intensified by both the gentle rhythm of the musical score as well as the warm, almost glowing facial expressions of Captain Kirk. Many of these shots of the starship are also from the spacemen's point-of-view, thereby allowing the spectator to see and experience the spectacle through their eyes.²²

Years and years of filmmakers practicing androcentric points-of-view have, perhaps, culturally conditioned viewers, both male and female, to automatically accept certain images as symbolic representations of women's bodies. Those who are critically conscious see through this "normalized" point-of-view, even if they cannot avoid its ubiquitous presence.

Interestingly enough, Bernardi's research demonstrates that the *Star Trek* saga began as a "liberal-humanist" project. Apparently, good intentions were there from the start:

In a 1991 interview with David Alexander, Roddenberry acknowledges that he is both a humanist and a liberal. "I think my philosophy," he states, "is based upon the great affection I have for the human creature. I mean I have tremendous affection." He goes on to explain: One of the underlying messages of both series (Classical *Star Trek* and *The Next Generation*) is that human beings can, *with critical thinking* [my emphasis], solve the problems that are facing them without any outside or super natural help....In developing *Star Trek*, the creator-producer insisted that a progressive and unified earth, a one-world government, be foregrounded in the science fiction universe. Moreover, racial harmony and tolerance were to be the norm rather than the exception in the on-going *Star Trek* diegesis. In effect, he called for a multi-cultural future. For example, the original series treatment, which the creator-producer used to pitch *Star Trek* to various networks, describes how an one-hour show with an integrated cast of characters that included a Latino

navigator, a woman as second-in command and an alien science officer replete with red skin and a forked tail (what eventually became Spock). The outline goes on to pitch *Star Trek* as “Wagon train to the stars,” an action-adventure of optimism wrought with human conflict. Unlike science-fiction shows like *Lost in Space*, where the cast is an all-white family and the aliens are almost always the villains, this vision of the future is clearly integrated.²³

But “good intentions” often suffer the subconscious contradictions of one’s biased point-of-view. In other words, one’s cultural inauthenticity is not so easily avoided.

For example, Bernardi writes that,

Roddenberry’s vision, his attempt to fix the meaning of *Star Trek*, is not without its contradictions. For example, the description of Jose “Joe” Tyler is laden with stereotypical Latino traits, making the character an evident fissure in the humanist-liberal project. The lengthy passage from the original treatment is worth quoting in full: “Jose [Joe] Tyler, Boston astronomer father and Brazilian mother [Paolo Freire might be pleased with this!], is boyishly handsome, still very much in the process of maturing [aren’t all minorities?]. An unusual combination, he has inherited his father’s mathematical ability. Jose Tyler, in fact, is a phenomenally brilliant mathematician and space theorist. But he has also inherited his mother’s Latin temperament, fights a perpetual and highly personalized battle with his instruments and calculators, suspecting that space—and probably God, too—are engaged in a giant conspiracy to make his professional and personal life as difficult and uncomfortable as possible. Joe (or Jose, depending on the other party) is young enough to be painfully aware of the historical repudiate of Latins as lovers—and is in danger of failing this challenge on a cosmic scale.” Jose is written as a racial half-breed: on the one side, he is a brilliant scientist, a trait that comes from his European American and paternal line [What a surprise!]; on the other side, he is irrational, a failed Latin lover: traits that evolve from his Latino and maternal line [This makes so much sense, if one *believes* that women are irrational and emotional by nature!].²⁴

When one considers both the *conscious* values, ideals, attitudes and evaluations, and the *subconscious* prejudices and expectations that comprise a mechanistic view of reality,

writing and producing truly pro-social and progressive visual “art” becomes an extraordinarily difficult task.

As with any collaborative work, one must consider the many “chefs that spoil the broth.” It is never simply the case that what gets projected on the silver screen or what gets put on the air goes directly from writers or producers to its ultimate presentation. It is silly to think that even if one desires to produce pro-social art that those who control the purse strings will allow it to reach viewers as intended. For example, Bernardi’s research tells us that the so-called first interracial kiss on network TV was supposed to happen on the liberal-humanist *Star Trek* series and that it ran into streams of racist “concerns” over what was proper to broadcast over the airwaves and what was not:

Despite science fiction conventions that privilege metaphor and allegory, however, network decision-makers attempted to control the creative staff’s liberal-humanist project. In “Plato’s Stepchildren (1968), for instance, a pre-shooting script calls for Kirk, manipulated by Greek God-like figures, to kiss Uhura. According to most speculations, this would have been network television’s first interracial kiss between an African American and an European American. Apparently, NBC was concerned with the fallout of such a “first,” and requested changes. A memorandum from NBC’s Broadcast Standards Departments made their position explicit: “...it must be clear there are no racial over-tones to Kirk’s and Uhura’s dilemma.” While many creative players resisted the network’s capitulation to racism, NBC nevertheless continued with their aim of censoring the proposed interracial “dilemma.” Apparently, they even requested that Spock, the alien half-breed, be the one to press lips with Uhura. Nichelle Nichols [who plays Uhura] explains: “...they even went so far as to suggest changing the scene so that Kirk gets paired off with nurse Chapel and Spock ends up with me. Somehow, I guess, they found it more acceptable for a Vulcan to kiss me, for this alien to kiss a black woman, than for two humans with different coloring to do the same thing.” Nichols continues: “It was simply and clearly racism standing in the door . . . in suits. Strange how a twenty-third century space opera could be so mired in antiquated hang-ups.”²⁵

This “interracial dilemma” is a wonderful teaching tool! Class discussion could address the trickle down ideologies of network censorship. That an elite group holds the ultimate authority over what gets aired, demonstrates that theories of ideological hegemony are more “reality” than intellectual abstraction, as some would have us believe. That other agencies (e.g., the government, media watchdogs, etc.) influence what viewers get to see, is certainly one way for communication scholars or culture studies instructors to demonstrate “dominant ideology” at work.

Instructors need to bring examples of ideological hegemony to their students’ attention so that concrete evidence of rhetorical and discursive influence situates theory within the social practices that inform its validity. Merely discussing theories without providing examples of theory-in-action does not assist students very much in developing a heightened critical consciousness. Students might be encouraged to investigate how the economic structures governing media work against artistic elements that struggle to “perfect the power to perceive.” Class discussion could address legal concepts such as “copyright.” If copyrights did not exist, might society be better off? Do existing copyright laws shuffle more benefits to the artist or to the conglomerates that purchase the artists’ work? A powerful argument might be made for eliminating commercial control of visual art! How is an artist actually to perform her moral function if she cannot control what ultimately becomes visual art? These are a few of many possible debates that should help students to develop a heightened critical consciousness. Instructors cannot be afraid to step outside of film to

address these political concerns. Having commercial control of media almost assures a national entity that its visual art will be immoral, in Dewey's sense of this term.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is casting. Those who are traditionally marginalized in the civic realm need to be examined under a political microscope when they are represented in the cultural realm. Do women serve on the bridge? Are they Admirals? Generals? Presidents? Do women of authority and presence do their jobs as women or as *substitutes for men*? Put differently, are the women we see in leadership roles simply replacement stereotypes of men? Or, are they different in some way? Do they rule through something other than macho commands? Are Black, Asian, Latino, etc., characters merely tokens? Are they there simply to dress up the plot? Bernardi argues that,

The written description and the narrative use of Uhura are also examples of the contradictory nature of Roddenberry's liberal-humanist project. Relegated to the narrative and spatial background for most of the series, her presence reveals that integration in the *Star Trek* universe smacks of tokenism. As the *In Living Color* skit mentioned in Chapter 1 parodies, Uhura was mostly seen "placing the Captain's calls." Nichelle Nichols comments on the use of her character: "...I'd get the first draft, the white pages, and see what Uhura had to do this week, and maybe it was a halfway-decent scene or two, sometimes more, and then invariably the next draft would come in on blue pages and I'd find that Uhura's presence in the show had been cut way down. The pink pages came next and she'd suffer some more cuts, then the yellow, more cuts, and it finally got to the point where I had really had it. I mean I just decided that I don't even need to read the FUCKING SCRIPT! I mean I know how to say, 'hailing frequencies open'..." Seen but not heard, Uhura, like Sulu, is primarily used as background color.²⁶

As a teaching tool, the section cited above suggests that perhaps those who write teleplays or screenplays ought to pay more attention to the changes made during re-writes. Are there *subconscious variables* involved that cause succeeding drafts of the script to drift toward the

“central tendency” of one’s inherited assumptions? For film studies instructors who teach the fine art of teleplay or screenplay writing, the point might be made to their students that each and every *change* a script endures must be evaluated in terms of its possible “normalization of the status quo.” The human mind rationalizes its obsessions. Why should script-writing be any different? Conscientious artists do not confabulate.

In his exhaustive analysis of *Star Trek*, Bernardi notes that,

The liberal-humanist project behind the production of *Star Trek* and in-the-text is contradictory. Story outlines that call for an integrated cast are literally whitewashed: scripts that call for a radical critique of racism are diluted. The science fiction series brings extraterrestrial nations and dissimilar aliens together, yet also marks and segregates difference as Otherness: Spock is a loyal and stoic alien: Elaan is a cunning or submissive fetishized object. In certain instances, such as “The Paradise Syndrome,” scripts and production notes suggest a systematic racial hierarchy: Whites on top, all Others at the bottom. The results of these practices are contradictory and liberal compromises that reveal the racial project of creative decision-makers and in-the-text as anything but universal and coherent. The contradiction—indeed, the paradox—of *Star Trek* is that, despite its appeal to “infinite diversity in infinite combinations,” it supports a white and Western universe populated with dark alien threats and colored servants.²⁷

All science fiction narratives need to be evaluated in terms of patriarchal white supremacist logic because this is the greatest site of political conflict in these United States. Feminists struggle with the ever-present-although-improving patriarchal side of privilege while non-whites struggle with the ever-present-although-improving social, economic and political postures of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. Narrative fantasies of a white-ruled world need to be interrogated in terms of our nation’s *racist* history, its present “recovery projects” and its manifest and latent (hetero)sexist acts.

Science fiction in American narrative art needs to be *vigorously* questioned not only in terms of its subconscious *racist* inflections but also its blatant *sexist inflections*. As Bernardi observes:

The use of aliens as metaphors for racial Others in recent science fiction films is not limited to androids and superhumans. In the *Alien* trilogy (1979; 1986; 1992), for example, the queen of the monstrous creatures is not simply a mother, a representation drawing upon ideologies of gender and sexuality as many film critics have pointed out, but a black mother. This, it seems to me, is a specific use of both the well-worn myth that equates the color black with evil as well as the racist stereotype of over-populating Black women. Whether the aliens in the trilogy are consciously or unconsciously read as racial or racist, the pattern of their chronotopicity—from color to narrative fiction—has its roots in the genre’s evolution. In short, science fiction chronotopes like aliens have consistently concretized racial ideologies—the stereotypes, the fears and, as with *Brother From Another Planet*, the struggles—that colorize the real world.²⁸

When Toni Morrison called for a re-evaluation of American literature with a view toward discovering the conscious as well as the unconscious impact of slavery on whites, in particular those who create(d) culture, she opened up a can of historical worms that glisten and wiggle even to this day. Any type of prejudice can and should be examined in terms of the inflections of prejudicial social practice on the collective imagination of the nation.

Racism and sexism have followed *Star Trek* from its inception to *The Next Generation*. According to Bernardi,

The ideology of neoconservatism, with its strong political base capitulating to the ideals of a color blind society but maintaining and even increasing de facto discrimination, is systematically woven into *The Next Generation* via intertexts that, though revealing a diverse universe where beings of color coexist, ultimately proffers a “parallel” evolution that, like the first six feature films, privileges the white aliens over the colored ones. Thus, it is not the overt exclusion of people of color from acting roles that makes *The Next*

Generation neoconservative. The markedly white worlds of 1950's television, where people of color were systematically excluded or, when present, came only in the form of blatant stereotypes, are, for the most part, not present in the science fiction series. It is also not the tokenism of the pseudo-integration of the 1960's, where people of color remained, for the most part, in the background—seen but not heard. Characters of color have more to do in this future time. Rather, what makes this generation of television *Trek* neoconservative is a more implicit and insidious project, where racial equality is given lip service. In “Code of honor,” for instance, the intertextuality of race offers us a group of humanoid who “closely” resemble “an ancient earth culture” who have evolved into a technologically advanced but tribal, polite but patriarchal, disco-wearing and spear-chuckin’ alien “race” dominated by males who are more pomp than character.²⁹

Indeed, the “character flaws” of those who are marginal cannot be properly evaluated as simply narrative choices or a-political extensions of narrative tradition. Any so-called “character flaw” of an individual or a group must be paired with the historical use of stereotypes in narrative art and the political lessons of the past.

Women have not fared well in the transition from *Star Trek* to *The Next Generation*.

As Bernardi notes,

There are several identifiable intertexts framing *The Next Generation*, not just those specific to the racial formation. Gender, particularly the position of women in the future, is a dominant discourse in *Trek*'s play—a play, it seems to me, that can best be described politicized as sexist. As is the case with *Star Trek*, women in *The Next Generation* are consistently positioned as either helpers or fetishized objects. This is clearly the case with both Doctor Crusher and Counselor Troi, their Federation rate (job) suggestive of their role as nurturers. The Doctor and the Counselor rarely if ever give orders and almost always serve the men. Moreover, while the women of *The Next Generation* are generally not as loosely clad as the women of classical *Trek*, they are still objectified. Counselor Troi, for instance, wears clothes that tightly hug her body [and this appears “normal” through our patriarchal eyesight] and reveal her breasts. In fact, many shots of the character show her exiting a scene, thus revealing her backside, or bending over, thus revealing her cleavage. She is positioned as a “looker.”³⁰

But, neither are queers accepted “Others” in *The Next Generation*, according to Bernardi:

Heterosexism is another discourse framing the plurality of *The Next Generation*. As gay fans of the science fiction spin off, specifically the Gaylaxions analyzed by film and television scholar Henry Jenkins, have long argued, the show’s vision of an egalitarian future where all people are accepted irrespective of their difference is contradicted by the almost complete absence of gays in the fictional universe. Jenkins writes: “They (the galaxions) looked around them and saw other series—*LA Law*, *Heartbeat*, *Thirtysomething*, *Quantum Leap*, *Northern Exposure*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Roseanne*—opening up new possibilities for queer characters on network television, while their programme could only hint around the possibility that there might be some form of sexuality out there, somewhere beyond the known universe, which did not look like heterosexuality. *Star Trek* was no longer setting the standards for other programmes.”³¹

Science fiction is fertile ground for developing a moral narrative art because of the narrative possibilities it opens up to the writer. Three of these “possibilities” may be (1) an entirely fictional world where social, spiritual and ecological events are limited only by one’s imagination and one’s critical consciousness, (2) characters who can explode traditional negative stereotypes, and (3) political situations that offer workable alternatives to consumer capitalism and hierarchical relations of power.

The Maintenance of Stereotypes Regardless of Social Circumstance

Both mainstream film critics and film studies instructors need to understand that the human mind has a “proven” tendency to rewire social events, representations and social communiqués to fit particular “philosophies of life.” If those “philosophies of life” are not dialogical, if they are not engaged in an ever-evolving search for intersubjective

morality, then they may bear poisonous fruit. Ishmael Reed (1993) points out how an “oppressor consciousness,” a patriarchal white supremacist “philosophy of life,” in a sense, “re-writes” the news:

After years of front-page pictures about black violence in inner-city schools, the *New York Times*, on April 21, 1993, quoted a Justice Department report of 1989, which found “surprisingly little difference between cities, suburbs, and non-metropolitan areas in a number of measures of school violence.” Yet even when the media report stories of white violence the participants are often provided with excuses. For instance, a rise in battery against women that occurred in Alaska was blamed on male depression about unemployment that resulted from the Exxon oil disaster. The murder of a Little League baseball player by a youngster on a rival team was blamed on violence in adult sports. *But the network news shows illustrated this story with pictures of black athletes fighting instead of showing white athletes engaged in brawls [my emphasis].*³²

When they observe such “discrepancies,” film studies instructors need to bring these to class and discuss them with their students. Hyper-political film criticism, in an academic setting, cannot afford to ignore any aspect of an “oppressor consciousness.” To do so is to decontextualize cultural criticism and weaken its political validity. Ishmael Reed’s observations (and others’) provide much needed evidence that filmic narration must be evaluated in terms of a patriarchal white supremacist “philosophy of life.” This “philosophy of life” exists in the denial of housing to non-whites and many other aspects of social interaction.

Indeed, narrative fantasy, when viewed in terms of enduring political conflicts—when *contextualized* in terms of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination—takes on a very different “meaning.” No longer do we see Jim Carrey’s smugness, we see over two

hundred of years of oppression passed down from one generation to the next like an angry genetic disease infecting Carrey's obsessive ridiculing of those who do not share Carrey's skin color. It is as silly and as shocking as that.

Reed (1973) points out that news media offer *excuses* for violence committed by whites but, generally, not by blacks. This, too, must be brought to the attention of film studies students if they are to transform their "oppressor consciousness" into something intersubjectively "neutral." Reed, correctly of course, implies that the practice of offering "excuses" for white criminals but not non-white criminals is both disingenuous and immoral:

By offering justifications or explanations for this violence instead of condemning it, the news media and the neoconservative policy wonks often seem to be condoning it in a manner similar to how some members of the German government blame violence against foreigners on the foreigners. When a black man was murdered by a white mob in the Howard beach section of New York City, a *New York Times* writer said that it was because whites were afraid of the underclass. When a trigger-happy white Louisiana suburbanite killed a visiting Japanese student, Yoshihiro Hattori, who had mistakenly knocked on the wrong door, NBC News said that the Japanese ought to learn slang so that they will understand what is meant by *freeze*.³³

When news media take sides, they do so in subtle ways. They constantly shift perspectives so that violent acts against "Others" fit a specific "philosophy of life," a patriarchal white supremacist point-of-view that positions white purity against non-white impurity. This "ordinary consciousness" does not recognize its "shifty" eyes, its constant "re-writing" of social "reality." Yet, the fact that such bias exists suggests that our national psyche is out of contact with economic, social and political "realities." This

distortion of “reality” is evidence that narrative art cannot be easily dismissed as mere entertainment. If “news” is biased, how can art be free from bias? Narrative art must be evaluated as a reflection of the “national psyche” that excludes women and those who are marginal from its positive manifestations of privilege.

Everyone can relate to the *fear* of being attacked by an unknown assailant and therefore many of us may, in fact, fail to recognize the incredible disrespect (i.e., the blatant racism) that NBC News exhibited when they suggested that Japanese tourists learn phrases such as “freeze,” as discussed above. First of all, NBC News diverted attention away from the *real* issue, that of socially-conditioned fear in which gun owners are highly likely to flex “trigger-happy” fingers every time some stranger approaches their property. Secondly, by discussing what tourists could do to avoid being shot, news media probably spent little or no time analyzing and discussing what could or should be done to mitigate fear and/or change the economic situation that breeds crime. The “causes” of crime are hardly ever discussed because (1) our “ordinary consciousness” does not see context and (2) the media may not wish to bite the hand that feeds it. Ruling elites and media producers shy away from the “realities” of economic discrimination because of their complicity in creating social circumstances that “cause” of our nation’s ills—from ecological suicide to urban violence and social decay.

The economy, racial oppression and other social factors—all these go unmentioned when blacks are the perpetrators of violent criminal acts because there seems to be a Nazi-like unwritten “contract with America” that blacks are to be forever

considered genetically inferior and genetically aggressive. This “contract with America” began with the introduction of slavery into the Americas and continued throughout our country’s history with the pantheon of negative black stereotypes in American art and politics. This contract is quite difficult to dissolve because it functions on automatic pilot. Over the years it has gathered a tremendous historical momentum steeped in cultural “inauthenticity.” As a true social contract though, it works both ways. It makes demands of each party to the contract, even if one side is bound to it by an inextricable “philosophy of life” imposed without its “authentic” consent. The next chapter excavates more of this notion of cultural “inauthenticity” and discusses how communication scholars might overcome it through transrational analysis and a liberatory pedagogical praxis.

The “Looking Glass Self” of Schema Theory

Murray Stuart Smith (1994) in his doctoral dissertation titled *Character Engagement: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* notes that,

Schema theory is informed by a realist, constructivist epistemology in which sense-data from the external world are organized by mental structures; it is neither an empiricism which sees the mind as a tabula rasa passively accepting the imprint of an immanently meaningful world, nor an idealism which regards the mind as entirely unconstrained in its construction of “reality.” But this process of construction is subject to feedback from the external world; the latter is not simply an illusion, as idealist epistemologies maintain. As Gombrich writes, our “need to organize and interpret does not mean that we are hopelessly caught in our interpretation. We can experiment and through trial and error learn something about such impressions. An alternative interpretation may drive out the accepted one and reveal a glimpse of the reality behind it. (Gombrich, 1969; p. 363)’ Agency is conceived as occurring within a cycle of action and perception: the human agent ‘perceives as the basis of

action; each action affords data for perception' (Arib and Hesse, 1986: p.52). Emotion too is part of this cycle, as we establish earlier in this chapter. Perceptions and actions may give rise to particular emotions, but these, in turn, function as 'patterns of salience' and thereby influence future perceptions and actions (p. 107).

It is important for "hyper-political" cultural critics to measure their interpretations against multicultural lived experiences because by doing so they can more fully engage opposing "philosophies of life." When we seriously and openly dialogue with those who are "different" from us, those who manifest different values and ideals, it enables us to "see" new horizons of meaning. When we spin our perspective in various directions we face new directions which cast light on the self-constructedness of our own horizons of meaning.

When we employ "schema" to organize and interpret our social worlds, we are not consciously aware of doing so. It seems "natural" to us. We sometimes misperceive instances that might "refute" our "philosophies of life," our "schemata of meaning."

Murray Stuart Smith notes that,

in order to understand how such an 'estrangement' might occur, when a person is confronted with sense-data which seem recalcitrant to processing within any available schema, we need to examine schema theory in more detail. Schemata are possessed of default values and hierarchies, each 'slot' of the schema has a number of hierarchically ordered alternatives, with the prototypical case being the default value. A handshake is usually held for two to three seconds, but occasionally one or both of the agents involved may grasp the other's hand for longer, for an entire sentence or more. The latter is not our first expectation, but it is an option held within the schema, accommodated through our experience with many thousands of handshakes, and so we are not thrown into crises by the change....When sense-data fit none of the available options within the default hierarchy, persons may either assimilate or accommodate this new experience. In

assimilation, the existing schema overrides the recalcitrant experience by processing what it can of the sense-data and effectively ‘ignoring’ (not noticing) the rest. As Gombrich writes, if schemata ‘have no provisions for certain kinds of information, it is just too bad for the information’ (1961: p. 73). At least, this can occur. Accommodation, on the other hand, is the process of adaptation whereby schema develops by incorporating new experience: either the default hierarchy becomes more elaborated, or new schema is developed.³⁴

Schema theory puts us in a double bind. On the one hand, it “adequately” explains levels of consciousness. On the other hand, a transrational understanding of it acknowledges that it is incapable of locating totalizing social “truths” because such “truths” can not possibly exist. As Alan W. Watts put it, “Conventional [Western] Knowledge” is inherently problematic—representations are unavoidably “biased” because the mind cannot really represent itself to itself. That which categorizes cannot unproblematically categorize itself.

The “trick,” then, is to acknowledge that hyper-political cultural criticism *must be* equal parts “art” and “science.” So-called “schemata” might serve several interpretative ideals, but in the end, the transrational analyst must trust some of her *intuitions* and rely upon the “emotional resonance” of given cultural artifacts—that is, she must interrogate how she *felt* at particular moments during any particular viewing and what she believes might have contributed to those *feelings*. Bell hooks (1990) apparently does this when she interrogates the racial stereotypes in an emotionally-charged scene in a popular American film:

Witness is a prime example of a film which exploits racial stereotypes to enhance its “thriller” dimensions. Audiences are literally sitting on the

edge of their seats when the black male character (played by Danny Glover) commits a brutal murder in the presence of a little white boy who watches, unseen. After the murder, the black male searches the stalls to make sure he was not observed. Racial difference is exploited to create dramatic tension. As he reaches his hand into the stall where the innocent “beautiful” little white boy is hiding, the camera zooms in for a close up of the black hand, moving from that image to the scared white face of the little boy, playing on the contrasts between terrifying blackness and pure, innocent whiteness.³⁵

It is not simply a question of “traditional” horror motifs where *a* hand is always shown before *a* murder and it doesn’t matter what color the hand is. *When one considers our history as a nation*, “politics” becomes a question of Blacks having been systematically demonized throughout an ever-evolving “moment” of economic exploitation. Historical context cannot be ignored in hyper-political film criticism.

Hooks (1990) goes on to add that, “cinematically, the movie version of *The Color Purple* [produced by Spielberg, a white male] operates in a similar manner. When the film begins, the innocence of the young black girls appears more poignant and authentic when contrasted with the brutal images of dominating black masculinity.”³⁶ Hooks astutely points out that Alice Walker’s novel was *not* faithfully rendered on the silver screen:

Even though the novel shows the transformation of Mister [the father figure]—he moves from being a brutal male chauvinist to a compassionate caring person—Walker’s shift in representation was rarely acknowledged [in public debate]....In the film version of the novel, Spielberg did not choose to graphically portray Mister’s transformation. Instead he highlighted images that readily resembled existing racist stereotypes depicting black masculinity as threatening and dangerous. This had been the case in filmmaking from *Birth of a Nation* to contemporary films like *Witness*. These images “work” in the movies. Within a white supremacist culture, it is logical that white audiences *feel* more engaged with a scary film when the villain is a black male.³⁷

And, hooks openly “politicizes” her critique when she concludes that,

Speilberg’s representation of black men cannot be dismissed as though it has no political implications, as though it is rooted solely in neutral artistic choices. Whatever the factors which personally motivated him to downplay and in some ways almost completely ignore the transformation of Mister, it had the political impact of transforming Walker’s text (which was not anti-black male, which did not portray black men as if they are not complex individuals) into a one-dimensional frame where black males were depicted in a conventional, stereotypically racist Hollywood manner. In this film, black masculinity was portrayed as brutish and animalistic.³⁸

The argument is *not* that Spielberg is a benevolent bigot—at least, *I am not making that hasty evaluation* and I do not believe that hooks is implying that either—it is that racist inflection often operates at an *unconscious level*, at the level of our “mechanistic appreciation” of social “reality.” We are all biased. We are trapped in perspectives we inherited. We cannot face all conceivable horizons at once. We may consider multiple horizons of meaning, but our eyes are stuck forever in our foreheads. We cannot see behind us while we simultaneously look forward. We cannot see off into infinity and we cannot paste the incredible complexities of the universe into an incredible mosaic of “truth.” “Good intentions” are all we have, but “good intentions” do not always produce “politically correct” films. Sometimes, it is only *after* a film has been made that its “politics” can be fully appreciated.

I do not know whether or not hooks uses a “template” or “schemata” for assessing a film’s “political” content, I suspect that she probably relies partially, as I do, on intuition and general “rules of thumb” (which might be called “schemata”). For

pedagogical purposes, one might suggest the following “method.” Viewers might ask themselves a series of questions designed to probe meaning, for example:

- (1) If Black characters commit crimes, are there also “good” Blacks portrayed in the film?
- (2) Are so-called “good blacks” *so* unrealistically “good” that they appear to be saintly (e.g., Danny Glover in *Grand Canyon*)? Social science research seems to suggest that extreme “disconfirmation” of a stereotype tends to reinforce the subtyping tendency rather than eliminate or diminish the tendency to stereotype.³⁹ More about this later.
- (3) Are the so-called “crime scenes” exclusively Black vs. White characters?
- (4) Is there a scene in which an innocent White person is terrified of a Black male. For example, Danny Glover terrorizes a small white boy in *Witness*.
- (5) Are there any bad White guys in the film? If so, do they “act” black? For example, the young white males in *Kids* seem to be infected with an evil “blackness.”
- (6) Do “outrageous” characters “talk the ‘black’ talk?”
- (7) Do minorities always play supporting, or passive, roles?⁴⁰
- (8) Are there more Black characters committing crimes than those involved in pro-social activities?
- (9) Can the film be perceived as Others vs. Whiteness (e.g., *Falling Down*)?

- (10) Are the “good” Black characters intelligent, heroic or are they just bumbling fools who appear to stumble upon success (e.g., Dyson in *Terminator II*)?
- (11) Are characters one-dimensional? For example, are Asian Americans brilliant computer whizzes? Are Native Americans somber and mystical? Women highly emotional, subservient, fickle, objects of lust? Are white males macho and cool? Are Latinas either saintly or sexy?
- (12) If minorities are poor or oppressed, does the story explain how they came to be so?
- (13) Does the film compare minorities to a “normalized” whiteness? In other words, does the film emphasize cultural difference?
- (14) Do s/heroes fit a traditional template? In other words, do sheroes act “male?” Do “good” blacks act “white?”
- (15) Do minority characters fight for “whiteness and the American Way” or for the good of all people?
- (16) Who produced the cultural artifact? People of color? Women? Or, an elite supply of white males?
- (17) Does crime or poverty appear to be a “natural” lifestyle for minorities?
- (18) Do gay characters always die at the end of the film? (19) Are gay characters campy? Happy-go-lucky?
- (19) Are Chicanos tough, hard, macho?

- (20) If the hero is black (or any other minority), does s/he succeed because a white person provides critical support?
- (21) Do minority characters see the errors of their ways and adopt white values and ideals? These “templates of critical inquiry” are not meant to exhaust all the possibilities, but instead to suggest just a few.

Unfortunately, it seems nearly impossible to pose a comprehensive series of questions that viewers should think about as they watch films without them falling into the repulsive, stereotypical abyss of essentializing “otherness.” “Race” is, of course, its own *figurative* “act.” But it is an “act” or “schema” that plays itself out in *literal* economic, social and political practices. Race cannot be ignored when it is so integral a part of our collective consciousness. There appears to be no political alternative but to essentialize. Our consciousness as a nation is steeped in the teas of inherited prejudice. Hate that lives by the stereotype apparently must “die” by the stereotype. Stereotypes, therefore, must be analyzed, dissected and laid out like road kill. If Kunda & Oleson (1995) are correct when they report that “stereotypes are notoriously difficult to change,”⁴¹ then film studies instructors need to seriously question their pedagogical practices. It is not simply a question of providing information to one’s students, it is a question of changing *how* they think. It is a question of transforming their consciousness. The same, of course, applies to cultural critics.

Motivated Subtyping and Unconscious Cognitive Bias

Returning to this notion of “cognitive bias,” I want to more fully engage this “difficulty in eliminating the act of stereotyping others.” Allen R. McConnell (1995) in his doctoral dissertation titled *Motivated Subtyping and the Perseverance of Group Stereotypes* points out that some individuals, which he calls “motivated perceivers,” perceive stereotypic disconfirming information in a manner that does not ‘obliterate’ the original stereotype. Instead, these “motivated perceivers” engage in a process called “subtyping.” As McConnell explains it:

The **motivated subtyping hypothesis** suggests that subtyping serves a functional role in helping motivated perceivers maintain their preferred group affect even in the face of disconfirming information, as long as the targets who perform the counterstereotypical behaviors can be identified in some way as nonprototypic group members (p. 40).

McConnell goes on to present his startling conclusions,

Across two experiments with both real-world and novel experimental groups, the predictions of the motivated subtyping hypothesis were strongly and repeatedly supported. Motivated subtyping appears to have important implications for the maintenance of group affect, and the flexibility in maintaining ingroup-outgroup perceptions. These experiments relied on multiple measures of subtyping rather than relying on a single index to infer subtype formation. These measures captured the formation of subtypes well and were generally consistent across both experiments with both positive and negative stereotypes. *Finally, this study suggests that subjects do indeed form representations about subtyped targets rather than simply ignoring their counterstereotypic behaviors.* [my emphasis] Thus it seems clear that good support for the motivated subtyping hypothesis was found. (P. 43)

McConnell found that it was not a simple case of subjects ignoring information. They did perceive the counterstereotypic information. The individuals were apparently *motivated* to maintain the stereotype! Perhaps their “mechanistic view of reality,” their “schemata,” *their ordinary consciousness* prohibited them from reaching a more “realistic” level of understanding. Until we address this notion of *motivated perception* or the possibility of multiple levels of awareness, we probably will not get past the “false consciousness” that breeds inequality, hate, fear and immorality.

Johnston et al (1994) report that “the motivational influences [in this case, whether or not subjects were expected to meet with the “exemplar” of a particular stereotype] subjects bring to an encounter affect their processing of and memory for the presented information and may influence the nature of future interactions.”⁴² And so, we go back to the age old “truism” that contact between the “races” is important if society is to mitigate the formation and utilization of stereotypes.

Hewstone et al (1994) report that,

Our findings support Weber-Kollmann’s (1985) claim that subtyping inhibits the process of transcendence [of a stereotype], even if it does bring about a change in cognitive representation. *Furthermore, increased awareness that a target group is heterogeneous is not necessarily a harbinger of stereotype change. In fact, somewhat paradoxically, it may make change more difficult to achieve* [my emphasis]. Srull (1981) has suggested that the more variability a schema incorporates, the more exceptions it can allow, and thus the more resistant to change it is. Put differently, by increasing the variability of a stereotype when inconsistent group members are encountered, social perceivers can maintain the stereotype’s central tendency. The relationship between perceived group variability and stereotype change now deserves systematic study.⁴³

Again and again, it does not seem to be a simple case of providing individuals with more information, with counterstereotypic exemplars. The traditional pedagogical model of inserting information into students, what Freire called the “banking system of education,” falls far short of actually helping students to become self-actualized, to live decent, moral lives.

In order for individuals to spiritually grow, they need to *transform their consciousness*, starting with the schema they use to categorize and make sense of their social worlds. However, social scientists have discovered that people do not easily overcome a “mechanistic view of reality.” Of course, work is still being done on “stereotype removal,” so we do not yet have a clear picture of what is needed to eliminate stereotyping. Common sense tells us that we ought to become more self-reflexive. Future studies should investigate whether *telling students about subtyping/subgrouping* later affects how they perceive “exemplars.” To my knowledge, no such studies are presently under review.

Stereotypes hang around because there are probably “partial truths” in each perspective we adopt and because, as social psychologists have discovered, people *make up new categories* (subtypes) which comprise “exceptions to the rule,” or they formulate “subgroups,”⁴⁴ which give the stereotype new life when it *should* just die away like fresh “road kill,” obliterated by the tractor trailer of multiple truths. Yet, stereotypes pick themselves off the asphalt like the “wily coyote” in the *Roadrunner* series and the chase is on (Kunda & Oleson, 1995). Unfortunately, those who bear the brunt of ugly

stereotypes must go through endless series of a not-so-funny social pain. Real “coyotes” suffer real pain.

With this graphic picture in mind and a vomit bag in hand, it should be relatively easy to see that “cognitive bias” is a problem of consciousness. It apparently is composed of (1) a psychophysical variable, (2) an “historical” variable (i.e., that of “expectations” governing perception), (3) a subliminal variable and now, (4) an unconscious “motivational” variable. This last variable is associated with affect, how one *feels* about a particular group of people. That each of these four variables is mostly *unconscious* seems to complicate pro-social projects to eradicate stereotyping. How does one “restructure” the unconscious? Clearly, what is called for is a form of culture-analysis whose ultimate objective is a “transformation of one’s consciousness.”

Unanswered Questions of the Political Economy

Marx, arguably, called for such a radical re-working of one’s consciousness. As transrational analysts we must ask ourselves to what extent do political and economic structures play in the production and maintenance of stereotypes? Social scientists have yet to unearth cultural clues which might answer this question. Their focus is probably too narrow. For the most part, social scientists seem to be concerned with “close-ups” which exclude the complexities of history. Could structures of historical inheritance underlie much of what unconsciously motivates perceivers? Economic structures, as Marx argued, are noted for dividing societies into “out-groups” and “in-groups” (i.e., the

eternal “haves” vs. the eternal “have nots”). What if society saw itself as an indivisible whole and personal property and privilege did not exist? Could this be the “transformation of consciousness” that effectively eliminates a “false consciousness” of greed?

My argument is that economic structures exert a normative function because we do not choose the economic circumstances of our birth. Just as we inherit culture, we must also inherit the “thrown-ness” of the symbolic interactions of our economic environment. In this sense, “economic structures” determine our being-in-the-world although not in any “absolute” fashion. We can become enlightened to the structural events of our existence through a heightened critical consciousness. Paradoxical thinking charts the middle way between cultural conditioning *and* conscious resistance. Formal thinking does not see this balancing act. For example, it is immensely difficult for an “ordinary consciousness” to even imagine a society in which property does not exist, one does not inherit wealth, each “citizen” has equal standing in a world without exploitation. Only a “heightened critical consciousness” can imagine such a utopia, or one which approximates it. Likewise, those who stereotype find it extremely difficult *not* to subtype because their minds have adopted a “philosophy of life” that categorizes difference. They seem to be stuck in cognitive “loops” that forever feed them their own delusions. Even Heidegger, the “philosopher” who proposed the normative functions of culture, did not fully escape his “thrown-ness:” He sided with the Nazis.

Transcending “Cognitive Bias” Through Self-Reflexivity

If, as the evidence seems to imply, we unconsciously “mediate” between the environment (the world out there) and our perception of it (the world “re-created” inside our minds), we had better become more *self-reflexive* if we are ever to transcend, to the degree that it is possible, “mechanistic views of reality.” If we are ever to overcome the immoral consequences of “social amnesia,” we need to transcend the structural consequences of an “ordinary consciousness.” We need to go beyond patterned ways of perceiving. The problem is that pedagogy here in America sifts its students through “sieves of patterned social programming.” For example, what is truly troubling, from a political standpoint, is the increasing “specialization” occurring in the academy, a type of specialization that shuffles psychologists, philosophers, biologists and film studies teachers, ministers and mathematicians into different “departments” as though there were no intersections in knowledge. Knowledge intersects at every corner of symbolic social interaction. At an earlier and earlier age, students are prepared for very *particular* careers without ever giving them the critical tools to negotiate an intersubjective social “reality” (Kincheloe, 1995). This overparticularization creates unbalanced students. Their fragmented views of the world further conditions their acceptance of stereotypes. The last two chapters address this need for a transformative pedagogical practice that focuses on self-reflexivity.

Footnotes

¹Sarris, Andrew (1978). Politics and Cinema, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 9.

²Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 7.

³Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 8.

⁴Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 8.

⁵Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 8.

⁶Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 9.

⁷Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 9.

⁸Mosse, George L. (1996). Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 65.

⁹Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁰Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 10.

¹¹Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 13.

¹²Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 13.

¹³Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁴Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁵Bernardi, Daniel Leonard (1995). "The Wrath of Whiteness: The Meaning of Race in the Generation of *Star Trek*," Doctoral Dissertation @ the University of California, Los Angeles, Committee Chair: Nick Browne, page 13.

¹⁶Bernardi, D. L. (1995), Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁷Bernardi, D.L. (1995), Ibid, p. 71-2.

¹⁸Bogle, Donald (1973), Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁹Bernardi, D. L. (1995), Ibid, p. 88.

²⁰Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 61.

²¹Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 104.

²²Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 104-5.

²³Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 51.

²⁴Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 52.

²⁵Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 56.

²⁶Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 60.

²⁷Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 95.

²⁸Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 115.

²⁹Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 163.

³⁰Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 164.

³¹Bernardi, D. L. (1995), *Ibid*, p. 164.

³²Reed, Ishmael (1993). Airing Dirty Laundry, New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, p. 16.

³³Reed, Ismael (1973), *Ibid*, p. 16.

³⁴Smith, Murray Stuart (1994) Doctoral Dissertation: "Character Engagement: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema" Degree Date: 1991, UMI Dissertation Services, a Bell & Howell Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan, pp. 113-4.

³⁵hooks, bell (1990). Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, Boston: South End Press, Page 69.

³⁶hooks, bell (1990), *Ibid*, Page 69.

³⁷hooks, bell (1990), *Ibid*, Page 68-9.

³⁸hooks, bell (1990), *Ibid*, Page 69.

³⁹Indeed, Hantzi (1995) reports that, "If disconfirmers [of a particular stereotype]

are too extreme, and thus perceived as less typical [of a given stereotype], as in the case of the concentrated conditions, they are subtyped into a separate unrepresentative subcategory, and the overall stereotype is therefore protected from change (cf. Hewstone, 1994; Johnston & Hewstone, 1992). See also, Hewstone et al (1994) "Cognitive Models of Stereotype Change: (5). Measurement, Development, and Consequences of Subtyping" in Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 30, pp. 505-526.

⁴⁰ If we are one with the universe, then representation has nothing to do with numbers. Even though the United States of America is predominately white, the world is not. The argument that white people should make movies about other white people because "it's only natural" doesn't hold water in a world that focuses on diversity.

⁴¹ Kunda, Ziva & Kathryn C. Olsen (1995) "Maintaining Stereotypes in the Face of Disconfirmation: Constructing Grounds for Subtyping Deviants," in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 68, No. 4, 565-579. This study reports that, "participants who were told that targets had an additional, neutral attribute appeared to use it as grounds for subtyping them."

⁴² Johnston, Lucy; Miles Hewstone, Louise Pendry & Clive Frankish (1994) "Cognitive Models of Stereotype Change (4): Motivational and cognitive influences," in the European Journal of Social Psychology, Vol. 24, pp. 237-265.

⁴³ Hewstone, Miles; C. Neil Macrae, Riana Griffiths, and Alan B. Milne (1994) "Cognitive Models of Stereotype Change: (5). Measurement, Development, and Consequences of Subtyping," in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 30, p. 523.

⁴⁴ Maurer, Park & Rothbart (1995) "Subtyping Versus Subgrouping Processes in Stereotype Representation," in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 69, No. 5, 812-824, report that "subgrouping refers to a somewhat similar [to subtyping] process in which the members of a group are broken into smaller meaningful clusters, the members of which are similar to one another in some way and different from those in the other clusters. Some of these subgroups contain members who confirm the group stereotype, and some contain members who disconfirm it. As a consequence of realizing the varieties of ways in which the group stereotype is manifest, perceivers come to see the group as diverse and heterogeneous. As a result, subgrouping leads to a less stereotypic view of the group than does organizing a group around its individual members (Park et al, 1992).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE COMMUNICATION OF PREJUDICE, INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION (HETEROSEXISM & AGEISM)

*Prejudice—a vagrant opinion without visible means of support—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary**

*Prejudice is a raft onto which the shipwrecked mind clammers and paddles to safety—Ben Hecht, *A Guide for the Bedevilled**

*For too long have we been trampled under the iron feet of oppression, too long bound in the starless midnight of racism—Martin Luther King, Quoted in a profile on Jesse Jackson by Marshall Frady, *The New Yorker*, April 20, 1992.*

Perhaps the most important element of a hyper-political approach is developing the ability to discern both the psychological and political relevance of certain images, particular practices in film making and recurrent motifs in narrative art. In preceding chapters I interrogated racism in terms of pervasive stereotypes and classism in terms of its general invisibility in narrative art (in these United States). I now turn my attention to heterosexism, sexism and ageism. My aim is to present a bird's eye view of these "isms," not to explicate more stereotypes. The reader can easily extrapolate from the information so far presented. Cultural critics are therefore encouraged to more fully research the five major "isms" presented in this dissertation and invent others which should aid us in our collective endeavor to liberate the oppressed.

Heterosexism as Communicative Practice

Jung and Smith (1993) define *heterosexism* as “a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation” that “denotes prejudice in favor of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual people.”¹ Nakayama (1998) adds that, “by contrast, *homophobia* [my emphasis] often is seen as operating out of emotional fear, hatred, and anger.”² The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard on October 12, 1998 stunned the nation. As *USA Today* put it: “Hate comes in focus.” College campuses all across the nation held candlelight vigils to express both sympathy and outrage for what happened to Matthew Shepard. Gay bashing signifies a powerful evil congealing around what *should* be considered a very private matter—consensual sex between two adults. How does the *private* sexual practices of two or more individuals *politically* affect those who are not directly involved in the act(s)? We must admit that private sexual practices do not directly affect any of us. We create an “effect” through religious beliefs that condemn anything but heterosexual relationships. Again, I argue that spiritual (or religious) beliefs cannot be separated from politics. But whose religious practices do we stamp into law? Yours? Mine? The neighborhood guru’s?

If anything, the Third Reich—as a history lesson of what *not* to do—should teach us that prejudice, intolerance and discrimination are subjective sins of the worse “moral” disposition. Recall that Hitler blessed his “project” with references to God Almighty and he discriminated against “queers.” Either-or “logic” tells us that if everyone were gay the world would grind to a stop, humanity would disappear off the face of the planet. Perhaps the

gradual disappearance of humanity is not such a bad thing given humankind's propensity to destroy ecosystems. That aside, we already know that either-or thinking is invalid because it denies much of social "reality." Either-or thinking is also psychologically problematic—it is implicated in severe and moderate forms of depression.

Can we really argue that the world is composed of just two divisions: "straights" and "gays?" Do we really want to argue that human sexuality must be reduced to some mechanical act of procreation where pleasure and other emotions mean little if anything at all? Nakayama (1998) observes that,

sexuality, of course, is never so easy. In our desire to categorize and understand the world in manageable ways, we have bought into a fictive identity that has ramifications across the entire social order.³

In our absurd struggles to categorize and classify everything like Whitman's Learned Astronomer, we simply "forget" that gay people can and do produce progeny. "Gay" men have "come out" after having raised a family. In fact, some gay men are now coupling with lesbians and making arrangements to share or otherwise care for the children produced by such "coupling." With modern technology, people need never have traditional sex again to produce children. The human race need not disappear even if homosexuality became the norm. These possibilities, of course, escape those who employ either-or "logic."

Some argue that a "natural order" somehow prescribes heterosexuality. These either-or thinkers conveniently forget that Hitler spoke of a "natural order." Monette (1994) astutely reminds us that "the first Nazi book burning . . . was of a gay and lesbian archive."⁴ Nearly fifty years after Nazi Germany, either-or thinkers still refuse to soften their stance on

homosexuality, even though “rational hatred” proved to be all too deadly, all too dangerous and all too unkind to millions of earth’s inhabitants, not to mention the planet itself. The moral lessons of the Nazi Holocaust and the Black Holocaust should have adequately demonstrated to all reasonable folks that there is no “natural order.” Here in these United States, we seem to take special pride in our homophobia. Boswell (1994) observes that,

few, if any, other major cultures have made homosexuality—either as a general classification of acts according to gender or an “orientation”—the primary and singular moral taboo it has long been in Western society; “the sin that cannot be named,” “the unmentionable vice,” “the love that dare not speak its name.” Those who have never had occasion to question this extraordinary prejudice, especially if they personally entertain reservations about homosexual acts, may have difficulty apprehending how remarkable this degree of revulsion actually is. Murder, matricide, child molesting, incest, cannibalism, genocide, even decide are *mentionable*; why are a few disapproved sexual acts that injure no one so much more horrible than these? Because they are worse? (p.xxiii)⁵

So-called moral prescriptions against homosexuality do not fit the “facts.” As I mentioned earlier, biblical scholars debate the practice of injecting modern words such as “homosexuality” into a text that originally had no need of such a classification. “Race” is, similarly, another word that crops up in modern translations of ancient texts (Goldberg, 1993, p. 21). Clearly, we are dealing with modern political issues here. Yet, even if one believes that same sex companionship is morally wrong, there is no *intersubjective* “reason” to deny gays and lesbians civil rights or to discriminate against them in any way. From a post-formal perspective, there is no clear and present danger imposed by those who are queer. There is no harm done by gays and lesbians who do anything “appropriate” that heterosexuals do in public.

The laws of these United States implicitly, if not explicitly, condemn homosexuality.

Nakayama (1998) notes that,

It is not as if lesbian and gay relationships never experience spousal abuse. Yet, the ways in which the laws, protections, and programs are specifically designed for *exclusive* use by and for heterosexuals so as to make heterosexuality function despite its clear (dys)functional moments, reinscribe heteronormativity.⁶

The “love that dare not speak its name” reveals itself in the political debate concerning the military’s “Don’t ask, Don’t tell” policy adopted after President Clinton attempted to remove restrictions against gays and lesbians serving in the armed forces. Even though gays and lesbians serve in armies overseas and some have “come out” after having served in this country, there remains a powerful political oppression of gays and lesbians in these “free”

United States. Nakayama (1998) adds that,

heterosexism is a prejudicial communication practice that condemns all of those who defy the (hetero)sexual order to the margins (e.g., beatings, harassment, exclusion). But we must not forget that this communication practice is not invoked by individuals alone; it is powerfully buttressed by social institutions that not only allow it but also encourage it.⁷

Indeed, as a young student it originally shocked me to learn that many religious leaders before the Civil War gave their blessing to the institution of slavery by either supporting, neglecting or actually refusing to condemn it. Today, too many religious leaders sanction gay bashing by neglecting or refusing to condemn such violence.

Rothchild (1992) observes that,

Unfortunately, homophobia is not confined to the moral cesspool that is the Republican campaign headquarters. Instead, it is the stuff of American

culture, audible in the schoolyards and in the bars, on television and at any open-mike comedy club. Somehow, people still think it is not only acceptable but also funny to ridicule lesbians and gay men. But it is a short path from ridicule to discrimination...It is an even shorter path from discrimination to violence, and gays and lesbians are with appalling frequency the victims of hate crimes.⁸

I already mentioned this in an earlier chapter, but it bears repeating: ridicule is a big part of the humor in *Chasing Amy*, a very heterosexist film, and *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*, a very racist film.

On the brighter side, Andre P. Grace, in an as yet unpublished article titled “Using Queer Cultural Studies to Transgress Adult Educational Space,” tells us that,

throughout the 1990s, popular culture has provided a space where queer culture has been increasingly explored while still being contested culturally and politically. Notably, television sitcoms (like *Spin City* and the now defunct *Ellen* and *Roseanne*), motion pictures (including *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *The Object of My Affection*), and magazines (such as *Advocate* and *Out*) have provided a spectrum of courageously honest representations of queer Others. These cultural media remain primary sites for learning about queer persons and queer culture.⁹

Older gay men I interviewed told me that (1) they “had little to identify with while growing up, that at least younger gays and lesbians have *some* positive images to grasp in the media these days,” that (2) they “had to be in the closet from day one,” and that (3) they “had longed for some social expression of the kind of love and desire that they experienced.” The overwhelming consensus was that “things are getting better but they still have a long way to go.”

Grace argues that “queer” culture is now attempting to redefine “normal” sexuality.

In his own words:

The politics of queer cultural identity-difference are kindled by how w/e see [“w/e” acknowledges queer diversity, i.e., there is no true “we”], remember, engage, and resist those who would keep queerness invisible. These politics oppose dominant cultural politics that have historically acted as points of power and privilege opposing the constitution of queer cultural identity-difference. This opposition is grounded in heterosexism, which Hill (1995) describes as the repressive social system of obligatory heterosexuality. Hill details that heterosexuality is enshrined in the language, deliberations, and symbols of the dominant culture in matter-of-fact ways that insidiously neglect, omit, distort, and eradicate queer persons. He describes how heterosexism is taken up in heterocentric discourse that envelopes gender identity, cultural behavior, social relationships, and issues of sexuality. This discourse embodies language, perceptions, meanings, assumptions, policies, beliefs, and values that discard queer Others and assaults our integrity by dismissing queer identity, needs, desires, relationships, and values. Queer persons respond by producing what Hill calls “fugitive” knowledge. This oppositional knowledge of the queer counterculture and community informs queer discourse and resistances in education and other social spaces. It infuses the struggle to live what Hill (1995, 153) calls “unambiguous, unapologetic lives.”¹⁰

The Nazi sought “erasure.” They sought to erase Jews. The “erasure” of difference cannot be tolerated in an intersubjective moral universe. We cannot become like the Nazis and expect to achieve enlightenment. Enlightenment does not come to those who cannot accept “difference” that poses no harm to humanity.

The politics of queer cultural identity suffers from the either-or “logic” of positivist thought. Nakayama (1998) states that “the problem with the term *homosexual* is that it places exclusive identification on sexual activities.”¹¹ Just as “heterosexuals” are defined in “reality” by more than *their* sexual “preferences,” queers must be defined by more than the

sum and substance of their *sexual activities or desires*. In other words, on one level, no one is strictly “queer”—lesbians and gays fit into a myriad of other possible “classifications.” It is *another level of reductionism* to suggest that *any human being can be defined in terms of sexual “appetite” or sexual practice*. This type of thinking is problematic. But because there are political prejudices against those who enjoy or would like to enjoy same sex partnerships, queers must engage this politics (i.e., essentializing) in order to mitigate or eliminate political oppression.

Sexism as Communicative Practice

Like heterosexism, *sexism* concerns sexual relationships, but it also addresses much more than sexual practice or sexual desire. It addresses the immoral, unequal, abusive and criminal treatment of women by men in a viciously patriarchal society that chauvinistically constructs “glass ceilings” in nearly every institutional, corporate and educational enterprise.

Rakow and Wackwitz (1998) argue that,

Sexism is a term that came into the everyday vocabularies of people in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s with the resurgence of the women’s movement, building on the inroads made by the civil rights movement and drawing parallels with racism. During the 1990s...it may seem dated in the context of sophisticated feminist scholarship that has focused attention on gender and difference. If used to identify and name a belief system about gender that is based on the subordination of women to men, however, the term *sexism* becomes a powerful concept that helps explain sexist norms, values, attitudes, and behavior.¹²

Within the theme of “subordination” let us not forget that women are brutally raped and murdered in every state of this union and because our society so callously disrespects women, many rapes actually go unreported.

Rakow and Wackwitz remind us that,

identifying sexism as a belief system requires the recognition that gender itself is a belief system; that is, gender is a web of socially constructed meanings that differentiate humans on the basis of perceived physical, social, and psychological characteristics.¹³

As with all belief systems, there are “reasons” that justify what we believe. Rakow and Wackwitz identify “three commonly identified sources used to justify sexism.”¹⁴ They are religion, biology, and social scientific reasoning.

Religious justifications point to a “natural order of things” where women occupy a subordinate position to men. Rakow and WackWitz (1998) report that “sexist religious beliefs may ascribe a natural sinfulness to women or, at least, a subordinate role for women in a hierarchical arrangement (see Bullough, Shelton, & Slavin, 1988; Christ, 1992; Christ & Plaskow, 1979; Daly, 1968, 1073, 1978; Millet, 1970; Starhawk, 1987, 1988; Tannahill, 1992).”¹⁵ The so-called “natural sinfulness” of women may be the most vulgar mythic stereotype on the planet because it imposes both a religious and a biological inferiority on women. Gender hierarchy is, I suppose, easier to maintain when it is “ordained” by God than when men are the culprits of its despicable destiny. Those who are willing to do research might discover that there were times when societies worshiped (a) female god(s).¹⁶ First Nation people (i.e., so-called “Native Americans”) spoke of “Mother Earth” and their

original beliefs (before colonization) were “gynocratic,” according to Allen (1986).¹⁷ Post-formal thinkers realize that there are no valid “reasons” to mistreat, abuse or deny women equal access to anything and everything that society has to offer them.

Rakow and Wackwitz (1998) argue that “given the Western reliance on the explanatory power of ‘scientific,’ ‘empirical,’ or ‘rational’ exploration, it is not surprising that biology has attained such a prominent role in the construction and explanation of gender (see Haraway, 1981)” and they conclude that “biological justifications for both difference and dominance are widespread in Western cultures.”¹⁸ Our ordinary consciousness, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, is one in which we look for “black and white” certainties in a very colorful universe. For example, Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) point out that,

even where there has been an acceptance of the role of culture in shaping a gender system, most people—even some feminists—continue to believe in the foundational nature of a biological differentiation of sex. For most people, the differences are obvious and are related to reproduction, physical characteristics, and sexual activity. Physicians and scientists, however, have had to deal with the complexity of these issues in a way that lay people have not, leading to shifting notions over time of what constitutes the essential defining characteristics of male and female. Neither physical nor genetic characteristics provide fail-safe methods of biological differentiation. Babies can be born with ambiguous or multiple organs and/or genitalia that can be surgically altered to provide a better “fit” between their gender identities and their physical characteristics. Likewise, genetic testing, although it has been seen to be a better indicator of one’s “true” gender identity, reveals variations in chromosomes that negate the possibility of assigning humans into two entirely distinct sexual categories (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Wackwitz, 1996a). *Both physical and genetic criteria are, at base, human constructs—ways of ordering the biological and social world.* [my emphasis]¹⁹

We all have probably met or know of people who do not easily fit into a specific “gender.” Some individuals who we might imagine should be women have way too much facial hair and a very low voice and way too many muscles and all the wrong attitudes, etc. Likewise, some individuals who we imagine should be men have little or no facial hair, no desire to build up their muscles, voices that inspire absolutely no fear and they seem to prance from spot to spot like sugar plum fairies. These individuals seem to be “exceptions to the rules.” We forget that when the so-called “rules” don’t fit the so-called “facts,” we ought to eliminate the so-called “rules” if they result in political oppression. Too often, we do not allow for nature’s free spirit of expression.

The third (and final) justification for sexism, according to Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) is what they call “social scientific justification.” It stems from a “functionalist explanation of the social order” which “grew out of the biological sciences and subsequently was legitimated in the social sciences by Parsons (1954, 1966) during the middle decades of the 20th century.”²⁰ They note that,

a functionalist argument might proceed as follows. The sexes are segregated by biological “function.” Women’s bodies function to bear and nurse children. Women, therefore, serve the social order by fulfilling their biological role and staying at home to raise and nurture human young. Women, due to their essential biological function as mothers, must be protected by men (who are naturally stronger) to ensure propagation of the species, thus requiring that they comprise a protected class. Women, therefore, must not be placed at risk and should not participate in activities such as military combat or physical exertion. In addition, because women are more nurturing by nature, they best serve the social order by performing relationship maintenance tasks in the home and the workplace as caretakers, wives, nurses, and kindergarten teachers. In this and other scenarios, the social order takes on an autonomous status apart from human creation and agency.²¹

A post-formal thinker knows that “functionalist arguments,” like *all* arguments or perspectives, fail to see the whole of social “reality.” In other words, “functionalist arguments” are as reductive as many other argument(s). This final “justification” for sexism falls flat on its patriarchal face when we consider that women have been working throughout pregnancy and life has not yet disappeared from this poor macho face of the planet. Besides, there is no sane “reason” to overpopulate the planet.

In this modern age of infant formulas and prescribed nourishment many families do not breast feed their young. Additionally, most jobs do not require brute strength these days, even if we “concede” that men may be stronger than women in certain physical tasks. The political question becomes: Why do we have to continue cave men traditions given the so-called advances of modernity? Even if women provide “natural milk” for their infants after a brief period, infants start on solid foods, so why can’t the so-called nurturing responsibilities shift back to fifty-fifty then? Besides, one doesn’t need mammary glands to change a diaper.

Perhaps history can offer a “reason” for the ill regard for women in these United States. Rakow & Wackaitz (1998) state that “Marxist and socialist feminists have looked to the capitalist economic system to explain divisions of labor between groups of people and the devaluing of women’s paid and unpaid productive and reproductive contributions to society.”²² Indeed, because men have, in Western cultures, traditionally dominated others,

economic structures, evolving into and through capitalism, continue this structural rule.

Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) tell us that,

although economic theories traditionally have lacked explanations of gender inequality, many scholars have revisioned Marxism and socialism from a feminist perspective. Shelton and Agger (1993), for example, argue that although “orthodox Marxism” (p. 40) is sexist and inadequate to explain gender inequities, a feminist revisioning of Marxism yields valuable insights into the relationship between the subordination of women and their place within the economic system. They conclude “Women’s subordinated position in the labor market, and their labor in the household, means that their rate of exploitation is higher than men’s. That is, women perform more labor for which they are not remunerated, thus producing more surplus value than men. This clearly benefits capital and is therefore understandable in terms of the logic of capitalism. (P. 39)” *Shelton and Agger further argue that such an economic interpretation has greater explanatory power than do models that posit patriarchy as the cause and center of women’s oppression.* [my emphasis]²³

Greed once again rears its ugly head, this time in the form of oppressive world hypotheses validated through economic structures and social practices.

But economic structures are not the only structures that delimit women’s rights and privileges in these United States. An oppressive consciousness infects our legal apparatus.

For example, Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) observe that,

women’s subordination—relational, occupational, and sexual—is supported and enforced by the U.S. system of law and its emphasis on the dichotomy between public (political) and private (nonpolitical) spheres (MacKinnon, 1987). Taub and Schneider (1993) expose two facets of the U.S. legal system that are especially damaging to the status of women, demonstrating that the law (a) “has furthered male dominance by explicitly excluding women from the public sphere and by refusing to regulate the domestic sphere to which they are confined” and (b) “has legitimated sex discrimination through the articulation of an ideology that justifies differential treatment on the basis of perceived differences between men and women” (p. 9). Court procedures and specialized language limit access to and critique of the law from anyone

outside the trained legal arena, thereby helping to solidify the public/private distinction within the legal system.²⁴

Only recently is it becoming standard operating procedure to have same-sex cops interview rape victims, pat-down suspects and counsel victims of spousal abuse. The Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas issue focused attention on the difficulties of “proving” sexual harassment in a profoundly patriarchal society.

In America, sexism most definitely mixes with racism. Actually, all of the “isms” blend together, but sexism and racism seem to cross over so readily into social practices because of our nation’s sordid beginnings. Rakow and Wackwitz (1998) observe that,

in the case of Native Americans, native women are held to their subordinated positions in the dominant culture by specific sexist meanings that identify native women as squaws or princesses (Allen, 1983). Identification as squaws denigrates and falsifies their position in early native culture and thereby justifies White domination as a superior belief system about women. Likewise, identification as princesses establishes native women’s more natural alliance with White culture and with White men and thereby justifies their assistance to Whites (or betrayal, depending on a European or a native viewpoint), as exemplified by the White mythic tales of Pocohontas and Sacagawea. Native men are identified as either noble or brutal savages, the first portrayal useful to a White quest for noncommercial values and the second useful again to justify White domination by “proving” White supremacy.²⁵

Either they are brutal and dumb or they are noble and submissive savages. This either-or logic is a vital component of a mechanistic view of reality.

Quite interestingly, indigenous people in North America apparently did not have the same ideas about women that others had. Early native culture actually revered women.

Whites arrived in America, saw what the “story was” and quickly put the natives “in their place.” Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) observe that,

women and men of other major but subordinated U.S. cultural groups—African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos—are assigned different meanings that reflect both the racism and the sexism of the dominant group while also affecting the gender system within each group as it encounters the dominant gender belief system. In this way, racism and sexism can be seen as interlocking systems, with meanings about gender different for the women and men of each cultural group but always in relationship to dominant meanings about gender that demonstrate White men’s superiority over all women and all members of nondominant racial groups and White women’s superiority over women of color.²⁶

As a feminist, bell hooks (1981, 1984) was quite alarmed when, in the early days of the modern feminist movement, White women attacked sexism without apparently considering the paradoxically unique and similar experiences of black women.

Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) argue that sexism is maintained through communicative practices “because a gender system is a meaning system.”²⁷ They argue that (1) sexism is communicated in language; for example, “among the most obvious features of the language that embody sexism is the pseudogeneric masculine, which uses references to men as supposedly encompassing both women and men [this is slowly changing]; (2) Sexism is communicated in interaction; for example, “by carrying out the physical requirements of our genders—how we walk, carry and present ourselves, fit into space (men are allowed to take up more space with their bodies [Wex, 1979], eat and use our bodies—we have created the two physical genders we believed to exist in the first place; and (3) sexism is communicated in systems of representation; for example, “as early as the publication of Friedan’s (1963)

The Feminine Mystique, feminist activists were identifying the role of the mass media in representing negative and unhealthy images of women in advertising, television entertainment, magazines, and the news media. These images were systematically documented to demonstrate that all women (as well as men of color) are vastly underrepresented in certain media forms (e.g., news), whereas White women are vastly overrepresented in others (e.g., advertising).²⁸

Rakow & Wackwitz (1998) conclude that,

changing the sexist gender system will require that people become aware of the nature of gender as a social construction, a difficult intellectual task for most people given the ideological hold that biology and religion have on their understanding of gender. Arguments against biological and religious determinism are met with resistance, disbelief, even hostility. Consequently, our educational campaign must be systematic and comprehensive at the undergraduate level, leading students through a developmental process of awareness about the social construction of culture and human difference.²⁹

Film studies instructors *must* do their fare share of the work. They must discuss (1) The intertextual narrative treatment of women in films (e.g., What happens to women in most films? Do they get saved by a man, raped by a man or simply murdered?), (2) Which stars get picked to play significant roles in films (e.g., Is beauty skin deep and hip thin?), and (3) What “roles” women most often play in mainstream films (e.g., housewife, teacher, nurse).

The reader will recall that in my discussion of the politics of epistemological privilege in Chapter Six, I used football as a metaphor to interrogate a variety of philosophical “truth claims.” I did so not because I am a football fan (I rarely watch the game) but because football is so immensely popular in these United States and even those

who might detest the game probably know enough about it to grasp the subtle points I needed to make. At this point, I would like to argue that sexism is maintained through androcentric hypotheses concerning our professional leisure activities. I am not talking about the fact that there is no WNFL as there is a WNBA or that there are few professional woman's leagues that occupy as much of our national attention the way men's athletic contests monopolize the media.

I have not yet come across others who have argued this point so I will take it up with philosophical abandon. I am quite interested in our blatantly androcentric consciousness regarding our leisurely pursuits. I am interested in the fact that in this late day and age we have not devised games in which men and women can compete on more or less equal terms. I am asking why most of our popular games must be contests that require massive muscular strength and endurance? Isn't it about time that we devise games that have no winners and no losers? Why must we always compete for trophies or other extrinsic rewards? I do not buy the notion that brutal competition is "natural?" There are cultures that enjoy leisure activities that are not androcentrically competitive the way ours is. There are cultures in which competition is considered problematic (e.g., aborigines in Australia). It is quite interesting that the WNBA did not lower the basket to reflect the height differential between men and women or that the league did not change the rules to make it a different (and perhaps) more interesting game. It seems that we are a nation of utmost conservatism, we do not like change, even if it is sometimes for the better.

Communication of Ageism

Hollywood s/heroes are not only predominantly white males, but they generally range between, let's say, nine and thirty years of age? In fact, *Grumpy Old Men* and *The Golden Girls*, represent popular entertainment that proves an exception to the rule, even though both productions played upon rigid stereotypes of seasoned citizens. More than likely, those in their "golden years" play secondary roles if any at all in American narrative art. Butler (1987) defines *ageism* as,

a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills...Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify [or engage] with their elders as human beings. (Pp. 22-23)³⁰

Only a mechanistic view of reality would dismiss individuals (or groups for that matter) as "insignificant." A spiritual view of reality would consider all people to be important and worthy of being adequately represented in narrative art.

Williams and Giles (1998), however, point out that ageism is not unidirectional, it goes both ways:

In the U.S. media particularly, there has been a vast amount of recent press concerned with the current generation of young people (i.e., those born anywhere between 1961 and 1981). The labels for the generation, some of which are positive and some of which are negative, are worth considering here. For example, a popular label for this generation, "X" (taken from a popular novel by Coupland, 1990), has been used to represent the "facelessness" and aimlessness of a generation whose members have no distinct identity, causes, ambitions, and so on. *Time* magazine is credited with the first use of a more positive label, "twentysomethings" (Ladd, 1993), and Howe and Strauss (1993) coined the term "The thirteenth generation." On

their own, these labels sound relatively neutral, but many media reports also have included some very negative trait characterizations of the generation characterizing them as “losers,” “slackers,” and “whingers and whiners” who are dependent on their parents. In fact, a close examination of popular press reports shows that negative characterizations of the generation are ubiquitous and are lined up against younger people’s attempts to debunk them. This is evident by the negative *redefinitions* [my emphasis] given to the labels themselves; for example, the term twentysomething has often has been rephrased as “twentynothing.” Recent articles in *Newsweek Magazine* cite *Advertising Age* as referring to the [so-called “X”] generation as “that cynical, purple-haired blob watching TV” (Quinn, 1994, p. 67).³¹

This constant “redefinition” of who is “in” and who is “out” returns us rather starkly to Aaron Gresson’s ideas of “recovery rhetoric.” Rather than listening to and accommodating new perspectives, individuals who are “schema driven” simply “redefine” opposing arguments in their own terms, never truly allowing themselves to walk in another’s moccasins, as indigenous people were found of saying. Given the media’s obsession with youth, however, any practice of ageism is likely to be skewed in favor of younger generations rather than older ones.

In a consumer capitalist state, one’s consciousness is defined by the products that are produced and how well these products tap into our most basic fears (e.g., death). Williams & Giles (1998) report that,

Western advertising media very commonly market “age-defying” and “age-correcting” products that in effect promise social mobility or the “passing” of women from being “old” back to being “young”—fighting back “the ravages of time” or signs that they belong to an undesired and stigmatized out-group. Aging in Western media is not promoted as a process in which one can mature gracefully and positively. Rather, valued attributes of particular older people are heralded as rarities or even exceptions [remember the “subtyping hypothesis?”]; witness catch phrases such as “Still provocative at...,” “Life is still fun at...,” or “Still attractive at....” Some ads also draw

attention to the itemized physiognomic features, and hence criteria, for what is to be considered physical aging (and demise).³²

And so, the aged in these United States (and elsewhere) are victims of a consumer driven consciousness that over-values youth because it has lost touch with Buddhist insights such as gracefully accepting the “impermanence” of all things, the human body included. Companies, instead, tell us, via advertising, how to look youthful, what to smell like and how to dye one’s hair. The human body, itself, has become a product—there are “falsies,” “tummy tucks,” “nose jobs” and “surgical hair replacements” to sum up just a few of the many “make-over” possibilities. Our national psyche despises the aging process. Advertisers probably had a lot to do with this “attitude.” They played upon instinctual fears of death the same way they play upon sexual drives to sell their wares.

The stereotypes of negative representations of “seasoned citizens” in the media not only set back an entire generation, they become a vicious cycle of expectations that affect both the young and the old. Williams & Giles (1998) argue that,

when negative images associated with age are made salient to older individuals (e.g., by overaccommodating to them, by making visible a magazine attending to age decrements), they will look, move, sound, think, talk, and account “older compared to controls—a self-stereotyping phenomenon (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) that we have termed “instant aging.” Hence, in line with attribution principles and the self-fulfilling hypothesis, hearing different people in various contexts inform an individual (indirectly by overaccommodations or through societal images) that he or she is “over the hill” ultimately will induce many a recipient to accept this as reality.³³

In an earlier chapter we discussed negative black stereotypes possibly leading to self-stereotyping behavior(s). Seasoned citizens, likewise, may begin to live up to certain negative social expectations. If seasoned citizens resist and become angry when young folks patronize them, they are labeled “grumpy old men” or “arrogant old hags.” It’s a lose-lose situation defined by the impossibility of disproving the “rule.” A mechanistic view of reality does not see beyond its own hypotheses.

Prejudice, intolerance and discrimination of seasoned citizens is so accepted in American culture that little objection is ever raised when old folks are disparaged in mass media. Williams & Giles (1998) point out that “humorous cartoons that portray ageist sentiments rarely are condemned for their discriminatory social meanings; they are not questioned in the same way as we might challenge derogatory images of women or ethnic minorities.”³⁴ Similarly, those who are “differently abled” (i.e., handicapped) find that mass media often portrays them only in isolated communities. The “Munchkins” in *The Wizard of Oz* and the “Ewoks” in the *Star Wars Trilogy* are prime examples of primitive little people who live in their own communities, separate from “normal” communities.

Science-fiction writers and producers ought to be especially aware of the “politics of segregated fiction” and its deleterious psychological impact on those who are marginal. Film studies instructors need to help their students understand that when those who are marginal are segregated in narrative art from the rest of the world (e.g., Munchkins or Ewoks), such representation normalizes their plight. It is as though segregation was a “natural” political condition, when it is as artificial as the death camps were.

Women, Asians, Latinos, Gays, Lesbians and Blacks are largely “invisible” as heroic protagonists in mainstream narrative art here in these United States. When they are “visible,” they live in their own separate enclaves and they interact with Whites quite sparingly. Not only is our politics segregated, our art is. Similarly, Williams & Giles (1998) report that,

in the American media, older people have been characterized as “invisible”; in some genres such as quiz shows and Saturday morning cartoons, they have no appearances (Dail, 1988; Davis & Kubey, 1982). Elderly women on television, apart from soap operas, are particularly negatively portrayed as “past it,” whereas elderly men are portrayed either as authority figures or as villainous (Bell, 1992). Shaner (1995) alerts us to the fact that older men and women often may be portrayed very differently in motion pictures as well. Her comparative analysis of *Grumpy Old Men* and *Widow's Peak* points out that older adults of both sexes are portrayed as “busybodies” but that the women are overwhelmingly more nosy than the men. The men are portrayed as much more active and healthy, both physically and mentally, and also are portrayed as sexual. Although this research was exploratory and preliminary given that it draws on only two movies, it may well be worthwhile to turn our attention to the issues underlined here, that is, the interaction between ageism and sexism. Indeed, other evidence also suggests that there seems to be a double standard such that women are negatively stereotyped at a younger age than are men (Hummert, Garstka, & Shaner, 1995).³⁵

Even if one were to argue that “old folks” *are* all busybodies, this does not mean that narrative art *has* to portray them as such. When producers finally accept that media, to some extent, create self-fulfilling prophecies, they may become more careful of what they portray in narrative art.

Given the post-formal understanding that we learn behaviors from both the actions and the images we see, it becomes paramount for media producers to produce pro-social images rather than “realistic” images that reflect the “realities” they see. Post-formal thinkers understand that “reality” is often what we make of it. Given time, stereotypes may be

eliminated, but it would take a radical transformation of our national psyche to alter these Goliaths of “reason.” Williams & Giles (1998) alert us to the fact that,

Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) routes for [social] change provide a central role to a group’s awareness of cognitive alternatives to the status quo as a prerequisite to change strategies. For group members to begin to change their social status, at least three questions might be considered. First, we must ask whether individuals are aware of their group’s negative identity or low status vis-a-vis other groups. Second, we must ask whether individuals envision alternatives to their current identity status. Third, to determine whether or not a group strategy is likely, we must ask whether and how strongly individuals self-identify as group members. In other words, for individuals to engage in group-based strategies for social change, they must be aware of, and attach value to, a social identity.³⁶

Since our philosophy of life attaches great value to social identities (e.g., just fill out any employment application and notice the blanks that define one’s social identity), it appears to be nothing short of social suicide to ignore one’s group identity; unless, of course, one has achieved great monetary success, which here in America amounts to great social success.

Unfortunately, we teach our youth to disrespect Others without often being consciously aware of how much historical “propaganda” we inflict on their highly impressionable minds. Asante (1998) brings to light a typical educational vignette:

The child who goes to school in the United States gets the programming on the very first day when he or she learns about the Founding Fathers of the nation. There are sexist problems here, too. [Do you mean to argue that women *never* voiced their opinions?] The racist problems inhere in the structure of the knowledge. The child is told that these White men came and created such a wonderful civilization. Already the idea floats around that this was the most marvelous thing to happen in history. The little African American, Mexican American, or Native American boy or girl sitting there filled with his or her own historical consciousness, however fragmented from his or her home, wonders deep in the soul: How could such an experiment that enslaved his or her ancestors be as wonderful as the teacher makes it out

to be? The White child, already at a tender age, receives the essential dichotomy between Whites and other ethnic groups that will go with the child the rest of his or her life unless there are some interventions. Nevertheless, all children complete that grade and go through the rest of their education with the same dichotomous structure operating so that in the final analysis, I find both of them believing that Europe is universal and that nothing really happened anywhere else.³⁷

Indeed, this very nearly sizes up the “education” I received in Commack, New York as a child growing up in a suburban school district noted for its “quality education.” The education I received was paradoxically better than what inner city children received and worse because it was coated with racist comments in some classes made by white teachers who should have known better.

Asante calls political propaganda like this “misinformation” and he notes that,

The British scholar and Cornell University professor Martin Bernal wrote *Black Athena*, which was published in an effort to uncover the Afro-Asiatic foundations of Greek civilization (Bernal, 1987). Bernal’s thesis is that the past 500 years of European conquest has meant the emergence of an Aryan thesis to oppose the ancient model of world history, particularly as it relates to the anteriority of African and Asian civilizations to European ones. Indeed, the fact that most of the books published by university presses begin all discussions of theater, art, poetry, philosophy, communication, and political science with the Greeks instead of with the people of Kemet is indicative of the problem. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and Solon came after the Africans and were students of the Africans. Rather than begin at the beginning, all discussions of knowledge in Europe and America begin in Greece. One does not have a problem with Greece as the beginning of European knowledge; the problem is that it is not the beginning of knowledge. Indeed, as Diop (1979) says, Egypt is to the rest of Africa as Greece is to the rest of Europe. However, the difference is that Egypt is the mother of Greece. Bernal (1987) goes so far as to say that the name of Athens itself is an African name. Of course, I know that Herodotus (1987) says that nearly all the names of the Greek gods came from Africa (Book 2, Paragraph 50).³⁸

Political film critics need to be critically conscious of how history may really be “*his-white-story*,” a very subjective Eurocentric rendition of the past. With this knowledge, both film critics and film studies students can examine narrative films for Eurocentric “misinformation.” Film studies instructors might even have students watch films to see how many references are made to ancient Greece as “the beginning of modern civilization.” Other projects might include having students observe background props, comparing how much Egyptian art appears and how much Grecian art appears.

Asante (1998) says that it is “necessary to be vigilant, not just against the offensive speech found in the general American lexicon—not just for matter-of-course, matter-of-fact, and matter-of-opinion statements—but also in the common sentiment and expression of ideas.”³⁹ He does not directly concern himself with visual media, but the connections are unavoidable. Narrative films are loaded with “common sentiment.” One might even argue that narrative art evinces and even inculcates “common sentiment.” In the end, hyper-political cultural critics need to understand how prejudice, intolerance and discrimination are insinuated into American culture. Asante speaks of racism only, but his comments are equally applicable to all of the forms of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. He observes that,

racist communication is insinuated into society in four significant ways: (a) historical distortions, (b) eliminating agency, (c) creating illusions, and (d) using pejoratives. Almost all racist communication makes use of historical distortions, that is, telling a narrative that does not include all of the facts of time and space. [e.g., years ago homosexuality was not even given a second thought]. A second type of racist communication is through the technique of eliminating agency by groups such as Africans, Asians, Latinos, or Native Americans in any endeavor that involves knowledge, science, adventure, or

intellectual activity. Eliminating African or Asian agency, for example, is one way in which to take away the idea that Africans or Asians have civilizations, cultures or even humanity. A third way uses the creation of illusions, making statements that have no obvious basis in fact but nevertheless are projected as fact. For example, “Africans did not write” is just such a projection. Last is the use of pejoratives to define people. Whether these terms are current in the language of racists is not the issue; they minimize the human status of individuals and therefore become racist.⁴⁰

If history books distort history, then films made from this “history” will distort “reality” no matter how much film makers or film viewers want them to be “true” to the past.

To become critically conscious means to become a questioning soul. It means knowing something about propaganda—how the Nazis used it, how contemporary advertisers use it, how public schools use it to preach dominant ideology. A critically conscious individual knows that “one can speak of the society as being racist [etc.], the government as being racist [etc.], and mean essentially that the collective wills of the individuals who establish the policy have created a racist [etc.] environment.”⁴¹ In other words, the critically conscious individual knows that where equality is lacking, political power is manifest, where injustice is the norm, oligarchy is the ruling method. Political film critics know that they can never *describe* a film, any more than music critics can *describe* music. Alan Watts (1995) puts it this way:

There are certain things of which one cannot speak. For example, you cannot *describe* music. That is why most of the reports of music critics in the newspaper seem completely absurd. When they are trying to convey in words how a certain artist performs, they borrow words from all other kinds of art and try to make some show of being clever about it. But there is no way in which the music critic can, through words, make you hear the sounds of the concert.⁴²

There is no way in which the film critic can, through words, make potential viewers hear the sounds and see the images of any given film. It is impossible. The most noble function of a film critic is to educate his audience to an intersubjective spiritual awareness from which s/he might evaluate and appreciate cultural artifacts. This is no easy task; that's why cultural criticism can be a most noble and honorable profession.

Visions of Culture

But what is culture? According to Arthur Asa Berger (1995) there are over a hundred definitions of culture.⁴³ This alone demonstrates the *difficult* of grasping holistic (i.e., wide-angle) concepts. Still, it is possible to come to some understanding of "culture." Stuart Hall (1997) apparently believes that "culture" is somewhat self-reflexive for he writes that,

Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of *things*—novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics—as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings—the "giving and taking of meaning"—between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways.⁴⁴

It is readily apparent that our "self-reflexive" examination of "culture" requires *some* understanding of philosophy and personal psychology.

With a complex understanding of the human condition, hyper-political film critics can address the "practices of representation" that informs American culture. For example,

film historian Donald Bogle (1973), in his book *Tom, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, tells us that early on the film industry reveled in negative “representations” of people of color:

In the beginning, there was an Uncle Tom. A former mechanic photographed him in a motion picture that ran no longer than twelve minutes. And a new dimension was added to American movies. The year was 1903. The mechanic-turned-movie-director was Edwin S. Porter. The twelve-minute motion picture was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And the new dimension was Uncle Tom himself. He was the American movie's first black character. The great paradox was that in actuality Tom was not black at all. Instead he was portrayed by a nameless, slightly overweight white actor made up in blackface. But the use of whites in black roles was then a common practice, a tradition carried over from the stage and maintained during the early days of silent films...After the tom's debut, there appeared a variety of black presences bearing the fanciful names of the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck. All were character types used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey. None of the types was meant to do great harm [this is debatable], although at various times individual ones did. All were merely filmic reproductions of black stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts. The movies, which catered to public tastes, borrowed profusely from all other popular art forms.⁴⁵

Sadly, negative “representation” still survives. We already discussed that *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* is a prime example of contemporary racist discourse that carries on the tradition of patriarchal white supremacy here in America. The issue of “representation,” therefore, is a very important “political” issue because “representation” *is*, in a sense, *cultural pedagogy* that passes on prejudice, intolerance and discrimination from one generation to the next. Political and economic structures, of course, provide the *material foundations* for racist,

(hetero)sexist, classist and age-oriented prejudice to “be fruitful and multiple” according to privilege and power. These structures produce culture.

But, it is not really a question of “what” is taught to “whom,” it is also a question of how hard we look at the rationalization that film makers use for continuing a long line of racist discourse and how do we teach beginning film studies students to recognize “prejudicial politics” in their favorite movies? In his new book *Movies as Politics*, Jonathan Rosenbaum (1997) shows how a certain racial “politics” hides behind “real-sounding” dialogue:

PULP FICTION defines transgression and attitude largely through language. Most notably, it celebrates racial verbal abuse within an elaborately and strategically muddled PC context. By my count, PULP FICTION employs the word “nigger” at least sixteen times—spoken sometimes by black characters and sometimes by whites, always to great effect. But it does this within a racially complicated narrative framework: black and white hit men (Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta) work for a black boss (Ving Rhames) who has a white mistress (Uma Thurman); to complicate matters further, Tarantino’s own bit character—who says “nigger” more often and more gratuitously than any other white person in the movie is married to a black nurse. *All of these narrative elements are possible, if not plausible, reflections of interactions that might take place in the real world* [my emphasis], But Tarantino’s point in using them clearly isn’t to say anything about reality but to produce certain effects. When asked in the Cannes why the word “nigger” cropped up so often in the film, Tarantino replied he wasn’t really where it came from [unconscious racism?], but then added ingenuously that he liked to think that if the word were repeated often enough it would lose all its meaning and potency. A poignant prospect: if such a thing should happen through Tarantino’s noble efforts, it might actually put him out of business—unless, of course, he turns to “gook,” “spic,” “wop,” “chink,” or “kike” to furnish his future screenplays with comparable spiky, crowd-pleasing effects.⁴⁶

Hyper-political film criticism, like that above, reaches into the *psychological depths* of “representation.” It unearths the “political” even when it appears in “muddled PC contexts.”

A hyper-political approach to cultural criticism emphasizes that “political” cultural criticism interprets cultural artifacts in the social, historical and economic contexts within which they are produced and consumed. Given Hollywood’s history of “Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks,” it is either disingenuous or a true bit of “false consciousness” to conclude that the word “nigger” is politically non-problematic, regardless of whether people of color occasionally use the word or not. A “heightened critical consciousness” regarding black use of racial epithets might easily recognize what Paulo Freire calls an “oppressor consciousness” that exists in the oppressed. This is why Freire insisted that “political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore, action *with* the oppressed.”⁴⁷

To teach their students about Freire’s “oppressor consciousness,” film studies instructors might introduce their classes to Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play*, a play first produced at Theatre Four in New York City on November 28, 1981 by the Negro Ensemble Company under the direction of Douglas Turner Ward. Here is a synopsis of the play contained in a playbill from the School of Theatre Arts, College of Arts and Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University:

“They still hate you”—the last words of Sergeant Waters [a black soldier killed by his own kind] and the impetus behind the mystery in *A Soldier’s Play*. Although disguised as a typical courtroom drama, the investigation into Water’s demise soon becomes an analysis of black roles in white society, illustrating the way anger dominates reason when race is involved.⁴⁸

The play is set at Fort Neal, Louisiana in 1944 and deals with issues of “self-hate” or “false consciousness” or whatever one might call the “mental confusion” that oppressed people feel

as they try to deal with a world that despises them, a world of truly unutterable psychic torment. The play was made into a major motion picture titled *A Soldier's Story* and lively discussion (debate) in film studies classes, after one or more viewings, should yield a greater understanding of the psychological dimensions of oppression. Freire insists that it is through honest, soul-searching dialogue that students reach beyond an ordinary consciousness into a realm of being that recognizes the “existential duality of the oppressed,” a situational “beingness” in which the oppressed “are at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized.”⁴⁹

Students are, in many ways, at the very beginning of their struggle with self-actualization. They are in school because they need to develop a consciousness that transcends the prejudices of inherited culture. Those who belong to marginal groups have a double difficulty to confront. Freire tells us that,

during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men [sic]; but for them, to be men [men] is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot “consider” him sufficiently clearly to objectivize him—to discover him “outside” themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression.⁵⁰

And so, mainstream film critics, it seems to me, because they do not really discover the “politics” in oppressive films such as *Chasing Amy* and *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*,

and beginning film studies students need to develop a “critical consciousness” that rises above the “automaticity” of normalized social expectations I have been calling “inherited culture.”

Footnotes

¹Jung & Smith (1993) cited by Thomas K. Nakayama (1998) “Communication of Heterosexism” in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 114.

²Nakayama, Thomas K. (1998). “Communication of Heterosexism” in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 114.

³Nakayama, Thomas K. (1998), Ibid, p. 114.

⁴Monette (1994) cited by Thomas K. Nakayama (1998) “Communication of Heterosexism” In Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications, p. 118.

⁵Boswell (1994) cited by Thomas K. Nakayama (1998) “Communication of Heterosexism” in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 116.

⁶Nakayama, Thomas K. (1998), Ibid, p. 117.

⁷Nakayama, Thomas K. (1998), Ibid, p. 120.

⁸Rothschild (1992) cited by Thomas K. Nakayama (1998) “Communication of Heterosexism” in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 114.

⁹Grace, Andre P. (Unpublished Article) “Using Queer Cultural Studies to Transgress Adult Educational Space.” p. 1.

¹⁰Grace, Andre P., Ibid, p. 4.

¹¹Nakayama, Thomas K. (1998), Ibid., p. 118.

¹²Rakow, Lana F. and Laura A. Wackwitz (1998) “Communication of Sexism” in Communicating Prejudice Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 99.

¹³Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁴Rakow & WackWitz (1998), Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁵Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁶The reader is referred to Merlin Stone's When God Was a Woman.

¹⁷Allen (1986) cited in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) (1998), p. 105.

¹⁸Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁹Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 101.

²⁰Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 102.

²¹Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 102.

²²Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 103.

²³Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 103.

²⁴Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 104.

²⁵Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 105-6

²⁶Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 106.

²⁷Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 106.

²⁸Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 104-6

²⁹Rakow & Wackwitz (1998), Ibid, p. 111.

³⁰Butler (1987) cited by Williams, Angie and Howard Giles in "Communication of Ageism" in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht (Ed.) (1998), Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 136.

³¹Williams, Angie & Howard Giles (1998), "Communication of Ageism" in Communicating Prejudice, Michael L. Hecht, (Ed.), Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, p. 153-4.

³²Williams & Giles (1998), Ibid, p. 151.

³³Williams & Giles (1998), Ibid, p. 146.

³⁴Williams & Giles (1998), Ibid, p. 138.

³⁵Williams & Giles (1998), *Ibid*, p. 137.

³⁶Williams & Giles (1998), *Ibid*, p. 150.

³⁷Asante, Molefi Kete (1998), *Ibid*, 96.

³⁸Asante, Molefi Kete (1998), *Ibid*, p. 97.

³⁹Asante, Molefi Kete (1998), *Ibid*, p. 97-8.

⁴⁰Asante, Molefi Kete (1998), *Ibid*, p. 97.

⁴¹Asante, Molefi Kete (1998), *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁴²Watts, Alan (1995). OM. Creative Meditations, Berkeley, California: Celestial Arts, p. 39.

⁴³Berger, A. (1995). Cultural criticism: A primer of key concepts. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

⁴⁴Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, California: Sage Publications, Page 2.

⁴⁵Bogle, Donald (1973). Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, New York: The Viking Press, Page 3-4.

⁴⁶Rosenbaum, Jonathan (1997). Movies as Politics, California: University of California Press, Page 176-7.

⁴⁷Freire, Paulo (1995). Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Revised 20th Anniversary Edition), New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, Page 48.

⁴⁸Playbill , October 7-17, 1998, School of Theatre Arts at The Pennsylvania State University College of Arts and Architecture, A Soldier's Play, In "The Author" section.

⁴⁹Freire, Paulo (1995), *Ibid*, Page 43.

⁵⁰Freire, Paulo (1995), *Ibid*, Page 27.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PROPAGANDA & CULTURAL CRITICISM

*It was not Hitler's aim to convince the minority of intellectuals, who in fact were to be neglected. His primary target were the broad masses; he wanted to conquer the soul of the ordinary people. This is why all propaganda "had to be popular and its intellectual level had to be geared to the receptivity of the most limited minds among those whom it is designed to address...The more it exclusively takes into account the feelings of the masses, the more penetrating will be its success...The art of propaganda lies precisely in the fact that, in having the proper appreciation of the emotional world of the masses, it attracts the attention of these masses in a psychologically appropriate form and then finds its way into their hearts."*¹

Hilmar Hoffman, *Film Historian of the Third Reich*

*Emotions pull us into the story. We experience vicariously the character's journey through the emotions.*²

Linda Seger, Ph.D. *Hollywood Script Consultant*

*A very general and fundamental principle of human behavior is that emotions energize and organize thought and action.*³

Carroll E. Izard, *Expert in Emotions*

When Adolf Hitler stated that propaganda had to reach into the hearts of "the masses" and "simple messages" had to be repeated over and over to create the kind of political machinery he envisioned goose-stepping into eternity, he hit upon a deadly combination. His words bear repeating:

*"The most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is bourne in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over. Here, as so often in this world, persistence is the first and most important requirement for success."*⁴

But we Americans have our own propaganda—it's called history. We conveniently forget that as a nation we slaughtered, enslaved and displaced millions of indigenous people from their homes to pave the concrete future we now live in a blissful subjective righteousness. America is the land of the free, the home of the brave, but the real "Braves" live on reservations and those who are politically and economically "free" are "free" because they can afford to buy "justice" in our courts and they can influence the political machinery of this great nation with the immense power of corporate cash. As a capitalist nation we imported millions of Africans to the New World to work as slaves. We built our riches on "free" labor. Africans who refused to go along with the evils of our rendition of capitalism were summarily beaten, killed or thrown overboard. As a nation, we have a sordid past to reckon with.

Our national psyche, of course, would rather not remember the travesties of our birth. And so, textbooks across this nation have purified our past as much as possible (Loewen,—). Regardless of the euphemisms that define the "peculiar institution" and westward expansion, we had to create good "reasons" in our collective consciousness for acting the way we did. Our world hypotheses had to be adjusted to accept outrageously immoral social, economic and political action (from a multicultural perspective). Today, negative stereotypes of both Africans and indigenous people continue to testify to a mechanistic view of reality that expeditiously displaced(s) human beings into inhuman categories within which atrocities were readily committed against them. Racist images and racist thoughts have become what Paolo Freire calls an "oppressor consciousness." As world hypotheses, these ideas have been

repeated over and over throughout our history, so much so that even though media “artists” (e.g., Bill Cosby and Gene Roddenberry) honestly try to create pro-social art, they pitifully fail to break through the “oppressor consciousness” that lurks in the shadows of our national psyche like an evil historical fog that simply won’t fade away. Greed has reconfigured our collective conscience as a nation to accept lies as historical “fact” and perpetuate cyclical injustice that derives its form and substance from patriarchal white supremacy. Most of this injustice swells up from the subconscious templates of our history as a nation. It is through *social psychoanalysis* that we discover this “coloring” of our perspectives.

Until Freud, most theorists assumed that the human mind was always aware of every aspect of its decision-making. Sigmund changed all that. Although his views of human nature were probably somewhat deterministic, he nevertheless cleared the way for a much more self-reflexive interrogation of human behavior. No longer was being ethical an “open and shut case” of individuals (or a nation state) making simple decisions from culturally shared values and ideals. *Drives* and *instincts* now combined with personal history to exert a powerful “sub” conscious influence on thought and behavior. The assumption that we are always in control of our thought processes was laid to rest. As internationally recognized Freud scholar Robert R. Holt (1989) puts it, Freud suggested that “the unremembered traces of infantile traumas and fixations leave a different coloring on everyone’s personal spectacles.”⁵ Indeed, much of psychology now accepts Freud’s notion that we are largely unaware of many internal cognitive and affective processes that influence our attitudes, predispositions and desires. My contribution to a complex understanding of the self is to

place Freud's template over the nation so that America becomes a collectivity that, in many respects, acts as an individual. Indeed, just as each individual is unique and can act predictably and unpredictably, I argue that nations can and should be examined from a macro-level perspective that considers their past as well as their present.

As for personal and collective moral responsibility, the notion that powerful instincts and desires govern human behavior might tend to place severe limits on judging unacceptable behavior if it were not for the general consensus (based on observation) that, regardless of our personal history, we still have free-will. We can ostensibly override instincts, desires, our personal histories and emotions if we work hard enough at it. In other words, we have tremendous power over both our thoughts and our actions even if subconscious forces might "preprogram" certain tendencies. As a post-formal thinker, I approach Freud's "discovery" of the un(sub)conscious, clinical data and other forms of social psychological evidence with an open mind and a suggestion based on both personal observation and experience: the degree of personal self-reflexivity probably determines how "authentic" each of us can become over the span of our lives. We seem to be able to split from certain cultural and personal tendencies if we are aware of these tendencies and if we consciously interrogate our spiritual options. Freud discovered that bias was everywhere, he called this bias *transference* and *countertransference*. In other words, Freud discovered that the patient "transfer[red] to a contemporary figure, notably the analyst, emotional reactions that properly belonged to another person of his own past" and that "the psychoanalyst's perceptions and conceptions of the patient are likewise vulnerable to or are shaped by the

unique life experiences that constitute his special perspective.”⁶ This is why the psychoanalyst must undergo therapy. It is hoped that s/he will discover his/her own “characteristic ways of distorting reality, so that [s/he] can take appropriate distance from them and learn compensatory ways of correcting them.”⁷ Post-formal thinkers who critique cultural artifacts become social psychoanalysts, endeavoring to understand the recurring motifs of society’s dreams (its narrative art).

Some social scientists, of course, dismiss Freud’s notion of the unconscious as irrefutable nonsense (Karl Popper, 1963). Indeed, some of Freud’s suggestions have met with empirical disaster over the years. According to an internationally recognized Freud scholar, Freud’s “metapsychology is virtually dead.”⁸ Freud’s clinical theory, on the other hand, which he based on the observations he made of his patients and himself, survives to this day. As with any theory that proposes multiple levels of consciousness, it is difficult to confirm. It is presently unethical to do research on living human brains and patients have certain inalienable rights. Part of the difficulty in judging psychoanalysis or social psychoanalysis is that both put forth probabilistic hypotheses. For example, psychoanalysis suggests that patients with certain unresolved issues will “probably” act this way or that way in a particular setting.

Even the so called “hard” sciences have to deal with probabilities. “In nuclear physics,” Holt observes, “though we can specify to a tiny fraction of a second the half-life of any given radioactive element, all statements of this class are probabilistic.”⁹ To this he quickly adds, “Probabilistic hypotheses cannot be either clearly confirmed or refuted by a

single experiment or other empirical study—a point grasped by few experimenters.”¹⁰ Still, when psychoanalysts feel they understand their patients well enough, they can fairly confidently predict how patients will respond in various situations or *postdict* a set of events that probably occurred in the patient’s upbringing to influence his/her present thought, feelings and behavior. In a similar vein, I propose that *social* psychoanalysts can easily explain (and predict) “recovery projects” because these projects (e.g., anti-affirmative action) stem from the combination of a mechanistic view of reality, a guilty conscience and narcissistic greed. When culture-analysts look over the history of film in America, they can *postdict* certain narrative outcomes (e.g., homosexuals will die at the end of many films and women will serve mainly supportive roles) given our nation’s history and provided that they have an understanding of defense mechanisms and cognitive dissonance theory.

My chief problem with psychoanalysis is that I do not believe that it adequately considers cultural, ancestral or spiritual inheritance. In other words, it misses huge chunks of context. But this is no reason to dismiss it as “unfalsifiable pseudoscience.” Both psychoanalysis and social psychoanalysis are self-reflexive processes that use conscious bias to discover unconscious bias. Both have two strikes against them from the very beginning. Psychoanalysis and *social* psychoanalysis employ methodologies that are unavoidably *indirect*. But this does not mean that both are “irrefutable nonsense.” It simply means that the “proof” of both projects cannot be reduced to very short time intervals. Both projects essentially aim for a complete psychological make-over. One deals with the individual, the other deals with the *national* psyche. It is *possible* that subjects (or subjects of a nation)

might become enlightened in a day, but it is not highly *probable*. Because both projects push for enlightenment, they are realized only when individuals, for psychoanalysis, effectively tune into their personal histories and emotions and patterned ways of perceiving related to these histories and for *social* psychoanalysis, when the nation effectively confronts its history and gives up defense mechanisms such as “recovery projects.” Later in this chapter I will provide an explicit example (via Dr. Gresson’s research) of this notion of “recovery projects.”

In any event, empirical “proof” of *transformation* is difficult but not impossible to provide. To the extent that the individual is content, self-actualized, communally and ecologically conscious and *authentic* in that she does not periodically repeat self-destructive or environmentally-destructive, mentally or morally troublesome behaviors, the individual is to be considered transformed. The fact that individuals recycle psychological problems without having a clue how to escape such patterned responses, attests to subconscious (or unconscious) forces impacting cognition, affect and behavior. In national terms, the combination of “recovery projects,” the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes and the constant repetition of certain motifs attest to a nation at risk. Culture-analysts, therefore, perform something of a reverse “thematic apperception test” on an historical variety of cultural artifacts and plot these against salient memories of the nation’s past and continuing political conflicts to indirectly “measure” the national psyche. When a healthy majority of cultural artifacts no longer reflect negative stereotypes and narcissism and greed are not evident in much narration, then the nation is on its way to becoming transformed. Political

changes will follow because where the head goes, the body politic must follow, whether change comes about by revolution or by common consensus.

Both psychoanalysis and *social* psychoanalysis are macroscopic approaches to personal and national transformation, respectively. Holt goes so far as to state that,

What is distinctive about psychoanalysis as a psychology, what gives it a special claim to our attention aside from our personal involvement, is its concerns with what is most important in human lives. Long before the birth of lifespan developmental psychology, Freud was virtually alone in attempting to make a theory about how human lives grow, how they are malformed and straightened out, and what determines their major features. Just because of this macroscopic approach—this orientation to the large issues and the most perplexing dilemmas of human lives—psychoanalytic theory is especially interesting and extraordinarily difficult to test.¹¹

Likewise, *social* psychoanalysis is difficult to test because it considers more and more context that other theories (or approaches) ignore. But even with these difficulties, I do believe that data can and will eventually be collected to “prove” these theories. The question will then arise: Will other theories (or other approaches) accommodate the clinical data that support psychoanalysis and the thematic, political and economic data that supports social psychoanalysis. The answer will, of course, be—Yes!

Post-formal thinkers realize that multiple theories bring multiple “truths” to the discussion table. One theory may be better than others if it exhibits more explanatory power than the others. For example, both *personal* psychoanalysis and *social* psychoanalysis defer to guilt as an explanation for certain behavior. In *social* psychoanalysis, I suggest that an historical guilt is the underlying motivational factor that causes some to subtype (or subgroup) and thereby maintain negative stereotypes while others tend to modify stereotypes

or completely eliminate *conscious* elements of such stereotypes. Other theories do not adequately explain *why* some people look at stereotypic disconfirming information and still maintain stereotypical attitudes, etc. Other theories do not adequately explain *why* liberal minded people who are consciously motivated to “do the right thing” find it extraordinarily difficult to break through an “oppressor consciousness.” Social psychoanalysis explains this behavior as the result of culturally inherited schemata that evolved out of spiritual guilt.

Regarding this notion of guilt, Izard (1991) reports that,

in differential emotions theory, guilt is considered a fundamental emotion....The experience of guilt, like the experience of fear, is unlearned....The compelling fact that makes guilt rather than fear the chief affect in *conscience* [my emphasis] is this: The experience of guilt binds the person to the source of guilt and does not subside without reconciliation that tends to restore social harmony.¹²

Both *personal* psychoanalysis and *social* psychoanalysis attempt to trace the source of guilt that recycles itself in unresolvable personal problems or self-perpetuating “recovery projects.” Izard adds that,

It should be noted that the feeling of guilt is not dependent upon one’s belief and adherence to written or explicit moral, ethical, or religious codes. The codes may be implicit [or spiritual] and accepted intuitively. Almost everyone has an ethical framework that guides his or her interpersonal and social behavior, but very few people carry the structure and details of this framework in consciousness all the time.¹³

Indeed, I would argue that a deeply subconscious guilt for the horrors of slavery, what we as a nation did to “Native Americans” and how we historically treated women drives our national psyche to continually look for “empirical” support for patriarchal white supremacy.

This is why pseudo-science such as *The Bell Curve* and political nonsense such as *The End of Racism* sell like hot cakes in America and women bodies are *still* being used to sell everything from soup to nuts. My assumption, of course, is that the principle cause of guilt is wrong doing. If one takes a glance at the Bill of Rights and stops to think about slavery, guilt is an inescapable conclusion.

But what of the guiltless? We all know of (or have heard of) the psychopath who is, perhaps, as guilt-deficient an individual as any of us would ever care to meet. In a sense, Nazi Germany was guilt-deficient as a nation. It could only perpetrate the horrors it did by turning off the valve to certain emotions—love, empathy, perhaps others? That Spock-like logic could lead to gas chambers and torture, medical experiments and murder, only reminds us of the valuable of certain emotions. That self-centered thinking could create the immoral havoc a psychopath leaves in his wake, only reminds us how important it is to care for others. Whether one is self-centered as an individual or ethnocentric as a nation, in holistic terms, one is short-sighted. Guilt is a very valuable emotion. It teaches us to rectify problem behavior. However, when we do not wish to own up to our past, we confabulate and we rationalize and we continue in our “oppressor consciousness,” suffering internally, never really getting to know the benefits of other-love. In self-love we have a tendency to stew as the divorce rate goes up, the crime rate doubles (until millions are imprisoned and society eventually goes broke), the environment goes belly up and all that we do comes back to haunt us. The future is dim if we do not, as a nation, face up to our political past. Neo-Nazis speak

of future “race wars.” Some will call such “ethnic cleansing.” If history knows anything, it knows that unchecked evil spreads like the flu.

Cultural Artifacts and Spiritual Politics

Most of today’s film artists unfortunately produce art that does not truly serve its moral function “to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.” As a young black writer, I can easily forgive these artists because I, too, have written (hetero)sexist fiction which, when considered within the overall history of propaganda in American art, reinvigorates and recycles the prejudices I inherited. My protagonists have overwhelmingly been white males in leadership positions (My teen years disappeared in the white suburbs of Long Island). I have envisioned women in mostly supportive roles, nearly always nurturing male egos. More recently, I purposefully wrote white male protagonists into my scripts in an attempt to sell Hollywood, bit by bit, a progressively emancipatory discourse. In the past, I simply followed that inner voice of culture—I subconsciously duplicated dominant ideology through my own creative juices, never once realizing, until graduate school, that my “own creative juices” trickled down from the historical precipices of patriarchal white supremacy. If Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate, North American culture attempts to condition its citizens into patriarchal white supremacy. With our free wills we resist, to the extent that we are spiritually “authentic.”

Intuitively, it makes sense that those who desire hegemonic control try to manipulate society's *affective* strings. We are human because, for the most part, we *feel* something every time we do something, not just when our bodies are racked with grief. Izard (1991) puts it this way:

The significance of emotions for self-confidence, social commitment, creative endeavors, and courageous actions has been recognized by keen observers of the human sphere for as long as there have been written records, yet until the 1980's most of psychology ignored them. One could argue that psychology in its first 100 years was a paradox, a science that neglected its most important subject matter. How could anyone maintain that human beings in relationships and in action in the real world would ever be understood without the scientific study of emotions?¹⁴

Tao 42 states that "All life embodies *yin* and embraces *yang*, through their union achieving harmony."¹⁵ And so, post-formal thinking attempts to discover the balance between affect and cognition. Dreher (1990) puts it this way: "The western mind too often poses dilemmas, forcing us to choose one extreme over the other: day *or* night, male *or* female, action *or* repose."¹⁶ I would add "emotions *or* cognition." A mechanistic view of reality defines the world in terms of either-or thinking. But, quite interestingly, social scientist Izard (1991) takes a decidedly transrational stance:

after much debate on the question of whether emotion causes cognition or cognition causes emotion, the issue remains controversial (Lazarus, 1982, 1984; Zajonc, 1980, 1984). *A reasonable answer to this question is that both are true [my emphasis].* Emotion can activate and influence cognitive processes and vice versa; that is, the dynamic relations between emotion and cognition (perception, imagery, memory, thought) are reciprocal.¹⁷

Perhaps, as Alan W. Watts (1957) argues in *The Way of Zen*, there are other ways to appreciate social “reality” than by traditional or conventional thinking (non-paradoxical).

For example, how are we to understand irrational reactions to film? Ed S. Tan (1996) describes a rather puzzling event:

The story goes that during the showing of *L'Arrivee d'un train engare de la Ciotat* in 1895, people were so terrified at the sight of the oncoming locomotive that they tried to hide under their seats. Today's filmgoers are undoubtedly a good deal more hardened, but the cinema has itself evolved considerably since the days of the Lumiere brothers. Thus even today any cinema visitors who are in a position to observe their fellow film spectators will see reactions that are not too different from those of the primal filmgoers. People cover their faces, shrink back against their seats, and scream “Oh, no! Not that!” The irrationality of such reactions is striking. It is, after all, only a film. All the usual cliches present themselves: the plastic shark, the tomato ketchup blood, the starstruck lovers played by two people who cannot abide each other. Film is make-believe, and we know it.¹⁸

To investigate human behavior as though human beings were cookie-cutter molds of Spock or Data is to inauthentically appraise the human condition. It is to “force-fit” reason onto a sometimes rational sometimes irrational being, as though a one-size-fits-all “reality” were possible.

Even hard-core social scientists are beginning to recognize the eternal Buddhist paradox: That human beings are somewhat inscrutable. If this is true, then part of what constitutes “cultural criticism” ought to *transcend* the one-dimensionality of much of social science these days. Part of what constitutes “cultural criticism” ought to derive from *intuitions*, from what Watt (1957) calls “the peripheral focus of the mind.” Part of what

constitutes hyper-political cultural criticism *must* struggle with the irrational side social “reality.”

Tan (1996) adds that,

If we fail to be intrigued by the apparent irrationality of these emotional reactions [to film], then we will at any rate be struck by their intensity. In *Portrait de Lillian Gish* (1986), the aged actress recalls a showing of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and the violent emotions that seized the old men who had fought in the Civil War: “Their sobs shook the seats.” Today’s cinema audiences, too, are often surprised at the force of the emotion that grips them. Their surprise is triggered by the fact that they know full well that what they are seeing is a series of images projected onto a screen: in other words an illusion.¹⁹

Not too long ago, I saw a veteran of World War II on TV telling how his entire body shook when he saw Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. Apparently, not much has changed when it comes to the human *experience* of watching movies. There seems to be a part of our minds that viscerally relives social “realities” or is capable of relating to fiction on a much deeper, emotional level. Hyper-political cultural criticism does not ignore this experience.

Tan (1996) goes on to describe a plethora of possible reactions to film:

There is another interesting side to the emotions evoked by a film, and that is the sheer diversity of those feelings. A cinema audience can be brought to such a fever pitch of excitement that the people squirm in their seats, or even call out, as did happen in the well-known film scene in *Saboteur* (1942). Or they may respond in exactly the opposite way, by following breathlessly, in total silence, the events taking place on the screen. This is nicely illustrated by the scene in *84 Charing Cross Road* (1986) where Helen Hanff is sitting alone, smoking a cigarette and watching *Brief Encounter*. Or film viewers may feel a pang of guilt when they realize that they have wrongly suspected one of the characters of treachery or betrayal. Or again, they may be grateful to an actor or actress for a fine performance or jealous of the fortune amassed by the villain of the piece. Cinema audiences smile condescendingly, titter nervously, or burst out laughing. One and the same film can produce tears of

joy or tears of frustration. And then there is that subtle emotion that is a combination of contradictory feelings, like hope and fear, embarrassment and mirth, or pity and gloating.²⁰

The Nazis did not ignore emotions because they sensed their awesome power. Why should cultural critics ignore this powerful component of narrative art?

When we *purposefully* close the valves to some of our emotions, we drift in the “automatic pilot” of pre-planned “reasons.” Some of us who do this are capable of committing Nazi-like atrocities. Daniel Goleman (1995), author of the “Coast-to-Coast #1 Bestseller” *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ*, says that: “Only a potent love—the urgency of saving a cherished child—could lead a parent to override the impulse for personal survival. Seen from the intellect, their self-sacrifice was arguable irrational; seen from the heart, it was the only choice to make.”²¹ It almost appears foolish to argue that intersubjective moral behavior must be “rational.” It can’t be “rational” from a subjective point of view because we can manufacture “good” reasons for almost anything and everything we can imagine doing.

Intersubjective morality, on the other hand, *transcends* subjective “reason” because it breaks through the ugly narcissism of ethnocentric conceit. It allows us to empathize with multicultural points of view. It is difficult to cause harm to others when you *feel* for them.

Carroll E. Izard (1991) argues that,

Emotions directly influence what we see and hear. For example, while experiencing joy you see the world through rose-colored glasses. Fear tends to create tunnel vision, causing you to see only the object that frightens you or perhaps only a single route of escape. When experiencing intense fear this may be all that you perceive and all that will register in your consciousness.

Likewise, in anger a person is more likely to have angry thoughts and memories, while in the experience of intense feelings of interest one is curious and desirous of exploration and learning.²²

As evidence that emotions exert a powerful influence over cognitions, Izard (1991) cites “a study conducted years ago” in which,

subjects were treated either courteously or discourteously by an authority figure (Izard, Nagler, Randall, & Fox, 1965). They were made happy by the experimenter acting in a friendly manner or made angry by his hostility. The subjects were then shown pairs of emotion expressions in a stereoscope. (This device permits a person to view one picture with the left eye and another with the right eye; however, what registers in the consciousness of the viewer is a single picture, which may be either the picture seen by the left eye, the picture seen by the right eye, or a combination of the two.) The experimenters presented happy expressions and angry expressions randomly on the right and left sides, and subjects reported what they saw. Those made angry by the experimenter’s hostile manner saw significantly more anger expressions in the stereoscope, and those who were made happy by the experimenter’s friendly approach saw significantly more happy expressions. This demonstrated how an emotion state can actually determine what is perceived and registered in consciousness. There have been a number of such experiments...²³

Such studies may be a bit “artificial” but that does not mean that they are totally worthless.

Indeed, a post-formal view of social psychological research is that, while it is not perfect by any means, it can provide a helpful piece of the puzzle that “defines” the human condition.

Much psychological research suggests that we are primed perceivers—primed by both recent experiences and powerful emotions to perceive what we believe to be certain “truths.” The reader will recall that in a previous chapter, I cited a study by Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982) which concluded that subjects formed an impression of a stimulus person based on “the amount of hostile information to which they had been [subliminally]

exposed. The more hostile information to which rate-condition subjects were exposed in Experiment 1, the more negatively they perceived the stimulus person.” This study underwrites the possibility that we are not always conscious of how we evaluate others.

Most of us are probably not even aware how important *affect* is to “rational” behavior. We might have unquestioningly swallowed prevailing assumptions that to behave rationally we must somehow *turn off our emotions*. Neurologist Antonio Damasio (1994) writes about this false dichotomy between reason and emotion in his very radical book *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. In the introduction, Damasio tells us that he “challenges traditional views on the nature of rationality” because a real-life “Spock” appeared one day:

I had before my eyes the coolest, least emotional, intelligent human being one could imagine, and yet his practical reason was so impaired that it produced, in the wanderings of daily life, a succession of mistakes, a perpetual violation of what would be considered socially appropriate and personally advantageous. He had had an entirely healthy mind until a neurological disease ravaged a specific sector of his brain and, from one day to the next, caused this profound defect in decision making. The instruments usually considered necessary and sufficient for rational behavior were intact in him. He had the requisite knowledge, attention, and memory; his language was flawless; he could perform calculations; he could tackle the logic of an abstract problem. There was only one significant accompaniment to his decision-making failure: a marked alteration of the ability to experience feelings. Flawed reason and impaired feelings stood out together as the consequences of a specific brain lesion, and this correlation suggested to me that feeling was an integral component of the machinery of reason.²⁴

Damasio adds that, “Two decades of clinical and experimental work with a large number of neurological patients have allowed me to replicate this observation many times, and to turn a clue into a testable hypothesis.”²⁵

This will come as quite a surprise to those who argue that emotions can cause us to “lose control,” to become “irrational.” Damasio notes that he does not,

deny that emotions and feelings can cause havoc in the processes of reasoning under certain circumstances. Traditional wisdom has told us that they can, and recent investigations of the normal reasoning process also reveal the potentially harmful influence of emotional biases. It is thus even more surprising and novel that the *absence* of emotion and feeling is no less damaging, no less capable of compromising the rationality that makes us distinctively human and allows us to decide in consonance with a sense of personal future, social convention, and moral principle.²⁶

We return again and again to M. Scott Peck’s idea that a healthy intellect “thinks paradoxically” and Steinberg & Kincheloe’s belief that higher-order thinking must shy away from either-or simplicities.

A *transrational* understanding of the human condition *expects* emotions to be both harmful and helpful. In other words, culture-analysts avoid simplistic either-or thinking that eliminates the gray spaces between affect and cognition. Damasio’s conclusions are worth repeating: “feelings are the sensors for the match or lack thereof between nature and circumstance. And by nature I mean both the nature we inherit as a pack of genetically engineered adaptations, and the nature we have acquired in individual development, through interactions with our social environment, mindfully and willfully, as well as not.”²⁷ Emotions balanced against reason and insight serve human beings very well. Reason without the benefit of emotion and insight, loses its spiritual strength and its moral validity.

Daniel Goleman (1994) goes so far as to suggest that we should consider “Emotional IQ” as a very significant factor in measuring “true” intelligence. He states that,

The lopsided scientific vision of an emotionally flat life—which has guided the last eighty years of research on intelligence—is gradually changing as psychology has begun to recognize the essential role of feeling in thinking. Rather like the Spockish character Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, psychology is coming to appreciate the power and virtues of emotions in mental life, as well as their dangers. After all, as Data sees (to his own dismay, could he feel dismay), his cool logic fails to bring the right *human* solution. Our humanity is most evident in our feelings; Data seeks to feel, knowing that something essential is missing. He wants friendship, loyalty; like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, he lacks a heart. Lacking the lyrical sense that feeling brings, Data can play music or write poetry with technical virtuosity, but not feel its passion. The lesson of Data's yearning for yearning itself is that the higher values of the human heart—faith, hope, devotion, love—are missing entirely from the coldly cognitive view. Emotions enrich; a model of mind that leaves them out is impoverished.²⁸

Hyper-political cultural criticism, therefore, cannot simply dismiss human emotions—or any other facet of an individual's *being-in-the-world*.

According to the latest research, there seems to be reciprocal relationships between what we perceive or think and the emotions we “feel.” Emotions do not reside in the heart and reason in the brain. Emotion and reason interact, continuously, because a human being is more than the sum of divided parts that researchers study ad infinitum. We are, instead, complex beings who are slowly beginning to realize how much power we have over our *being-in-the-world*. Social scientists have even discovered that human expectations can be so powerful that researchers must use *placebos* or they risk attributing success to drugs or experimental procedures while such success really belongs primarily in the patient's mind. These findings, in themselves, offer so much hope for helping the individual and improving society.

So when Izard concludes that, “Guilt is the emotion most essential to the development of the affective-cognitive structures of *conscience* [my emphasis] and the affective-cognitive-action patterns of *moral behavior* [my emphasis],” we must understand that repressed guilt recycles itself in endless “recovery projects,” all of which contribute to political conflict, social discontent and civil strife. When historical guilt is finally addressed, amends might then be made for historical “wrongs,” true spiritual growth will most certainly occur and the historical record can be set straight (the lies removed from textbooks). Such honesty cannot help but raise a nation of children willing and able to solve the moral dilemmas of their future. A nation that addresses its historical guilt will be better able to balance the ethical, moral and spiritual demands of symbolic social interaction.

Propaganda, Advertisements & Critical Consciousness

If world hypotheses repeated over and over eventually become propaganda, then we ought to, as cultural critics and as instructors and artists, interrogate cultural artifacts with a view toward discovering their true political significance. As Freire did, we might examine commercial advertisements to more fully appreciate the emotional resonance of social rhetoric. Freire (1994) first established a situational definition of **propaganda** before he broached the issue of critical consciousness. He proposed that “as men through discussion begin to perceive the deceit in a cigarette advertisement featuring a beautiful, smiling woman in a bikini (i.e., the fact that she, her smile, her beauty, and her bikini have nothing at all to do with the cigarette), they begin to discover the difference between education and

propaganda,”²⁹ they begin to develop a critical consciousness. Freire utilized *advertising as the most obvious example of rhetoric*. From there, he proceeded to a more sophisticated analysis of ideology. Likewise, communication scholars may need to get their students to see the persuasive powers of advertising—the most obvious examples of rhetoric—before their students can develop a critical consciousness with which to fully appreciate the political rhetoric of culture.

Sholle and Denski (1993) state that,

any pedagogical practice must be formulated in the context of its specific historical location. Media must be examined in the context of their accumulation in the postmodern condition, in terms of the saturation of everyday life by the hegemonic practices of late capitalism and its subsumption of practice under the rubric of *consumerism*, in the erasure of the marginal and the exclusion of the other, and in light of the place of media in the everyday lives of students who bring this background to every pedagogical encounter.³⁰

To ignore the pervasive *consumerism* of our culture is to ignore a major context that might affect the ubiquitous cultural flow of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination.

Communication scholars could possibly begin an enlightened pedagogical practice by examining Jules Henry’s (n.d.) *Culture Against Man* as a problem-situation. For film studies classes, the *problem* might be understanding “advertising as a philosophical system.”

Students could discuss Henry’s observation that,

Industry spends billions exploiting the capacity of American women to lend themselves to unreality. Since our culture gives women no firm role except an erotic one, but surrounds them with ambiguities, they fit readily into tree-houses [he is referring to advertisements of his day] or any other kind of commercial fantasy. Men are more intractable (sic) in this regard; it is more

difficult to metamorphose them into make-believe creatures because their roles are more real.³¹

Students might discuss how men's roles are changing and how critical consciousness might have instigated or played a part in that change.

Another of Henry's observations which may be similar to Freire's discussion of *cigarette advertising* follows:

Advertising's use of female ecstasy is, perhaps, the most imaginative monetization of woman...“Are we wasting women?” queries *Life* editorially. The answer is, Of course not! No nation on earth has ever used them to greater advantage! Without the pecuniary uses of women—their hair, their legs and all the wondrous variety of their personality and anatomy—the economy would perish.³² (P. 84)

Students could discuss Henry's use of sarcasm to get his point across and compare this with the use of sarcasm in film. Is sarcasm a potent enough weapon by itself to confront the subconscious ravages of an oppressor consciousness? When media producers make fun of meditation, indigenous ways of knowing, intuition and non-Western spirituality, what affective do they stimulate? Subconscious? Conscious? A combination of the two?

Students might discuss how deftly advertisers hone in on the male sexual instinct to sell their products and how Hollywood overwhelmingly portrays women as objects of desire. Both advertisers and film producers use women's bodies to arouse emotional interest in their products. Lately, men's bodies are coming into vogue because women now have greater purchasing power and because women have argued for a more equal representation. The problem, however, still remains—advertisers play to sexual instincts and thereby unbalance

the emotion-cognition equation. When students finally begin to think of *films* as “products” they begin to understand narrative art as more than just entertainment but as an integral part of a psychological game of war waged by capitalists who want to culturally condition the masses into a state of perpetual product worship. Consumer capitalism needs to be interrogated by an enlightened, emancipatory consciousness, one which has the spiritual roots to take the media to task for their obsession with materialism, power and greed. By using advertising as a rhetorical backdrop, educators can more easily explicate the ideological and affective functions of narrative films.

One of the ways educators might expose cultural conditioning is to study Henry’s notion of **pecuniary logic**:

When one is asked to accept the literal message of a product on the basis of shadowy evidence, I dub it *pecuniary logic*. In other words, pecuniary logic is a proof that is not a proof but is intended to be for commercial purposes. There is nothing basically novel in pecuniary logic, for most people use it at times in their everyday life. What business has done is adopt one of the commoner elements of folk thought and use it for selling products to people who think this way all the time. This kind of thinking—which accepts proof that is not proof—is an *essential* intellectual factor in our economy, for if people were careful thinkers it would be difficult to sell anything.³³

As one studies consumer capitalism, one realizes that economic structure—if it does not directly *determine* human consciousness it certainly does—indirectly sets a stage upon which many other social and personal forces present the “play” which we call “Life in A Capitalist State.” A discussion might revolve around whether advertisers want consumers who rely on balanced reason or consumers who allow themselves to fall prey to pecuniary logic.

From there, discussion might focus on the economic issues Henry raises in his sarcastic but insightful conclusion:

From this it follows that in order for our economy to continue in its present form people must learn to be *fuzzy-minded* and impulsive, for if they were clear-headed and deliberate they would rarely put their hands in their pockets; or if they did, they would leave them there. If we were all logicians the economy could not survive, and herein lies a terrifying paradox, for *in order to exist economically as we are we must try by might and main to remain stupid.*³⁴

Students might discuss the moral, the *spiritual*, or even the religious problems that crop up when consumer capitalism controls the media. Obsessive materialism and ruthless individualism might not run so rampant in our subconscious wills if capitalists did not pull nearly all of the media's strings, given that media are so popular in these United States.

How to Fight an Unconscious Prejudiced "Will-To-Power"

In "The Introductory Course and the 'Ethically Embarrassed' Text: Toward a Multicultural Approach to Teaching U.S. Film History," Jeanne Hall (1994) writes of a very emotional "PC backlash" that some students have when dealing with "too much black stuff" and "too much silly feminism" in "a large introductory film history class" which she regularly teaches at Penn State.³⁵ Hall, who uses a "multicultural feminist approach," a transrational approach for sure, observes that,

surprisingly, the greatest reluctance to explore alternative film forms and modes of production in the introductory course has come not from the university administration, but from the (overwhelmingly white, middle class) students themselves—who complain, *sometimes quite vociferously* [my emphasis], that they simply "don't like" independent films.

If emotions operate largely at a subconscious level, as many social psychologists argue, then some students probably “don’t like” multicultural films (a.k.a. independent films) because these films challenge students’ largely uninterrogated and unarticulated world hypotheses. If our national psyche is indeed patriarchal white supremacy as I argue throughout this dissertation, then a tremendous negative affective will swell around “discourse” that is incongruent with the premises of patriarchal white supremacy and Eurocentric primacy. Leon Festinger calls this incongruence “cognitive dissonance.”

Hall observes that academics are not immune to such “dissonance”:

Colleagues sometimes *express surprise* [my emphasis] that students coming out of my survey course have not seen *Citizen Kane*—a film which has, in the past, been presented as a “challenge” to the classical Hollywood style—though it’s hard to imagine similar concerns being raised if they [her students] had not been introduced to works embodying a feminist, structuralist or hip-hop aesthetic.³⁶

There are, of course, many “reasons” that Jeanne Hall’s students and colleagues may have “emotional difficulties” or “cognitive concerns” over multicultural narrative art and multicultural analysis. Some of these “reasons” might not necessarily relate to repressed guilt.

If it is true that as a nation we have inherited a mechanistic view of reality, then we may also have been, in a sense, culturally conditioned to be receptive to traditional “forms” of mediated presentation. It would take some time for us to be “converted” to another “form”

of mediated presentation. When a new “form” is combined with incongruent discourse, the apple cart of content is upset and viewers will rebel. Jeanne Hall observes that,

many independent filmmakers use traditional narrative or documentary structures to give vision and voice to groups historically excluded from or marginalized by dominant cultural practices. But many others create works which seem as “radical” in film form as they do “controversial” in subject matter to my students. Overall, I’ve found them to be much more open to alternative perspectives when they are presented in conventional forms—and indeed, to be resistant and *even hostile* [my emphasis] when such perspectives are embodied in formally experimental works....As E. Deidre Pribram writes of Julie Dash’s *Daughter’s of the Dust* (1992), “The film’s narrative differences, poetic rather than linear or ‘realistic,’ may explain its ability to resonate with its viewers” (initially primarily African American women)—but, at the same time, “the very aspects that cause the film to appeal to its particular audiences also make it less accessible for most non-specific viewers, demanding extra ‘work’ on their part” (Pribram 1993, 4).³⁷

Jeanne Hall’s experiences and her intuitions highlight some of the difficulties in developing a heightened critical consciousness in beginning film studies students or any viewer, for that matter, who has not transformed her consciousness. It also suggests why *too many* mainstream film critics pan over racist, (hetero)sexist, classist and ageist discourse—they are so accustomed to aesthetic *form* that they forget political *substance*. Like many white middle-class students, they are culturally attuned to dominant discourse.

Jeanne Hall has discovered that there are “institutional factors which mitigate against adopting a multicultural approach to a history of American cinema—the canonical nature of introductory course descriptions, university film libraries and standard film history texts.”³⁸ In her experience, she has found that “no standard introductory textbook on the history of American film adopts a multicultural perspective or devotes much attention to

films made outside of Hollywood.”³⁹ This sad state of affairs is symptomatic of a defense mechanism known as **repression**, which is exemplified when unacceptable impulses or *ideas* are rendered unconscious. Essentially what happens is that the conscious mind is not adequately prepared or willing to handle the conflict between various levels of mental processing. Psychic conflict then goes underground, so to speak. Because of inherited guilt and prejudice from previous generations, I argue that Americans (for the most part) do not desire to own up to their guilt for supporting patriarchal white privilege and its concomitant economic and social benefits over the years. Most Americans prefer to confabulate theories, ideas, notions and pseudo-science that obfuscates their guilt and their privileged status.

But that does not mean that unacceptable impulses or ideas completely disappear from their heads, because they don't. Unacceptable impulses or ideas indirectly influence experience and behavior, producing in individuals what Freud called “neurotic symptoms.” A *social* psychoanalytical view of repression might envision it as the *motivating force* behind a prejudicial mindset (e.g., of hardcore bigots-sexists) which fights the effort to modify schemata to fit concrete social “realities.” Bigots and sexists who subtype (i.e., who form “exceptions to the rule” rather than eliminating a very unfair and inaccurate rule) are probably the same people who work on “recovery projects.” When they meet a woman or a person of color who disconfirms their very negative expectations, their consciousness refuses to deal directly and fairly with the evidence. They repress this evidence (i.e., truthful idea) because facing it fairly and squarely would cause them to feel too much emotional and spiritual pain. They would have to accept their complicity (i.e., their guilt) in oppressing

those who are marginal. And, they would not be able to fully enjoy their privileged status in society any more. From a spiritual point of view, they would have to share their enormous wealth. A part of their thinking apparatus (i.e., the insatiable self-centered *ego*) will not have this modification. And so, while their may not be a neurological homunculus (i.e., person within the person), there certainly does appear to be different levels of thinking or different *types* of mental processing that converges (in a healthy individual) at a site of schematic agreement. Without this convergence, we might be mental jellyfish, incapable of rendering a decision or embarking upon any particular course of action.

Critical consciousness, therefore, requires a thorough examination of the self and of culture *as* one struggles to develop a more egalitarian and inclusive philosophy of life. Paulo Freire puts it this way:

The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new.⁴⁰

For communication scholars, this means that we should engage in **dialogue** with our students. Large classes where students do not get a chance to discuss multicultural issues are a disservice to students, especially if the academy desires to teach its students ethical politics. If it is necessary, for some reason or set of reasons, for students to be assembled in mass to view films, preparations for small-group discussion should be made (e.g., recitation classes

after a master viewing class) to facilitate dialogue. If universities “must” hold such large classes for heaven knows what reason, Jeanne Hall offers a few suggestions:

An examination of submerged discourses on race, class, gender and sexual identity in Hollywood’s “ethically embarrassed” texts; a historiographical analysis of the “selective memory” of standard accounts of the history of American film; and an integration of independent, experimental and documentary film into the syllabus are three practical ways to bring a multicultural perspective to the large, introductory film history course. *Such courses cannot take the place of small seminars devoted to special topics in these areas* [my emphasis]—but they can reach a greater number of students from a wider variety of disciplines and distribute responsibility for diversification of the university curriculum beyond those (usually women and minority) faculty members who teach special topics classes.⁴¹

I would add that a quality education must include Hall’s multicultural awareness. To do otherwise is immoral, from an intersubjective point of view. In a nutshell then, communication scholars need to reject the hypothesis of a purely mechanistic lecture format with hundreds of students jotting down dates, names, numbers and notes. Small discussion groups are a necessity in a society that proclaims its interest in “justice for all.”

Jeanne Hall notes that students often have problems interrogating cultural artifacts. They do not want to look very closely at something that has probably formed their consciousness, in the beginning. However, she reports that after some time, “although students sometimes complain of an attendant ‘destruction of pleasure’ in viewing mainstream films analytically and ideologically, they also acknowledge the displeasure members of marginalized groups routinely experience at the movies, and begin to appreciate the alternative pleasures such viewers can create.”⁴² At first, any form of therapy is no fun, but after the initial shock has worn off and after the benefits of self-reflected awareness begin

to accrue, enlightenment vastly improves life. To awaken “conscientization” (i.e., enlightenment) in his students, critical educator Paulo Freire “rejected the hypothesis of a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness.”⁴³ In a similar vein, Jeanne Hall states:

I want to advocate an approach that treats history as historiography, emphasizing the “selective memory” of standard accounts of the subject matter as well as my own. The goals of the approach, then, are threefold: (1) to defamiliarize, through critical-historical analysis, works of the classical Hollywood cinema; (2) to familiarize students with works adopting alternative perspectives and embodying alternative forms; and (3) to encourage students to view and read critically, to question the ways in which American culture has been written—and ideally, by extension, the ways in which other histories have been written as well.⁴⁴

Hall’s approach is definitely transrational because (1) it engages multiperspectival insights and (2) it broadens the contextual base of inquiry, it “treats history as historiography,” and (3) it has a “critical” function, it questions culture. Is Hall’s the only transrational approach? No. There are as many as there are critical thinkers. Transrational analysis is not specifically a *doctrinal* approach nor is it a *set* of prescribed methods. While I do offer very specific “templates” (e.g., “admonitions” to focus on stereotypes, grounded material analysis, political conflicts, etc.) to hyper-political cultural critics for their use as “reality” checks, I do not believe that these templates comprise a “fool-proof” methodology. There is no such possibility. A truly hyper-political cultural critic must use a balanced measure of “science” (e.g., templates) and “art” (e.g., intuition) to engage post-formal thinking.

The Value of “Open Dialogue”

Whatever approach one uses to develop “conscientization,” whether one is a film critic or a pedagogue, *open dialogue* is an absolute necessity. Freire proposed the concept of “culture circles” where small groups “attempted through *group debate* [italics mine] to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification.”⁴⁵ Freire reported that, “Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating syllabi, compact programs that were ‘broken down’ and ‘codified’ [i.e., represented visually] into learning units.”⁴⁶ Dialogue revolved around “problem situations” uniquely presented in different illustrations. In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Paulo Freire writes of “ten problem situations” that he discussed in “culture circles.” Each “situation” presented a relationship between “man” and the “world.” Likewise, film studies teachers might present several overhead illustrations which problematize popular culture and social consciousness.

Multicultural educator Jeanne Hall used a collection of images from various films to illustrate similarities and differences among various filmic “texts” to her graduate students. Repeated showings of a film clip enabled graduate students to “see” things they might have missed the first time through. Discussion revolved around the intertextual significance of particular images or narrative events. Hall encouraged debate about possible “intentions” of the filmmaker. She constantly emphasized that there were many choices available to any group of filmmakers. She stressed that what we saw on the silver screen might not have been *consciously* planned but that does not necessarily mean that it might not have a rhetorical

dimension to it. The idea was that films do not make themselves, people make films. To understand films, one must understand people and what they might possibly mean by their “art.”

Film studies teachers could present filmic narration as a “problem situation.” As Paulo Freire did in his “Fourth Situation,” wherein he presented a “Lettered Hunter (Lettered Culture)” using a rifle to hunt birds, film studies teachers might problematize technology by showing how technological advances changed the ways stories are being told on the silver screen. Group participants could debate how films alter time and space to condense the plot and keep audience interest alive. Particular attention could be given to the *affect* one feels when one sees a dissolve, when one sees from a “distorted” perspective (i.e., high-angle or low-angle shot), when images are juxtaposed.

When film studies students problematize narration and emotional imagery, they see how the filmic content of any particular film must be measured up against (1) political images in the news, (2) *images* in history books, (3) historical *texts* and (4) the experiential “lessons” students learn from their parents, peers or significant others. Films exist in neither a social vacuum nor an historical vacuum. Yet, many students continue to rationalize the racist images in *Witness* as “possible.” It may be easier for some students to accept black violence on the silver screen as simply a “possible” or “likely” scenario that the film maker depicts for mere entertainment than to deal with the *political choices* that film makers might subconsciously make.

To excavate the *fear* that such students have apparently internalized, multicultural educators might ask their students to re-write the scene that hooks describes (in *Witness*, where Danny Glover, a black male, searches for “witnesses” and terrifies an innocent white child) so that the “reality” of violence in America might be captured without promoting fearful negative stereotypes of blacks. Debate could later take up the issue of whether or not *fear provoking* images of blacks are more potent than a few “neutral” images of blacks in the background of various scenes. *The difficulty of actively undermining nearly a hundred years of racist filmic imagery must be acknowledged if we are to achieve a critical consciousness that transcends inherited prejudice, intolerance and discrimination.*

The art and science of political cultural criticism, therefore, is the art of *sensing*, the art of *feeling*, the art of *intuiting* the political significance of narrative events. *Political* film criticism is not undertaken purely as a *science* but also as an *art*, which means that hyper-political cultural critics recognize first that criticism is a uniquely human undertaking and, secondly, because it is interpretive, *hyper-political cultural criticism* is as imprecise as is any other human endeavor. Watts (1957) notes that,

By far the greater part of our important decisions depend upon “hunch”—in other words, upon the “peripheral vision” of the mind. Thus the reliability of our decisions rests ultimately upon our ability to “feel” the situation, upon the degree to which this “peripheral vision” has been developed.⁴⁷

In the beginning, *hyper-political* cultural criticism is a science which might employ such methods as content analysis, but as the critic progresses in her ability to perceive through her peripheral vision, she drifts more and more into the art of hyper-political cultural criticism.

In the end, the *hyper-political* cultural critic has not learned a “skill” comparable to “carpentry” or “plumbing,” but a *skillful art*! Watts (1957) sums it this way, “To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it.”⁴⁸

To criticize from a political perspective is to embark upon an examination of the social, historical, economic and psychological contexts within which we apprehend “texts.” To criticize popular culture is to see cultural curricula as a pedagogy of values and ideals wherein dominant elites instruct the masses in “conventional wisdom.” The art and science of political film criticism is, therefore, to examine one’s world hypotheses with a view toward discovering the dominant philosophy of life that undergirds the political discourses of popular culture. Media critics must be imaginative and creative in their endeavor to uncloak the political assumptions of culture. The last word ultimately belongs to those who are marginal and enlightened about oppression for theirs is the site of struggle, the apex of political conflict and spiritual rebirth.

From Whence We Came

The question invariably arises: But how did education become so apolitical? How did many come to believe that politics was something “dirty,” something to be shunned in classrooms all across the country? This history is important because it contextualizes the consciousness we pass on from one generation to the next. Christopher Lasch (1995) traces the tendency of American schools to “avoid politics at all costs” to the attitude of early

influential leaders such as Horace Mann, the so-called father of modern education. Lasch states that,

Horace Mann, wise in so many things, failed to see that political and religious controversy is educative in its own right and therefore tried to exclude divisive issues from the common schools. His eagerness to avoid sectarian quarrels is understandable enough, but it left a legacy that may help to explain the bland, innocuous, mind-numbing quality of public education today.⁴⁹

The academy is by no means immune to a bland, mind-numbing quality of education. As Jeanne Hall discovered, some of her students seemed to prefer this brand of pedagogy—probably because they became culturally conditioned to it throughout their public school preparation for college and the so-called “real world.” That TV, because of the ubiquitous practice of stopping for “important messages from our sponsor” and shifting to other programming every half-hour or hour, fragments political commentary and abruptly ends political debate, only adds fuel to the fire of a pervasive mind-numbing acceptance of the status quo.

Today’s students, for the most part, engage in superficial political debate, if they discuss politics at all. Film studies classes, if they are not taught by multicultural educators, tend to ignore prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. Mainstream film critics, similarly, tend to see everything in mainstream narrative films *but* racial, gender, sexual preference, age-related discrimination and class politics. When films directly address so-called “minority issues” or “feminists’ concerns,” then film critics may dabble in some politics. It is as though the public sphere were expected to have a political-ectomy, a removal of a dangerous,

cancerous polyp called politics. Lasch (1995) calls this “the perfect world” scenario which originated in early misguided notions of what a public education could do for society.

Lasch points out that Horace Mann apparently envisioned “perfection” as an almost robotic state of consciousness:

The perfect world, as it existed in Mann’s head, was a world in which everyone agreed, a heavenly city where the angels sang in unison. He sadly admitted that “we can hardly conceive of a state upon earth so perfect as to exclude all differences of opinion,” but at least it was possible to relegate disagreements “about rights” and other important matters to the sidelines of social life, to bar them from the schools and, by implication, from the public sphere as a whole (XII:96).⁵⁰

Unfortunately, students as well as mainstream film critics appear have adopted these robotic or mechanistic states of apolitical “perfection.” That is to say that too many people fail to recognize that life is no “perfect world where everyone agrees” and “angels sing in perfect harmony,” regardless of what D’Souza claims in his so-called “end of racism” book.

Lasch (1995) observes that,

wide-ranging public controversy, as we have seen, was just what Mann wanted to avoid. Nothing of educational value, in his view, could issue from the clash of opinions, the noise and heat of political and religious debate. Education could take place only in institutions deliberately contrived for that purpose, in which children were exposed exclusively to knowledge professional educators considered appropriate. Some such assumption, I think, has been the guiding principle of American education ever since.⁵¹

Is it no wonder that the guiding principle of American public education and education in the academy as well as mainstream film criticism seems to be an avoidance of racial, gender, class and sexual preference politics?

Lasch (1995) concludes with a “tribute” (of sorts) to the legacy of Horace Mann:

Mann’s reputation as the founding father of the public school is well deserved. His energy, his missionary enthusiasm, his powers of persuasion, and the strategic position he enjoyed as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education made it possible for him to leave a lasting mark on the educational enterprise. One might go so far as to say that the enterprise has never recovered from the mistakes and misconceptions built into it at the very outset.⁵²

From an historical perspective, then, it is readily apparent that politics was never meant to be part of our nation’s pedagogical package. Politics was to evolve as a leper in the public sphere, to be avoided at all costs. As advertisers desired an unquestioning consumer consciousness, so did American education desire and require an unquestioning acceptance of a special brand of “knowledge.” Post-formal thinkers call it by its rightful name “propaganda.”

But how do students (and others) escape the evil tentacles of propaganda? Critical Theorist Max Horkheimer maintains that individuals become open to philosophical transcendence through the **concept of negation**, a process which involves the continuous criticism and reconstruction of what one presumes to know. In his book titled *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer (1947) writes: “Negation plays a crucial role in philosophy. The negation is double-edged—a negation of the absolute claims of prevailing ideology and the brash claims of reality.”⁵³ He is obviously writing about, although he does not use these terms, an “*intersubjective* cultural reflexive negation,” one which challenges any and all philosophies of life. He adds that,

Philosophy confronts the existent, in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticize the relation between the two and thus *transcend them* [my emphasis]. Philosophy derives its positive character [i.e., its “intersubjective” and “transcendent” character] precisely from the interplay of these two negative procedures.⁵⁴

Thus, a key dimension to a multicultural analysis of popular culture necessarily involves an implicit understanding of the self and how the self construes the world against the social background from which the self and social “truths” emerge. Students, armed with such knowledge have the basic wrecking tools to break through or transcend the world views they inherited through dominant social discourse and symbolic social interaction.

Horkheimer stresses that,

Philosophy rejects the veneration of the finite, not only of crude political or economic idols, such as the nation, the leader, success, or money, *but also of ethical or esthetic values* [my emphasis], such as personality, happiness, beauty, or even liberty, so far as they pretend to be independent ultimates. It should be admitted that the basic cultural ideas have truth values, and philosophy should measure them against the social background from which they emanate. It opposes the breach between ideas and reality.⁵⁵

An ordinary consciousness, therefore, frequently *creates* gaps between ideas and reality. No where is that gap more insidious than in Neo-Nazi views of social “reality.” *The Bell Curve*, as pseudo-science, provides a good example of world hypotheses that guilefully ignore context. *The Bell Curve* hypothesizes a social “reality” that ignores the economic, political and social backgrounds of “underachievers.” If Hernstein and Murray had considered economic, political, historical and social contexts they would have had to trash their entire pseudo-Nazi enterprise. Differential achievement is not a function of genetic promise, as they

argue, but a function of a social, economic and political disequilibrium brought on by a consciousness of individuality fused with a consciousness of greed that denies equal education to all. Post-formal thinkers know in their heart of hearts that “context matters.”

Dealing With the Cognitive “Loop” of Political Recovery

An ordinary consciousness represses *context* because context is a dangerous psychological tool that opens the mind up to its past and all of the ensuing guilt associated with that past. In *The Recovery of Race in America*, Aaron David Gresson III (1995) describes “recovery projects” in which individuals and collectivities attempt “to recovery ways of being related and connected to something and someone larger than “I” and “me.”⁵⁶ Both Neo-Nazis and Progressive Blacks employ *recovery projects*. But when Neo-Nazis do it, they do it through an *ordinary consciousness*. When Progressive Blacks do it, they do it through an *evolving critical consciousness*. This is so because the former ignores Horkheimer’s *concept of negation* and the latter put it to good use.

In other words, a heightened critical consciousness reconfigures social “reality” through Horkheimer’s *concept of negation*. For example, on page 145 Gresson (1995) writes that,

[Rhetorical] reversal is a pivotal tactic with a most interesting logic. It pertains to the power to name, define, and negotiate reality. In the 1960s, Blacks engaged in such behavior around the notion of “Black.” Before the 1960s, this word held largely negative connotation for most American Blacks, but by seizing and embracing the word “Black” and investing it with positive value, Blacks engaged in a most significant form of reversal. One of the major reflections of the power shift—at least, symbolically—occurred when whites no longer told Blacks the meaning of words and Blacks defined

and redefined meanings according to their own values and interests. It is, for instance, now a part of Black folklore that Quame Toure (Stokely Carmichael) told the white press, “Black Power means whatever we say it means.”⁵⁷

When blacks “reversed” the meaning of Black, they did so because they were able to negate Nazi-like concepts which did not resonate with their lived experiences. When Neo-Nazis and like-minded individuals claim that “affirmative action is reverse discrimination” they do not attempt to negate Nazi values, they simply reconfigure social “reality” in terms of the uninterrogated assumptions of patriarchal white supremacy.

Neo-Nazis assume that corrective measures to redress an “oppressor consciousness” and its attendant economic, social and political inequalities are patently immoral. Their recovery project is deaf, dumb and blind to anything that would make them feel spiritually guilty. Their recovery project does not hear the cries of economic, social and political disenfranchisement that echo through the ages of America’s past. Their recovery project has no conception of itself other than the self-righteous biological narcissism that it reflects back at its own image through the social mirrors of insatiable greed.

What Gresson (1995) calls the “white male recovery project” is really a psycho-political reaction to the pro-active political struggles of critically conscious individuals in the 1960s. In his own words Gresson reports that:

the racial liberation movement and its companion liberation movements represented losses for white men as moral heroes; the emotional and symbolic aspects of this loss, moreover, were greater than any material loss the American dominant majority sustained. These symbolic losses combined with the loss of faith in government and “authority” to ensure a peculiar form of “white privatization”: whites’ refusal, if not inability, to identify with their

racial past. Increasingly, whites experienced themselves as oppressed victims of an uncaring authority and cited efforts on behalf of Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other ethnics as “reverse racism”—the birth cry of modern white racial recovery rhetoric.⁵⁸

The tendency of an ordinary consciousness to recycle certain notions of social “reality” without ever checking those views against the economic, social and political *backgrounds from which they emanate*, points to a pedagogical need to re-contextualize everything bit of knowledge “produced” in the classroom. Students need to see more and more context, in each and every class. A narrow focus, i.e., “specialization,” effectively diminishes the possibilities of students spontaneously applying Horkheimer’s *concept of negation* to expand their critical awareness of social “realities.”

How are we ever to know who is the *real* victim? Neo-Nazis, by means of an ordinary consciousness (which severely constricts context), claim racism, and they are, of course, *partially* correct. Affirmative action fights oppression through the social, economic and political “realities” of such oppression. It *necessarily* uses the oppressive practices already inculcated in the minds of the public. What else can it do? Perhaps, it should reconfigure the national psyche before it proceeds—but this will not be easy and it will take protracted effort. Reconfiguring the national psyche would be like putting the entire nation in culture-analysis for quite a few decades. The end result might be spiritually and morally great but political realities suggest that more efficient (less time-consuming and costly) options are called for. Blacks and other disenfranchised groups claim oppression, and they

are, of course, *more* correct than their Neo-Nazis “buddies” because Blacks and other disenfranchised groups generally include more context in their analysis.

Gresson (1995) puts it this way:

Both the oppressor and oppressed may participate in this tactic of recovery rhetoric; thus, either out-group members or members of the oppressed group may direct reversals at the oppressed. The relative differences in history and real differences in power, however, ultimately make such rhetorical arguments less than persuasive.⁵⁹

Not only does the oppressor, as a contingent of “think-alike” male white CEOs, control Hollywood, but an oppressor consciousness, i.e., a patriarchal white supremacist philosophy of life, underscores the direction and form of narrative filmic discourse. There is a relative differential of power at work in our country that almost assures North Americans and all others who purchase our cultural artifacts that they will feed on class insensible, youth-slanted, (hetero)sexist, racist rot for years to come. When America’s conscience is finally awakened, massive spiritual changes will be made to fix a horror that has continued for centuries.

We live to be egos; so much so that Gresson (1996), a psychologist, had to do a psychological double-take when he saw a Hollywood exemplar of our nation’s patriarchal white supremacist recovery project. Gresson (1996), a critically conscious academic, confesses,

When I saw the movie *Forrest Gump* I viewed it with typical—that is, for a postmodern African American radical—schizoid affect: part of me enjoyed the “entertaining” moments and part of me continually asked, what am I seeing, feeling, believing, learning.⁶⁰

We have been culturally conditioned by media to enjoy certain things. This conditioning is insidious and it underscores the need for us to be ever vigilant of art's indelible social bias.

Gresson (1996) calls *Forrest Gump* a “recovery project,” an effort, perhaps mostly subconscious, that continually reconfigures social “reality” to resonate with an historically living and breathing patriarchal white supremacist philosophy of life. In other words, we Americans are unfortunately Pseudo-Nazis in our mediated social reveries. Gresson (1996) writes:

I associate this racial recovery [of white male dominance] with the increased presence and popularity, among certain moviegoers, of movies such as *Forrest Gump*. This movie, despite its characteristic identification as a “romance” and “redemptive narrative,” encourages a most insidious form of violence. Like movies such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, it depicts and inscribes a preferred understanding of racial relations that work on the behalf of the public mourning of the “victimized white male” (Gresson 1995).⁶¹

Forrest Gump “proves” that even a dull white male (his IQ was reportedly 75) is better than your typical woman, black, Hispanic, Latino, etc. In fact, Gump is, paradoxically, a white male genius in the body of a moron! Besides Gump being the protagonist, the hero of the movie, Gresson (1996) observes that “Gump seems to be quite a cognitive whiz when he mimics the opportunistic, unethical principal who, having just had sex with Gump’s mother, says: ‘You don’t say much do you?’”⁶² This “masterful repartee,” as Gresson puts it, and a myriad other events put the “gold stamp of approval” on Gump as a positive role model for what others might call “white trash.” He is “dumb,” but cool—not “dumb” as in “ignorant,”

but “dumb” as in “better than most well-educated niggers and certainly smarter than those Hollywood bimbos.”

Gump is the white voice of reason in our “be dumb and be cool” postmodern condition. Gresson (1996) puts it this way:

Because of the conscious distortion of history [i.e., Gump is the White Guy who is everywhere—the “Ubiquitous White Guy” who even helps Rosa Parks] and the refusal to allow voice to anyone other than Gump, we are pushed to receive a vision: white male as racial innocent. The movie recovers the image and ideology of racelessness. Because of movies and a national campaign to which it belongs—along with D. D’Souza’s (1995) *The End of Racism*—those who articulate racial violation or foul rhetoric are dismissed. They become, as conservative Supreme Court Justice Scalia prophesied, political dinosaurs—ignored by a nation convinced that racism is dead [because “The Cosby” made it big and that means all blacks have a fighting chance] and that the moral forcefulness of racism rhetoric has been buried with it.⁶³

Racism is not dead, it just lives under the covers of white supremacist recovery projects. *Forrest Gump* proves that both sexism and racism cannot be defeated if we do not consider the collective cultural unconscious.

I was shocked by mainstream film critics’ responses to *Chasing Amy* and *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*. Gresson (1996), likewise, says, “I was most excited by the near total absence of racial discourse about [*Forrest Gump*] among the critics I read.”⁶⁴ Gresson (1996) goes on to summarize the very “racial structure and function of the movie, all of which is set forth within the first half of the movie:”

1: Gump’s first encounter is with a “white feather;” his first human encounter is with a black woman wearing “clean, white” [work for whitey] shoes—unlike his well-worn and “dirty-white” [trash] shoes—which he envies. 2: Gump identifies himself as a descendent of the southern Confederate founder

of the KKK [which tells us that he is both historically “superior” and that racism is dead/because he presently befriends a dumb, fat black guy who digs shrimp]; Gump (and the camera) portrays “Bubba’s female ancestors as a succession of dark-skinned “Aunt Jeminas” (and at a point in history when even the pancake box has “lightened” her skin to be “politically correct” in a “raceless society”) as Gump reflects: “...his momma cooked shrimp and her momma before her cooked shrimp, and her momma before her momma cooked shrimp too” [meaning that, “once a nigger, always a nigger.” Neo-Nazi diatribe hinges on biological determinism] 4: Bubba’s lip (a conscious casting gesture since the script addresses it) is made fun of by the lieutenant: “What’s wrong with your lip?” Bubba turns and glares at Gump (I guess to see if he has “racial memory” and joins with the lieutenant in the muted humor of the moment) and replies to the lieutenant: “I was born with big gums, sir.” The lieutenant: “Well, you better tuck that in—you’re gonna get caught on a trip wire.” 5: Bubba says his name is “Benjamin Bufford Blue—call me “Bubba”—just like one of them old red neck boys—can you believe that?”⁶⁵

The “biological determinism” of Bubba’s big lips is unquestionably Neo-Nazi discourse. If the actor who played “Bubba” had had really big lips, but not “special effects big lips,” this would not in any way diminish the racist inflection of *Forrest Gump*. Big lips are part of Neo-Nazi discourse. Period.

In “real life,” there are plenty of black actors who *don’t* have big lips. The narration’s calling attention to Bubba’s big lips not only reinforces *existing Neo-Nazi stereotypes*, it proves that part of *Forrest Gump* is, at least on a subconscious level, racist rot. Unfortunately, actors (both men and women) from time to time, may “fit” the negative stereotypes of highly prejudicial discourse. These actors need to be politically careful about which roles they accept. If the script “negates” other aspects of an existing evil stereotype, at least some positive political momentum may be gained. If the script does little to disprove

evil negative stereotypes, then, considering what we “know” about stereotypes, the movie should be avoided at all costs.

Our nation unfortunately operates with an ordinary consciousness. Few noticed the racism in *Forrest Gump*. Gresson (1996) adds that,

In pursuing a reading of *Forrest Gump* as white recovery activity, I propose a parallel argument: both explicit constructions within the movie itself and the resultant public discourse constitute aspects of white recovery. That is, not only is white recovery encoded as a preferred racist/sexist narrative in the movie, but audience, reviewer and critic may also contribute to the concretizing of the preferred understandings despite the possibility of diverse audience receptions and readings.⁶⁶

Hyper-political cultural criticism, therefore, does not focus on the possibilities of “diverse audience receptions and readings” (as these will always exist), but instead focuses on “preferred understandings” which derive from the perverse fantasies of an “oppressor consciousness” and the greater historical, economic and social contexts that serve as a “reality check” to one’s interpretation. “Preferred understandings” essentially evolve out of a critical self-reflexive faculty which continuously makes use of Horkheimer’s *concept of negation* as a philosophical “reality check.”

Critical Pedagogue Joe L. Kincheloe (1991) astutely addresses Horkheimer’s *concept of negation* in terms of its critical self-reflexivity:

Critical social science is concerned with uncovering the ways ideology shapes social relations..., [it] is also concerned with extending a human’s consciousness of himself or herself as a social being. An individual who had gained such a consciousness would understand how, why, his or her political opinions, religious beliefs, gender role, or racial perspective had been shaped by dominant perspectives.⁶⁷

In other words, Jeanne Hall's brand of critically conscious film pedagogy, Shirley Ruth Steinberg's investigation of the curriculum of popular culture, and Aaron Gresson's psychopolitical analysis of "recovery projects," are moral necessities for students all across America, if we agree that media in these United States function in an ideological fashion.⁶⁸ Film Studies instructors ought to fully explain to their students why narrative feature films need to be examined within economic, historical and social contexts and how "preferred understandings" reflect a desire to understand spiritual "truths."

Even if students refuse to see film as "art" and "art" necessarily serving a moral function, communication scholars can still effectively approach films from a political perspective by getting students to dissociate specific constructs they have of knowledge production. Paulo Freire (1994) encouraged "what Aldous Huxley has called the 'art of dissociating ideas'" in his brand of therapeutic pedagogy, one which he called "Education as the Practice of Freedom."⁶⁹ The art and science of political film criticism, likewise, calls for dissociating ideas. Freire argued for instruction that revealed to students the largely unconscious ramifications of what he called "ideological indoctrination." He "planned filmstrips, for use in the literacy phase, presenting propaganda—from advertising commercials to ideological indoctrination—as a "problem-situation" for discussion."⁷⁰ Likewise, communication scholars who teach the art and science of political film criticism can present media, in general, as "problem-situations." The problem becomes one of examining how one *feels* in relation to the idea that popular culture may have an unspoken "curriculum," as Shirley Ruth Steinberg (1997) argued in her wonderfully insightful

dissertation. The problem becomes one of analyzing how Neo-Nazi “recovery projects” operate through deep psychological symbolism in movies such as *Forrest Gump*, as Aaron Gresson astutely pointed out. The problem becomes one of understanding that moral art, as John Dewey defined it, thoroughly exemplifies Horkheimer’s *concept of negation*.

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John Carlo Manigaulte

Personal

John C. Manigaulte was born and raised in New York. He spent the spring semester of his senior year of undergraduate studies as a volunteer at Cortland-Madison BOCES where he assisted in a federally funded Title IV-C grant that adapts Project Adventure to behavior disordered students. While helping students in the computer lab at NYIT, he so impressed the chair of the English department that the chair offered him job teaching remedial English. During his doctoral studies at Penn State he discovered time to write an opinion column for the college newspaper and act in a film being shot on campus by Charles Dumas, who appeared in popular films such as *Die Hard*, *Peacemaker*, *Deep Impact* and stage plays such as *Othello*.

Education

Bachelor of Science, Cortland State University (NY)

Master of Arts, New York Institute of Technology (NY)

Doctor of Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University (PA)

Employment

Adjunct Faculty, New York Institute of Technology

Helped implement a new program to teach writing skills to college students by total immersion in computer use. Designed, printed and disseminated a workbook on WordPerfect to several classes so that students who had never used a computer before could more effectively cope with a very difficult challenge. Also taught speech communication and job interviewing skills.

Adjunct Faculty, Nassau County Community College

Taught Interpersonal communication to adult learners as well as other college students. Emphasis was placed on non-verbal communication and other psychological dimensions of communication.

Research Faculty, The Pennsylvania State University

Assisted faculty members in their research by searching through computer data bases such as Lexis-Nexis and old archival writings on early film, grading term papers on cinematography and supervising students on night shoots for end-of-term film projects.

Papers and Conferences

Presented a paper titled "Oppositional Cultural Criticism" at the Mid-Year conference of AEJMC's Graduate Education Interest Group held at The Pennsylvania State University. The keynote speaker was Dr. James Carey of Columbia University, author of *Communication as Culture*. Dr. Carey was a pioneer of American cultural studies in communication.

Presented a paper titled "Bartleby's Way of Seeing" at the Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference in Omaha, Nebraska. Conducted a workshop on the use of Herman Melville's short story as a teaching tool for emancipatory learning. The keynote speakers were Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal.