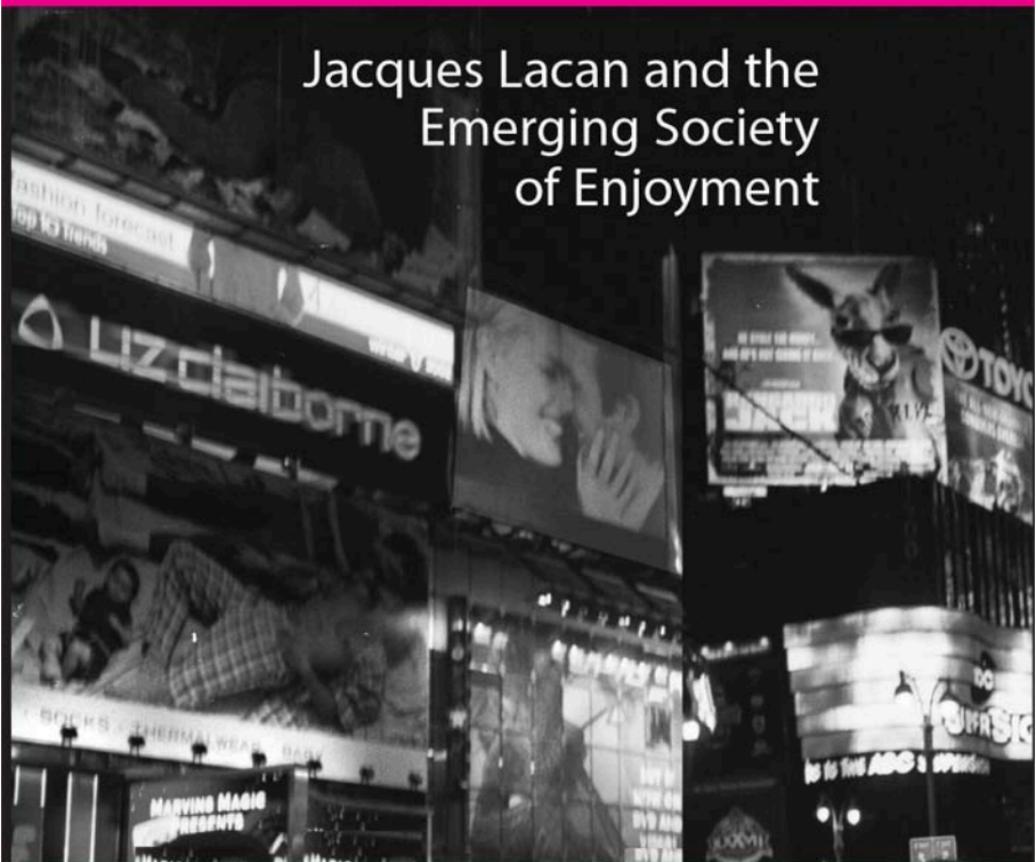


# The End of Dissatisfaction?

Jacques Lacan and the  
Emerging Society  
of Enjoyment



Todd McGowan

THE END  
OF  
DISSATISFACTION?

SUNY series in Psychoanalysis and Culture  
Henry Sussman, editor

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*Jacques Lacan and the  
Emerging Society of Enjoyment*

TODD MCGOWAN

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For Paul Eisenstein,

the *sine qua non*

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## *Introduction*

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# PSYCHOANALYSIS AFTER MARX

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The salient feature of contemporary American society is the premium that it places on enjoyment. Ours is what Michael Wolf calls an “entertainment economy,” in which, as Neil Postman puts it, we risk “amusing ourselves to death.” This enjoyment explosion seems to represent a marked change from just forty years ago—as if we have entered into a new epoch of social relations. This change inevitably gives rise to the question of the degree of its radicality: Is this “proliferation of enjoyment” an indication of a fundamental change in the social order as such—or is it simply a part of the normal evolution of capitalist society? Whereas most historians view the emergence of modernity from traditional societies as the most dramatic rupture in the history of the West, it is the contention of this project that the increasing proliferation of inducements (and commandments) to enjoy represents a transformation in the social order as drastic as the emergence of modernity. It marks a shift in the very logic of social organization.

Though the Marxist view of history has largely fallen out of favor among theorists and historians today, the importance that it places on the birth of capitalism in human history continues to enjoy widespread acceptance. Marxism views the transition to a capitalist economy—the emergence of modernity—as the decisive transition in the history of the West. The shift from traditional society to capitalist society entails a massive rupture, evident in all aspects of the social order. Most importantly, it appears as a revolution in the relationship between the authority of the social order and money. As Marx himself points out in the first volume of *Capital*, whereas ancient societies

“denounced money as subversive of the economic and moral order of things,” modern society “greet[s] gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life.”<sup>1</sup> Greed is not, of course, an invention of modernity, but the onset of modernity allows for a change in its ethical status. Only within the modern world would it be possible to proclaim, with Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*, that “greed is good”; to ancient societies, greed is always sinful (that is to say, always dangerous to the stability of the social order). In other words, the very thing that threatens to destroy ancient societies becomes the very lifeblood of the modern one. Because it involves such a complete upheaval, no other change in Western history, for the Marxist, approaches this one in importance.<sup>2</sup> This type of valuation of the historical shift to capitalism, however, is not confined to doctrinaire Marxists. Even avowedly non-Marxist historians, though they might not emphasize the changing status of money, nonetheless tend to see the onset of modernity—the nascent moments of capitalism—as a time of epochal change, as a shift from a static society to a progressive one.<sup>3</sup> This is what leads Fredric Jameson to claim that “the emergence of the modern world or capitalism, the miraculous birth of modernity or of a secular market system, the end of ‘traditional’ society in all its forms [. . .] remains for us (in the collective unconscious) the only true Event of history.”<sup>4</sup> In whatever language we discuss the changes in society occasioned by modernity, few would dispute Jameson’s claim that it marks *the* historical shift in the West, leaving, as it does, a gulf between the structure of traditional society (a closed world) and modern capitalist society (an open universe).

I contend, however, that the importance of this shift is now being rivaled by another kind of historical change. This is the transformation from a society founded on the prohibition of enjoyment (and thus the dissatisfaction of its subjects) to a society that commands enjoyment or *jouissance* (in which there seems to be no requisite dissatisfaction).<sup>5</sup> Whereas formerly society has required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible. The fundamental social duty in contemporary American society lies in committing oneself to enjoyment. Advertisements, friends, movies, parents, television shows, internet sites, and even authority figures all call on us to maximize our enjoyment. This marks a dramatic change in the way the social order is constituted: rather than being tied together through a shared sacrifice, subjects exist side by side in their isolated enclaves of enjoyment. Whereas Marxism has shed the most light on the turn from traditional society to modernity, Marxism needs the insights of psychoanalysis—and specifically the thought of Jacques Lacan—in order to best illuminate this transformation from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. Though Lacan has no explicit theory of history, his thought, because it privileges and explicates the subject’s relationship to enjoyment, paves the way for grasping the importance of this radical transformation.<sup>6</sup>

A society of prohibition requires all its members to sacrifice their individual, private ways of obtaining enjoyment for the sake of the social order as a whole. That is to say, one receives an identity from society in exchange for one's immediate access to enjoyment, which one must give up. This is, traditionally, the way in which society as such functions. This type of society operates in the manner of a sports team: the team demands individual sacrifices in order to ensure the team's success. In order for the team to win, the individual must give up her or his dreams of wholly individual achievement and fit her or his abilities into the structure of the team.<sup>7</sup> In a society of commanded enjoyment, this dynamic changes dramatically. Rather than demanding that its members give up their individual enjoyment for the sake of the whole, the society of enjoyment commands their enjoyment—private enjoyment becomes of paramount importance—and the importance of the social order as a whole seems to recede. Contemporary complaints about sports stars who are more concerned about individual statistics and money than about their team's fortunes are indicative of this transformation. These sports stars are not simply anomalous narcissists. In the society of enjoyment, individual, private accomplishments and rewards *are* more important than the success of the team. In such a society, it is no longer requisite that subjects accept a constant dissatisfaction as the price for existing within a social order. To return to the example of the sports team, one can remain a member of the team without having to subordinate one's own individual agenda to the larger plans of the team. Dissatisfaction now appears as something that one need not experience, in contrast to life in the society of prohibition, where dissatisfaction inheres in the very fabric of social existence itself.<sup>8</sup> In the society of enjoyment, the private enjoyment that threatened the stability of the society of prohibition becomes a stabilizing force and even acquires the status of a duty.

To stress the transition from the society of prohibition to the society of enjoyment at the expense of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is implicitly to challenge the Marxist prioritizing of economic relations in the understanding of history (and historical change). According to the psychoanalytic understanding of history that I will take up, enjoyment and our relationship to it has primacy in determining historical movement. In the last instance, we act as we do in order to sustain or advance our particular relationship to enjoyment, rather than on behalf of economic motivation. The Marxist thesis that places economic motivation at the fore posits that we will always act according to our interests: if revolution is in our interests, we will revolt, and if the status quo is in our interests, we will fight to preserve it. Questions about enjoyment are necessarily secondary to questions about survival. That is to say, for the Marxists, before considering the enjoyment I may derive from my dinner, I will first ensure that I have a dinner to eat (whether or not I will enjoy it).<sup>9</sup>

Though Marxism has certainly fallen on hard times today, this fundamental thesis of Marxism has not. Cuba Gooding's mantra in the film *Jerry Maguire*—"Show me the money!"—has become the automatic explanation of all varieties of behavior. Why does Alex Rodriguez decide to play baseball for the Texas Rangers? Why does Monica Lewinsky appear in an interview with Barbara Walters to tell her story? If Alex Rodriguez mentions the passion for the game he found in the Ranger franchise or Lewinsky mentions her need to tell her side of things, we respond with a wink or a cynical aside. In the spirit of Marx, we know that self-interest (i.e., money) is always the chief motivation. But if Marx errs, his error does not lie, as his critics often allege, in underestimating "innate human selfishness." Instead, his error—and, again, it is the common error today—lies in the other direction, in underestimating the capacity of subjects to act against their self-interest.

Psychoanalysis, however, calls into question the idea that we primarily act on behalf of our own interest. It allows us to see another power operating beneath the apparent predominance of self-interest. Of course, the commonsensical understanding of psychoanalysis is exactly the opposite of this, contending that psychoanalysis reduces everything to self-interest. This is often the basis for the most scathing criticisms leveled at Freud himself and at psychoanalysis as a whole. For instance, John Farrell claims that under the spell of psychoanalysis "every appearance of good must be exposed as unconscious hypocrisy, every commitment to public interests and to social institutions must be recognized for what it is—a disguise for narcissistic gratification or a painful instinctual concession."<sup>10</sup> Farrell, like so many critics of psychoanalysis, sees Freud as a prophet of human selfishness. But this attack on psychoanalysis—perhaps the most popular of all attacks—completely misunderstands what is at stake in psychoanalytic interpretation. Rather than uncovering narcissistic self-interest behind a benevolent act, Freud uncovers the abandonment of self-interest that is at stake behind a seemingly self-interested act. In *Seminar V*, Lacan points out that Freud discovers the self-destructiveness of desire, that "what we find at the foundation of the analytic exploration of desire is masochism."<sup>11</sup> Anyone can point out why human subjects act self-interestedly—and many thinkers before Freud (Hobbes, Machiavelli, etc.) did so—but it is the province of psychoanalysis to explain why they are able to act against their self-interest, to transcend their narcissism. Because of this ability to act against our interest, Freud claims that "the normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows."<sup>12</sup> It is on this point that Freud directly questions Marx: for Marx, there is only self-interest; for Freud, there is something more, and this something more is enjoyment—the *jouissance* factor.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, it was Freud's belief that human subjects were prone to act against their self-interest that led him to doubt the possibility of a socialist

utopia. If we always acted in our self-interest, Marx would be right, and the contradictions of capitalist society would lead to a socialist utopia. However, our ability—and our tendency—to act against our self-interest makes such a utopia inconceivable for Freud. As Joan Copjec notes, “The psychoanalytic subject, in short, being subject to a principle *beyond* pleasure, is *not driven to seek his own good*.”<sup>14</sup> When Freud formulated the concept of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he did so in order to account for the fact that we often act in complete disregard of our self-interest and instead act out of a compulsion that we do not understand. The concept of the death drive means that we will sacrifice anything and everything (even life itself) for our particular Thing—which is to say, for our enjoyment. Oftentimes this Thing is a national Thing, the bond that constitutes national identity. Marxism has consistently underestimated the importance of the enjoyment of the national Thing, but, as Slavoj Žižek points out, at no time as dramatically as at the beginning of the First World War. The working class of Europe, well-informed by the Communist International, seemed to know that the war would not advance their interests, that it was an imperialist struggle. And yet, when the moment of decision came, the working class in Europe supported the war almost unanimously, much to the surprise of Lenin. Why? What did Lenin fail to take into account? He failed to consider enjoyment—specifically the degree to which the working class shared in nationalistic *jouissance*. What drove them was not their self-interest—the war didn’t speak to interest—but their relationship to enjoyment. This is one indication why it is through its consideration of enjoyment that a psychoanalytic understanding of history can supplement the Marxian version.<sup>15</sup> Marxism allows us to understand the role of economic and social contradictions in driving the movement of history, but it often provides an inadequate explanation of the actual politics of historical transformation—why change does or does not occur at a given time. It is on this question that psychoanalysis proves indispensable.

Psychoanalysis allows us to rethink sociopolitical history around the question of enjoyment.<sup>16</sup> This involves understanding the nature of the transition from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. Recognizing what is at work in the society of enjoyment does not imply that the proper response is the nostalgic one, the one so often proffered by conservative cultural critics. These conservative critics call for a return to “family values,” to a world in which prohibition kept us safe from outbreaks of enjoyment. This desire for a return to the past, however, is rarely genuine. Which is to say, such proclamations don’t really want the return to the past that they claim to want. Instead, they want the best of both worlds—the “benefits” of modernity (computers, cars, televisions) without their effects (isolation, enjoyment, narcissism)—and fail to grasp the interdependence of the benefits and the effects. More importantly, however, what such a position fails to realize is that enjoyment is implicit not in the

content of, say, the internet (that is, in the pornography, etc., that appears there), but in the very form that we experience it: hooked on to a computer, in isolation from the rest of the world. It is not *what* one experiences in the modern world, but *that* one is experiencing it in the modern way which is decisive, which produces the negative effects of modernity that the nostalgic position hopes to avoid. This is why once we have the “benefits” of modernity, we also have the painful drawbacks; one cannot have one without the other. Which means that the “family values” response, unless it is combined with a radical renunciation of all aspects of modern society, is not an authentic alternative. In fact, its promise of the spoils of modernity without its requisite disruption of tradition and traditional authority simply repeats the promise of fascism, which insists that we can have all the advantages of modern industry and technology without sacrificing our connection to “blood and soil.” Even when it avoids this fascist contradiction and does actually involve a complete rejection of modernity, such a solution is still not viable. Any return to the past, to traditional values, will necessarily be mediated by the present.

The other alternative common today is the cynical embrace of the society of enjoyment—an attitude that proclaims that things simply are as they are, that there is no changing the structure of the social order. The cynic knows well enough the problems with the way things are but acts as if she/he doesn’t know, conducting her/his daily life certain that the social order, despite its problems, cannot be changed. This attitude resigns the subject to the private realm: for the cynic, change is possible on a personal level (i.e., I can change my weight, my degree of happiness, my lover, etc.), so that’s where I should keep my focus. As Paul Gilroy puts it, “A language of revolution may persist, but these days it is more like to turn away from the complexities of wholesale societal transformation and promote an ‘inward,’ New Age turn.”<sup>17</sup> We can see evidence of the turn from wide-scale political activity to an emphasis on personal transformation throughout contemporary popular culture, but perhaps nowhere as dramatically as in the case of the rock band U2. Whereas in the 1980s they wrote songs with an overt political significance, such as “Pride” and “Sunday Bloody Sunday” (both celebrations of the struggle for civil rights), in the 1990s such songs disappear completely from their oeuvre, having been replaced with songs about personal struggle and romance, such as “Mysterious Ways” and “One.” It is as if U2 felt disappointed with the ineffectiveness of their larger political project and decided to turn to a more promising avenue—the personal.<sup>18</sup> What this increasingly widespread conclusion misses is the performative function of its own—seemingly descriptive—statement about the impossibility of large-scale change. That is, the gesture of confining oneself and one’s actions to the private realm is precisely what fuels the predominance of the society of enjoyment, which makes large-scale change seem impossible. In proclaiming the inevitability of this type of world,

we help to make it inevitable, to make the status quo all the more unassailable. In this way, the strategy of cynical embrace of the society of enjoyment is every bit as flawed as the nostalgic attempt to return to a previous epoch. Both positions share a fundamental refusal to recognize their own complicity with the society of enjoyment.

Despite their ultimate bankruptcy, nostalgia and cynicism predominate today to the extent that there seems to be no other path open to us. The key to discovering an alternate path does not, as we might believe, depend on our ability to imagine a different future, but on our ability to properly recognize the present. Thus, the chapters that follow will not try to imagine alternatives to nostalgia and cynicism; instead, the focus will remain on inquiring into the prevailing society of enjoyment. This is not because alternatives do not exist, but because the wager of this book is fundamentally a Hegelian one—that thought cannot arrive at future alternatives through bypassing the present. It must instead recognize the future as having already arrived, inhering implicitly in the present. Our task, according to Hegel, is to reconcile thought to the present, to grasp the rationality of the real. Any attempt to imagine an alternative—that is, any utopian speculations about a possible future—will necessarily express that alternative in terms of the present, thereby stripping it of its alternative status *a priori*. Our efforts to find a political alternative to the society of commanded enjoyment—and to contemporary late capitalism—depend on our ability to recognize our status within the society of enjoyment.

The fundamental thing to recognize about the society of enjoyment is that in it the pursuit of enjoyment has misfired: the society of enjoyment has not provided the enjoyment that it promises. It has, instead, made enjoyment all the more inaccessible. The contemporary imperative to enjoy—the elevation of enjoyment to a social obligation—deprives enjoyment of its marginal status *vis-à-vis* the social order, bringing it within confines of that order, where we can experience it directly and fully. What the society of enjoyment thus makes manifest is the impossibility of any direct experience of enjoyment: if we try to experience it directly, we necessarily miss it; enjoyment can only be experienced indirectly, through the act of aiming at something else—as a by-product. This is because the barrier to enjoyment is essential to the experience of it. In fact, what we enjoy is the barrier itself. For instance, children's enjoyment of Christmas morning derives from the barrier to enjoyment represented by the wrapping paper over their gifts and the prohibition against opening gifts prior to Christmas day. Without the wrapping paper—with direct access to the gifts—Christmas would be just another day. When we experience enjoyment directly, when we have gifts without wrapping paper and on any (or every) day of the year, enjoyment (and the gift) loses its value, a value produced by inaccessibility. Kierkegaard makes a similar observation relative to religion when he insists that our relationship with the greatness of

God can never become a direct one but must occur through the mediation of the lowly figure of Christ. He suggests that God sent Christ to us because he understood the importance of what Kierkegaard calls “indirect communication.” If we were to see God as he really is rather than through the humiliated image of Christ on the cross, God would be degraded in our eyes; we couldn’t properly see his greatness. The same is true for enjoyment: when we experience it directly, it loses all value and becomes commonplace, and as a result we don’t actually experience it.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the problem with the society of enjoyment is not that we suffer from too much enjoyment, but that we don’t have enough. Far from finding new ways of restraining enjoyment, as many contemporary cultural critics suggest, we must find new ways of making it possible. This entails a move from inhabiting a society of commanded enjoyment to engaging in a politics of enjoyment.

The key to such a move involves recognizing what is occurring in the transition to a society of commanded enjoyment, a transition that the subsequent chapters will explore in the domain of contemporary American culture. After laying out the distinction between the society of prohibition and the society of enjoyment in the first chapter, I will explore the various characteristics of the society of enjoyment, the ramifications of the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the imperative to enjoy. My contention is that these characteristics function as symptoms of the underlying transformation of the social order. The symptoms include the decline of the traditional father (chapter 2), the proliferation of the image (chapter 3), the elimination of transcendence and distance (chapter 4), a loss of meaning (chapter 5), the development of widespread cynicism (chapter 6), an increasing sense of political apathy and the waning of desire (chapter 7), the disappearance of the public world (chapter 8), and a rise in incivility and aggressiveness (chapter 9). Cultural critics on both the Right and the Left—both academic and popular—have attacked each of these eight symptoms without, however, making explicit the link to the underlying social transformation from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. Each chapter will take as its starting point one of these critiques of contemporary culture from one or more cultural critics. In each case, these critiques will serve as the basis for identifying a symptom of the transition to a society of enjoyment. In an effort to illustrate the breadth of the turn to enjoyment, these chapters will rely on all varieties of contemporary cultural criticism: conservative, liberal, Marxist, and feminist; academic, popular, or an amalgamation of the two. After beginning with this discussion of cultural criticism, the chapters will explore the symptoms of the society of commanded enjoyment through a variety of cultural texts: Peter Wier’s film *Dead Poets Society* in chapter 2, Don DeLillo’s novel *Americana* in chapter 3, Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* in chapter 4, Toni Morrison’s novel *Paradise* in chapter 5, Wim Wenders’s film *The End of Violence* in chapter 6, E. L. Doc-

torow's novel *World's Fair* in chapter 7, David Koepp's film *Trigger Effect* in chapter 8, and Spike Lee's film *Summer of Sam* in chapter 9. These texts respond to the different symptoms of the turn to the command to enjoy and often explicitly link them to this imperative. Each chapter moves from a cultural critic identifying the symptom to a cultural text responding to it. In this way, the transformation from a society that prohibits enjoyment to one that commands it will become visible in all its manifestations.

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## Chapter One

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# FROM PROHIBITION TO ENJOYMENT

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### PROHIBITION AS FOUNDATION

If today, in the midst of a full-fledged consumer culture, we are surrounded everywhere by the demand that we maximize our enjoyment, this represents a significant departure from the way in which society has traditionally been organized. Prohibition has always functioned as the key to social organization as such, demanding that subjects sacrifice enjoyment for the sake of work, community, and progress. Hence, in order to grasp the significance of the emergence of the society of commanded enjoyment, we must first explore the role that prohibition has played in allowing society to function by investigating thematically the structure of the traditional society of prohibition. In exploring the central role of prohibition in social organization, I will look to three related lines of thought that together will help to shed light on the way that it functions. By laying out these theoretical explanations of prohibition, I hope to provide a foundation for understanding what has changed. The importance of prohibition's structuring role in society becomes evident in Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussions of incest, Freud's speculations about the primal horde and the origins of society, and Lacan's conception of the symbolic order. Each of these three lines of inquiry emphasizes that prohibition is the *sine qua non* of a coherent social order, though prohibition's foundational status becomes most evident in the work of Lévi-Strauss.

In *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss notices the presence of prohibition—specifically the prohibition of incest—in every social order. He

claims that the prohibition of incest, though a thoroughly cultural phenomenon, has the universality of something natural. It appears across cultural barriers, as the necessary feature of culture itself. Though the definition of incest is plastic, changing from society to society, there is no society, according to Lévi-Strauss, that does not in some way prohibit it. In asserting the universality of the incest prohibition, Lévi-Strauss is really articulating something even more fundamental about the structure of any social order: every social order depends on a shared sacrifice, something that must be given up by those who enter into it, a societal "entry fee." As Lévi-Strauss himself puts it, "Considered in its purely formal aspect, the prohibition of incest is thus only the group's assertion that where relationships between the sexes are concerned, *a person can not do just what he pleases*. The positive aspect of the prohibition is to initiate organization."<sup>1</sup> The shared sacrifice embodied by the incest prohibition—and not some positive characteristic held in common among all the members of a society—brings unity and coherence to a loosely organized group. If a society were based on only a common positive characteristic (the same language, for instance), this characteristic would not in any way act as a control on people's behavior. It would not stop them, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, from doing just what they please, in the way that prohibition, and specifically the incest prohibition, does.

The incest prohibition creates societal coherence through directing people's interest away from what is closest to them (the family) and toward the social organization itself. As a result, for instance, rather than continuing to desire the mother, the subject must desire someone from another family, from the social order at large. This directing of interest away from the family and to the society at large is the most important function of the incest prohibition. Without this redirection of interest, nothing would propel the child out of the family, out of a concern for only her/his immediate environment. As psychoanalysis makes clear, there is no want of passion on the part of the child for her/his fellow family members, no initial revulsion at the familial (or familiar) love object.<sup>2</sup> The incest prohibition, then, not only creates a desire for something beyond the immediate scope of the child, but it also produces a feeling of disgust with the idea of taking someone immediately present (a family member) as a love object. In this way, the prohibition opens us up to the social world, freeing us from the narrow focus of our initial interest through a complete redirection of it.

This redirection of interest is not simply an even exchange, however. One does not give up one equally enjoyable object (the family member) for another (the member of society at large). Instead, one gives up enjoyment itself for a socially directed or mediated pleasure that pales in comparison. The prohibition of incest is the prohibition of enjoyment. Incest is identical with enjoyment insofar as incest implies actually enjoying one's love object itself rather

than a fantasmatic replica. Incest would be the perfect sexual encounter—perfect enjoyment—because it would involve an impossible object, an object that is completely forbidden. Though the social order always seems to hold out the promise of its own compensatory enjoyment to its initiates, this is a promise that it cannot but break. The social order can't keep its promise of compensatory enjoyment—enjoyment that might come close to the enjoyment that the incest prohibition bars—because such unrestrained enjoyment necessarily threatens the self-perpetuation of the social order itself. Whereas the self-perpetuation of the social order depends on conservation of resources, calculation of possibilities, and allowances for the future, enjoyment occurs without any consideration of how it will be sustained, without any fear of using itself up. Enjoyment also shatters barriers; it overcomes differences, distinctions, and hierarchies (including those of social class). Most importantly, however, those who are enjoying themselves are not, at the moment of enjoyment at least, “productive members of society.”<sup>3</sup> Freud's description of a prototypical experience of enjoyment reveals just how enjoyment produces a subject unconcerned with society and productivity. He points out that the “prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life” is the image of “a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile.”<sup>4</sup> This image of enjoyment suggests the extent to which enjoyment stands as a barrier to good citizenship: while someone is enjoying, she/he is not contributing to the good of the social order. Because of all these inherently antisocial features, enjoyment represents a danger to the very logic upon which every social order constitutes itself, and the social order must try to ward off this danger.

However, even though enjoyment represents a threat to the social order and its stability, every social order must use enjoyment in order to perpetuate itself. In fact, Lacan even goes so far as to say that the founding signifier of the social order (what he calls “the One”)—and, by extension, the social order itself—“far from arising out of the universe, arises out of enjoyment.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, despite the prohibition against enjoyment, enjoyment still makes itself felt within society. Religions, for instance, often promise an afterlife of unrestrained enjoyment in exchange for the sacrifice of enjoyment in the here and now. But enjoyment appears within society in even more direct and socially useful ways. Societies are able to perpetuate themselves because subjects derive enjoyment from its sacrifice, because the sacrifice of enjoyment itself produces enjoyment. Social coherence depends on the enjoyment that subjects derive from the sacrifice of their private enjoyment for the greater good of the society. It is this type of enjoyment that sustains soldiers through the horrors of war or workers through the drudgery of their labor. It is akin to the enjoyment that people experience when identifying with the society as a whole—such as when Americans enjoyed the gold medal of the 1980 U.S.

Olympic Hockey team. And finally, there is the enjoyment that derives from those minor transgressions permitted by the social authority (drinking to excess, playing the lottery, etc.). In all of these ways, the social order allows—and relies on—some degree of enjoyment. However, in each case, the enjoyment remains constrained and confined within clear limitations. These are moments of clearly demarcated and limited enjoyment, enjoyment that occurs within socially defined limits. Despite the use the social order makes of enjoyment, unrestrained and uncontrolled enjoyment—which is to say, enjoyment as such—still constitutes a mortal threat to that order, as the universality of the incest prohibition makes clear. It is, as Lévi-Strauss says, the founding moment of society, and it is so insofar as it marks the moment at which a society demands the renunciation of enjoyment.

Here we see the unequaled role that the prohibition of enjoyment plays in the construction of a social order. It provides the foundation on which all the structures of society necessarily rest. Prohibition performs this function because it eliminates the threat that unrestrained enjoyment poses to society as a whole. Without prohibition, enjoyment would constantly threaten the stability and security of the social order. The antisocial danger represented by enjoyment finds perhaps its most poetic expression in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in the figure of Hannibal Lecter. The film demonstrates, quite clearly, that Lecter derives his enjoyment from eating people: he doesn't eat people because he bears them ill-will, but simply because he enjoys it. Rather than facilitating harmonious intersubjective contact, as the example of Lecter indicates, enjoyment threatens the big Other, insofar as it disregards the desire of the Other altogether.<sup>6</sup> Though Lecter's mode of procuring enjoyment is undoubtedly extreme, it is nonetheless exemplary, because all enjoyment involves seeing the Other as nothing more than a tool and *not* showing "consideration" for the Other. As Serge André points out, to enjoy something "is to be able to use it to the point of abusing it—the abuse being precisely that which the law seeks to delimit."<sup>7</sup> In the act of barring this unrestrained enjoyment from the social order, prohibition produces habitable space in which we can coexist without directly confronting the horror of the Other's enjoyment, which is why Lévi-Strauss sees prohibition at the root of everything social.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud illustrates in another way the foundational role of prohibition in structuring the social order. He offers his own mythic account of the origin of social organization, an account in which he envisions a group not bound by the prohibition, a primal horde. In the horde, enjoyment is not readily available to everyone. It is confined to the strongest, the primal Father, who hoards all enjoyment (i.e., all women) for himself. This Father enjoys without restraint, but only until such time as the sons, jealous of his enjoyment, conspire to murder him. According to Freud, this murder of the primal Father is the first social act, and the prohibition of incest—or, of enjoyment—follows

directly on its heels. In establishing a social order in the wake of the primal Father's murder, the sons recognize that, if they are to live together in relative peace, they must agree to a collective renunciation of enjoyment. Without this collective renunciation, no one can have any feeling of security, because there is nothing to mediate a life-and-death struggle for enjoyment. Force itself—and force alone—prevails: the strongest can enjoy himself, and all the weaker ones will not survive. The sons, however, had already opted out of this life-and-death struggle at the moment they conspired to murder the primal Father. In this first moment of collective action, the renunciation that would ultimately become the incest prohibition has its genesis. After this point, the enjoyment embodied by the primal Father becomes only a memory, the object of fantasy for all those who have agreed to give it up. That is, the murder of the primal Father has the effect of triggering fantasies about the enjoyment that he experienced prior to his death. These fantasies sustain those who have sacrificed their own enjoyment in the collective renunciation that made the murder possible, and they provide the reassurance that, if enjoyment is inaccessible now, at least it once was accessible for someone.

It is important to remember, however, that the prehistory of society that Freud recounts in *Totem and Taboo* is a mythic reconstruction. Freud's account is necessarily mythic because once we have entered into the social order, the origins of that order always become wholly obscured. This is why Lacan points out in *Seminar XVII* that “no one has ever seen the least trace of the father of the human horde.”<sup>8</sup> It becomes impossible to look at the origins of the social order—or prior to them—except through the reflection of that order itself. Hence, when we look back, we don't see “natural humanity” in its pure form, unmediated by the social order, but the order's own fundamental ideological presuppositions.<sup>9</sup> The onset of the social order constitutes an absolute barrier and beyond it we see only our own reflection. That is to say, any conception of the state of nature is a conception of *our* state of nature, the state of nature belonging to our specific social order. Even the idea of primal humanity engaged in a “life-and-death struggle” is itself but a reflection of a prominent presupposition concerning what constitutes “human nature.” Prior to the onset of the social order and the system of meaning that it constitutes, there is no meaning and, therefore, no enjoyment that holds meaning in abeyance. Before the social order, there are no distinctions at all—neither enjoyment nor the lack of it. The introduction of the symbolic order effects a radical change in our relationship to enjoyment.

At this point, we can see the importance of Lacan's conception of the symbolic order, which lies in his grasp of the extent to which the symbolic order and its prohibition of enjoyment actually introduces the possibility of enjoyment. In the act of prohibiting enjoyment, the symbolic order erects a barrier relative to which enjoyment can constitute itself. It is this that Lacan grasps

when he rewrites Dostoyevsky's "without God, everything is permitted" to "without God, nothing is permitted." That is, without God, without some Law that demands renunciation, one cannot have any enjoyment. This is why the introduction of the Law is an obscene act, an act producing the possibility of the enjoyment it prohibits. Enjoyment requires the barrier to it that the Law provides. This means that we must qualify the idea that entrance into society requires the renunciation of enjoyment: one must indeed renounce one's enjoyment, but this enjoyment is something that *does not exist prior to its renunciation*.<sup>10</sup> In giving it up, in other words, we in effect retroactively create, through our presupposing of it, an enjoyment that we never had. Here, we can again see why incest is but another name for enjoyment: just as prehistorical enjoyment does not exist, neither does incest prior to its prohibition. When one is free to sleep with one's mother, she's not *the* mother, in the sense of being *the* privileged object of desire. It is only at the point at which the mother becomes off-limits that she takes on the role of "mother," because it is the fact of being off-limits that elevates an object to being the privileged object of desire.

Though this prehistorical enjoyment did not exist, the idea of it nonetheless continues to have a power over the subjects of the social order. Having given up a part of themselves—albeit a part that did not exist until they gave it up—these subjects, insofar as they remain within the social order, are incomplete or lacking. Bound by this lack, they imagine or fantasize an object that exists in the gap left by their sacrifice. This object is what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. The *objet a* constitutes the subject as desiring; it provides the lure that acts as an engine for the desire of the subject and also directs that desire in its circuit. In fact, Lacan notes repeatedly that "the *petit a* is the cause of the subject."<sup>11</sup> It causes the subject to emerge as a desiring subject, as the subject of desire. Desire is, in this sense, part of what one gets in exchange for the sacrifice of one's enjoyment. While this may seem, on the surface, to be a bargain for the subject (considering that she or he never had the enjoyment she or he gave up in the first place), desire is inevitably a poor substitute for enjoyment. Enjoyment satisfies the subject, but when a subject desires, she or he perpetually lacks her *objet a* and hence remains perpetually dissatisfied.<sup>12</sup> Desire lays down a path that has no exit and leaves the subject, despite her/his constant longing for something more, a prisoner of the social order that desire itself is a reaction against. The only end of desire is more desire. We desire because we don't find the sacrifice of our enjoyment entirely satisfying, but desire, unfortunately, does nothing to overcome that dissatisfaction. In fact, desire is sustained dissatisfaction.<sup>13</sup> This state of sustained dissatisfaction is the normal state for subjects within a society of prohibition. Prohibition produces dissatisfied, desiring subjects, subjects who remain securely within the confines of the social order.

Desire is consonant with the social order because of its reliance on absence rather than presence. When I desire an object, its absence is often

helpful in building up my desire: the longer the desired object remains away, the stronger the hold of desire over me. All of our clichés about desire—like “absence makes the heart grow fonder”—affirm this fundamental truth of desire. By the same token, when the object becomes a constant presence, my desire tends to wane. And if I gain too much proximity to the object of desire, the object suddenly disappears or loses its desirability. This aspect of desire is correlative to the functioning of the social order, which is itself a symbolic entity. It allows subjects to relate to each other through the mediation of a symbolic order, which means through absence rather than presence. The symbolic order is, as Lacan puts it, the absence of things, and this absence is crucial for the possibility of mediation, because it serves to eliminate rivalry. If one subject doesn’t have a thing, at least another doesn’t have it either, which provides some degree of consolation for lost enjoyment.<sup>14</sup> This is why prohibition is so important for holding society together: if I see that no one else is able to enjoy, I feel as if we are partners in loss rather than rivals in enjoyment.

The symbolic order is the basis for any social order because it provides a layer of mediation connecting subjects together. Within it, no one has direct access to enjoyment. As Lacan puts it, “jouissance is prohibited to whomever speaks, as such—or, to put it differently, it can only be said between the lines by whomever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition.”<sup>15</sup> This shared sacrifice of enjoyment—embodied in the incest prohibition—establishes the basis of the social bond. Because subjects experience themselves as lacking, as not fully enjoying themselves, they look to the Other for what they are missing, for the piece that would allow for complete enjoyment. It is subjects’ inability to enjoy completely—to have an experience of total enjoyment—that directs them to the Other, that creates a desire for what the social order seems to have hidden within its recesses. In contrast, the enjoying subject does not look to the Other for what it lacks, but rather sustains an attitude of indifference toward the Other. As a result, enjoyment as such is not conducive to social relations and the functioning of the symbolic order. The symbolic order thrives on the deprivation of the subjects belonging to it: it creates a bond of lack. In this way, prohibition works to create coherence within society. The prohibition of enjoyment holds the social order together through the shared dissatisfaction it produces. This sense of shared dissatisfaction is the salient feature of the society of prohibition, and it represents a direct point of contrast with the society of commanded enjoyment.

#### IMAGINARY INTERLUDES

In order to make clear the structure of the society of prohibition as it contrasts with that of the society of commanded enjoyment, it is not enough to

emphasize the bond created by the sacrifice of enjoyment. Though the society of prohibition functions primarily through the dissatisfaction of its subjects, it also must provide some way of alleviating the sense of lack without endangering the social structure. Recognition of the social bond and of one's own lack allows one to relate in a mediated way to other subjects. It allows one to view other subjects not just as rivals in struggle, but with some degree of lateral identification. But this is clearly not adequate compensation for the dissatisfaction that prohibition produces. Because recognizing one's lack—one's failure to enjoy—is not pleasant, we often avoid doing so, preferring instead to imagine that we haven't made the initial sacrifice of enjoyment or that we are able to overcome this sacrifice and enjoy within the social order. For those who have acceded to life within the symbolic order, there remains one easy avenue of procuring enjoyment: the imaginary. For Lacan, the imaginary is the domain of images, a register of experience that allows the subject to visualize the enjoyment it lacks. Thus, grasping the importance of the imaginary is vital for understanding what sustains the society of prohibition.

Because prohibition denies the subject the ultimate enjoyment, it inevitably produces dissatisfaction and potential rebellion. The imaginary is the repository for that potential rebellion insofar as it provides an illusory enjoyment in the midst of its prohibition by the social order. One can imagine an enjoyment that the social order prohibits, and as a result, society's confines do not seem absolute, even for those committed to remaining within those confines.<sup>16</sup> For example, the spouse devoted to the ideal of marital fidelity can imagine the steamy affair that she/he would never accede to in reality. This imagined affair—this event enacted on the imaginary level—allows the subject to enjoy transgressing a prohibition without actually doing so. The imaginary thus plays a crucial supplementary role in the society of prohibition, offering an imaginary enjoyment for those who suffer from the prohibition of enjoyment in the Real. Because of our ability to imagine an enjoyment that the symbolic order prohibits, the imaginary offers us a separate register of experience, distinct from the symbolic order. In Lacan's triadic division of experience, the symbolic order constitutes our social reality, the imaginary provides an avenue for the illusory transgression of that reality, and the Real marks the point at which the symbolic order fails—the gap that always haunts it. Though the imaginary assists prohibition by providing a safe outlet for enjoyment, it also represents a danger to the society of prohibition. The imaginary thus has an ambiguous status within the society of prohibition, and we must examine both its role in supplementing the power of prohibition and the threat that it poses.

Insofar as it offers us an image of enjoyment, the imaginary disguises our status within the symbolic order (which requires a sacrifice of enjoyment). Whereas in the symbolic we experience the power of the social order over us,

in the imaginary, which is the domain of the ego (our bodily image), we feel isolated within the shell that the ego seems to provide. Within this imaginary isolation, one seems not to have to sacrifice the object. One is able to enjoy it, but with the restriction that one can only enjoy *the image of the object*, not the object itself. The *objet petit a*, the object insofar as it offers enjoyment, is precisely what the subject misses in the image; this object is, according to Lacan, “what is lacking, is non-specular, it is not graspable in the image.”<sup>17</sup> Because the image lacks the *objet petit a*, imaginary enjoyment is illusory. Only outside the limits of both the symbolic and the imaginary—only in the Real—are we actually able to enjoy because the Real does not require a sacrifice of enjoyment. The status of enjoyment, in fact, provides an easy way of grasping Lacan’s symbolic-imaginary-Real triad: in the Real, we can enjoy; in the imaginary, we imagine that we enjoy; and in the symbolic, the symbol enjoys in our stead. Even though it only provides an imagined enjoyment, the imaginary nonetheless seems to provide enjoyment as such, while the symbolic order only offers desire. This is why one cannot think the society of prohibition without the imaginary housing the image of the denied enjoyment. This image is what allows subjects in the society of prohibition to sustain themselves in the midst of their dissatisfaction.

The imaginary, however, does not exist outside of or prior to the symbolic. It is the Real that marks the limit point—the failure—of the symbolic order, not the imaginary. The imaginary is simply a perspective within the symbolic, a way of seeing that fails to grasp its own symbolic determination.<sup>18</sup> In other words, when I engage with images (the imaginary), the symbolic order always determines the form of that engagement; the symbolic order determines the place from which I see the image. In *Seminar II*, Lacan explains this relationship:

The symbolic relation is constituted as early as possible, even prior to the fixation of the self image of the subject, prior to the structuring image of the ego, introducing the dimension of the subject into the world, a dimension capable of creating a reality other than that experienced as brute reality, as the encounter of two masses, the collision of two balls. The imaginary experience is inscribed in the register of the symbolic as early on as you can think it.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Lacan minimizes the distinction between imaginary and symbolic, claiming that the former necessarily takes place within the confines of the latter. This means that imaginary experience never actually breaks from the structure of the symbolic order. Our imaginary enjoyment remains a confined and policed enjoyment, an enjoyment relatively amenable to symbolic authority.

But within the society of prohibition the imaginary is also a site of potential disruption. Subjects immersed in the imaginary remain within the confines

of the symbolic order, but they do not recognize these confines. As a result, despite this inscription of the imaginary within the symbolic, our experience within the imaginary *seems* as if it occurs before or outside of the intervention of the symbol. This is why our first experiences, though the symbolic order provides the context for them, are imaginary ones.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the act of grasping their integration into the world of the symbol and thus their “humanization,” subjects constitute themselves on the level of the imaginary, and on this level, they are able to enjoy—which is to say, they are able to see themselves as whole, not as lacking. In the mirror stage, the prototypical imaginary experience, the child looks in the mirror and sees her/his body as a coherent whole over which she/he has mastery. Though this sense of wholeness and mastery is illusory or imaginary, it nonetheless obscures the child’s lack and hence disguises subjection to the symbolic order. In the imaginary, the subject seems isolated and independent of the symbolic order—self-sufficient.

It is for this reason that imaginary experience represents a danger to the social order even though it is integral to it and remains firmly within it: subjects lodged in the imaginary believe themselves to be independent and fail to see their symbolic bond with other subjects. Thus, they see other subjects purely as rivals, rather than as partners in sacrifice. The lack of distance in the imaginary further exacerbates this sense of rivalry. Images, unlike symbolic structures, seem directly present to us. As Richard Boothby notes,

The difference between the imaginary and symbolic functions aligns itself with a distinction between the perceptual and nonperceptual. Unlike the imaginary, which distinguishes figure and ground within a perceptual field, the symbolic is always conditioned by its relation to a network of signifiers that is not and in fact *cannot* be made an object of perception. We perceive speech and writing but not the symbol system that makes them possible.<sup>21</sup>

We can readily grasp the image in a way that we are constitutively unable to grasp the symbolic function. As a result, enjoyment permeates the imaginary realm because here there is no distance between the subject and the image.

This lack of distance—or lack of mediation that the symbol would provide—means that from the perspective of the imaginary, every relationship is necessarily a violent relationship, a life and death struggle for enjoyment: in the imaginary, there is no possibility for compromise or sharing because of the nature of imaginary enjoyment itself. Here, enjoyment has an either/or quality to it: either I am enjoying or you are—not both of us and not “first I’ll enjoy a little and then you can.” It is in such either/or terms that Lacan always describes life in the imaginary order. Here, without language, one cannot come to any agreement or compromise. On the level of the imaginary, in other words, there is no such thing as peaceful coexistence, no possibility for a pact governing the rationing of enjoyment. In *Seminar I*, Lacan argues that “Each

time the subject apprehends himself as form and as ego [i.e., on an imaginary level . . .], his desire is projected outside. From whence arises the impossibility of all human co-existence.”<sup>22</sup> This dimension of the imaginary—the hostility that it produces toward the Other—proves a barrier to the functioning of the society of prohibition.

#### SYMBOLIC RESPITE

Even though the society of prohibition relies on the imaginary to offset the dissatisfaction it produces in subjects, it nonetheless aims at policing both Real and imaginary enjoyment. As we will see later, this is one of the crucial differences between the society of prohibition and the society of commanded enjoyment. Whereas the society of enjoyment actively promotes imaginary enjoyment, the society of prohibition restrains it. Prohibition doesn't do this in order to eliminate enjoyment. Instead, the function of the symbolic order is the leveling out of enjoyment. As Lacan puts it, “That is clearly the essence of the law—to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*.”<sup>23</sup> The law prohibits enjoyment in effort to extend the life of enjoyment; it is the symbolic order that makes possible a sense of permanence, which is why subjects are willing to accept the prohibition of enjoyment that the symbolic order demands. However, enjoyment—and this is part of what puts it at odds with the social order—occurs without any reference to perpetuating itself. It is purely momentary, and when one enjoys, one does so lost in the moment, without any thoughts of the future or of future possibilities for enjoyment. Once one begins to calculate about enjoyment, to attempt to divide it up and ration it, one has already left enjoyment behind. Speech attempts to conserve enjoyment for tomorrow, to arrest enjoyment's own inherent self-wastefulness. We can see this most clearly in the case of the obsessional who continues to talk in order to preserve the enjoyment that he fears will be “used up” when the talking ends. In addition to conserving enjoyment, the obsessional's talking also has the effect—as does speech in general—of holding off enjoyment. He talks so that there will be no opening for a sudden outbreak of enjoyment.

The initial importance of words lies not in conversation, but in conservation. By replacing the object itself with a symbol, speech extends our ability to enjoy the object, allowing us to enjoy the object not simply in the immediacy of its presence, but in its absence. The symbol allows our experience—our enjoyment—of the object to endure, even after the object has disappeared. Without the symbol, all of the subject's relationships—and every object—can only appear as evanescent. The symbol allows the object to endure over time; it arrests the temporality of the object as it catches the object within a symbolic

web. It gives the object an identity, making it identical with itself, which is the key to perpetuating it. At the same time—because it gives the object subsistence over time—the word allows for a mutuality in relation to the object that remains impossible on the purely imaginary level; the word indicates the existence of a pact, an agreement between subjects. It is on the basis of the recognition of this pact, implicit in every symbol, that a life-and-death struggle is avoided. The symbolic order, which has its basis in prohibition, constitutes a pact of mutuality, which is why prohibition has such importance for any social organization. The social pact attempts to safeguard enjoyment, to ensure that no one will enjoy extravagantly.

From the moment that the symbol arrives, it changes everything in human relations and makes human coexistence possible. The symbol provides the possibility of coexistence because it transforms the subjects it interpellates at the same time that it mediates the relationship between them. In *Seminar I*, Lacan claims, “the symbol introduces a third party, an element of mediation, which brings the two actors into each other’s presence, leads them on to another plane, and changes them” (155). That is to say, the symbolic order adds a distance between subject and object and between subject and subject, eliminating the direct relationship between them that we find in the imaginary. Though we tend to think that we need intimacy or proximity for harmonious intersubjective relations, proximity actually represents a barrier to such relations. This is why, in conversations, we take pains to avoid invading the “personal space” of our interlocutors. We feel uncomfortable, unable to speak, with someone in close proximity directly in front of us. When we are too close, confronted directly with the presence of an other in her/his enjoyment, the enjoyment is suffocating. The symbolic order and the prohibition that constitutes it provide distance from enjoyment, a distance in which it is possible to relate to the other. In the distance that it provides, we can see the importance of prohibition in producing a social order in which subjects can interact smoothly.

One needs some degree of distance, however small, to separate oneself from the Real dimension of the other. The distance created by the symbol, however, has nothing to do with actual distance. The symbolic dimension of human existence allows me to be in the midst of a huge crowd and still feel properly distanced from everyone. Because the symbol has the effect of eliminating enjoyment and carving out a neutral space in which subjects can interact, I do not experience the other’s enjoyment encroaching on me, as I would if I didn’t have an experience of the symbolic pact governing the interaction. Insofar as it eliminates or muffles enjoyment, the symbolic order creates distance. But as the power of the symbolic order in our experience breaks down—as the society of prohibition transforms into the society of enjoyment—this proper distance begins to evaporate. Rather than being able to feel

comfortably alone in a crowd, we feel surrounded and trapped, even with only a few people around. This creates a feeling of claustrophobia, and we seek actual distance from the other in an effort to compensate for this failure of symbolic distance. That is to say, the very desire for more elbow room stems from an inadequate symbolic experience. We think, for instance, that by moving farther and farther from the city we can finally reproduce the distance that the symbolic order provided. Flight to the suburbs has its origin in the turn to a society of enjoyment, a society in which we no longer feel the effects of symbolic mediation. But no distance out on Long Island is ever enough—not because we always encounter other people fleeing along with us, but because no amount of actual distance can provide the breathing space that the tiniest amount of symbolic distance can. The attempted compensation always fails.<sup>24</sup>

We can see a precursor of this kind of compensation in Henry David Thoreau. Though *Walden* is ostensibly about the importance of self-isolation, Thoreau does give some consideration to intersubjectivity and to the need for distance in making that intersubjectivity possible. Thoreau accurately recognizes that intersubjective intimacy is only possible on the basis of distance: when we are too close, the Real *presence* of the other has a suffocating effect. When we are confronted with presence in this way, we are flooded with enjoyment, threatened with being swallowed up in it. This onslaught of enjoyment is not at all conducive to intersubjectivity, as Thoreau himself points out. We need distance for a conversation with the other to actually take place. However, Thoreau can conceive of distance only as actual physical distance, not as the product of the symbol. Hence, he finds that he can't really converse with another person in his small cabin because the lack of distance is stifling. True intersubjective communication, for Thoreau, requires speaking to his interlocutor across the diameter of Walden Pond. In this image of intersubjectivity, Thoreau attempts to conceive of Walden Pond itself as a kind of pseudo-symbolic order that works to provide distance and mediate the relationship between two subjects. The problem here is that physical distance—even the distance across Walden Pond—is never enough. It can't provide the respite from the other's presence that the symbol can, though we remain convinced—today even more so than in Thoreau's age—that it can. Thus, we try to move farther and farther apart in an effort to gain the respite from the other's enjoyment that only the experience of the symbolic structure could actually provide.<sup>25</sup>

Actual physical distance fails because the Real, unlike the symbolic order, gives us nowhere to hide. As Lacan claims in *Seminar II*, “only in the dimension of truth [opened up by the symbol] can something be hidden. In the real, the very idea of a hidden place is insane—however deep into the bowels of the earth someone may go bearing something, it isn't hidden there, since if he went there, so can you” (201–22). Lacan's point here is that the symbol creates

the possibility of a secret, of something hidden, which is impossible in the Real itself. The symbolic structure—the order of the signifier—begins with the act of concealment, and this concealment remains essential to its very logic. In *Seminar V*, Lacan uses the example of Robinson Crusoe's encounter with Friday to elucidate this dimension of the signifier. He says, "Friday's footprint that Robinson discovers in the course of his walk on the island is not a signifier. On the other hand, if we suppose that he, Robinson, for some reason or other, erases this mark, there clearly is introduced the dimension of the signifier."<sup>26</sup> We introduce the signifier and the symbolic order when we conceal something, and this concealment has clear benefits for the subject.

Life in the symbolic order requires a sacrifice of enjoyment, but in return the symbolic provides a place of respite from the other—a kind of hiding place for the subject. Only the symbolic order allows us to hide, and it does this by replacing the object with a symbol, a symbol whose presence indicates the absence of the object. The symbol introduces absence itself as a presence, proclaiming, in effect, that this word (which is here) conveys this thing (which is not here). And insofar as it does this, it allows us to hide even when we are in the midst of the public eye. With the advent of the symbol, we can put on a public persona that holds something private in reserve, hidden beneath the symbol. In this way, the symbolic order opens us a private space, a respite from its own intrusive operations.<sup>27</sup> In the symbolic order, one can, for instance, shave one's head in order to disguise baldness; in other words, even when a subject tells the truth using a symbol, the very use of a symbol suggests that something is concealed, thereby, in effect, hiding the truth that the subject has candidly admitted to. But just as it creates a hiding place where none was before, the introduction of the symbolic order also changes our relationship to objects and to enjoyment.

#### ABUNDANT RECOMPENSE

In describing the society of prohibition and contrasting it with the society of commanded enjoyment, we must pay attention to the transformation that prohibition effects as it constitutes the symbolic order. In order to safeguard the social order from enjoyment, prohibition replaces our direct relationship to objects with a symbolic relationship. Hence, after the onset of the symbolic order, the importance of objects declines while that of symbols increases. What we do with the symbol of the object becomes far more important than what we do with the object itself—or the former comes to determine the latter. As Lacan says in his first seminar, what we do with the symbol "elephant" ends up determining what will happen to real elephants. In the same way, my name—and what people think of it—becomes far more important to me than

my being—and what is done to it. I would rather endure physical injury than have someone slander my “good name.” I would, for instance, rather be an immobile Christopher Reeve while having his respected name than a healthy O. J. Simpson, whose name has become infamous. The ruin of Simpson’s name has made his life far more unbearable than Reeve’s physical disability has made his. This kind of valuation results from the shift in importance that the symbolic order effects—its instituting the symbol as the indicator of value. Through just this process—and as a part of this transformation—symbolic recognition comes to substitute for enjoyment. Recognition allows us to enjoy in a socially mediated way: we enjoy the recognition that the symbolic order confers on us. Though we can’t attain unlimited enjoyment within the symbolic order, we can obtain recognition, and this substitution helps to facilitate coexistence. Unlike unlimited enjoyment, recognition concerns itself with the Other and doesn’t exclude the possibility of mutuality. Recognition is socially acceptable enjoyment—conserved enjoyment, or enjoyment in its conservative form—precisely because it involves enjoying one’s symbolic status or allowing the symbol to enjoy in one’s stead.

With the onset of the symbol—the inception of the prohibition of enjoyment—recognition gains a paramount importance. Once this occurs, all of the things for which people strive are important not for the immediate enjoyment that they might provide, but for recognition that they can confer upon those who have obtained them. Money is perhaps archetypal in this sense. Its value doesn’t lie so much in the enjoyment that it can purchase as in symbolic recognition it produces. This is why the very wealthy are eager to give some of their money away—to forsake any enjoyment of it—in exchange for having their names associated with what they have funded. As a character in E. L. Doctorow’s novel *Loon Lake* puts it, “wealth is accumulated so that it can be given away thus bringing honor to the giver.”<sup>28</sup> Money buys a place of public prominence for one’s name. The great advantage of being wealthy involves garnering the recognition that someone with less money can’t come by. Being wealthy means, ipso facto, that the Other recognizes me and my importance. In American society, cars have historically functioned in precisely the same way. A nice car implies a certain status, that one has obtained a certain degree of recognition within the social order. The things that one does with one’s car—such as having it washed and waxed—suggest that the car’s primary importance rests upon the recognition it can provide rather than in enjoyment. One purchases a luxury car not simply to enjoy the luxury it provides but to be *recognized* as one who can afford such luxury. Owning a luxury car enables a subject to enjoy the recognition that accompanies this ownership rather than to enjoy directly. This distinction is entirely a product of the functioning of the symbolic order. The predominance of recognition over enjoyment within the symbolic order is evinced not only—or even primarily—in

money and consumer culture, but also in every decision to take up a public position within a society: to run for public office, to go to war, or even to become a television celebrity. In all of these efforts to gain recognition, there is the implicit assumption that I will recognize the Other who recognizes me—a potential mutuality. The society of prohibition depends on and constantly reinforces this sense of mutuality through its stress on recognition.

When I seek recognition, I invest myself in what the Other thinks of me, rather than cutting myself off from the Other or trying to destroy the Other. I fantasize about how the Other sees me; I set up the Other as my ego ideal, the point from which I want to be seen. Every seeking after recognition tacitly recognizes the other as well, as Lacan's example in *Seminar III* makes clear: "In saying to someone, *You are my woman*, you are implicitly saying to her, *I am your man*, but you are saying to her first, *You are my woman*, that is, you are establishing her in the position of being recognized by you, by means of which she will be able to recognize you."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the effort to gain recognition acknowledges my own dependence on the Other insofar as it is always the Other that does the recognizing. This is what the master discovers, much to his chagrin, in Hegel's master/slave dialectic. By enslaving the slave and establishing himself in the position of the one recognized, the master assumes that she/he thereby frees her/himself from a position of dependence on the other (the slave in this case). However, as Hegel points out, the master soon discovers that the exact opposite is true. As a master, she/he is totally dependent on the slave, because the slave provides the recognition that makes her/him a master; the slave *authorizes* the master's mastery.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the recognition that the wealthy person achieves places her/him in a position of dependence, as far as recognition is concerned, on the poor, or at least on the not-so-wealthy. This kind of dialectical reversal illustrates that recognition, in contrast to enjoyment, is necessarily intersubjective. Like the shared sacrifice of enjoyment, the valuing of recognition in the society of prohibition works to create a social bond among subjects within this society.

The onset of the symbolic order and the recognition it makes possible comes, however, with a rather steep price. It has the effect of alienating the subject from her/himself, introducing negativity and even death. The symbol brings death and alienation into the world because it brings absence—or, more properly, presence in absence. Because the symbol allows us to experience the presence of absence, it allows us also to become conscious of death without actually dying. The symbol thus makes it possible for us to obtain a kind of being-towards-death.<sup>31</sup> Though the symbol enslaves the subject to death—what Hegel calls the absolute master—at the same time it makes coexistence possible. Hence, it is only on the basis of our relationship to death that we can have a relationship with each other. Without suffering the loss associated with death and its anticipation, we can't relate to the other through

the mediation of the symbol—which is to say, we can't relate to each other at all, except in the form of a violent collision.

In addition to enslaving the subject to death, the introduction of the symbolic order also submits the subject to the sway of what Lacan calls the big Other. The big Other—not one specific other but the generalized and anonymous Other that represents the interests of the social order as a whole—is the source of recognition. When we act in order to obtain recognition, we have the big Other in mind. The ultimate foundation for the big Other is the Law, insofar as all recognition occurs with reference to the Law, and the Law returns us to the prohibition of enjoyment, the point at which we began. The Law of any social order commands a sacrifice of enjoyment, as we have seen, and one gains recognition to the extent that one obeys this Law. Hence, those who receive the most recognition within the social order have made the greatest sacrifice of enjoyment, having traded enjoyment for recognition. In this sense, recognition signifies repression: the more recognition one receives, the more one has given up to repression. We can see a perfect example in the case of Bill Clinton—not, however, as one might expect, in his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, but rather in his relationship with McDonald's hamburgers. As a look at the early years of his presidency reveals, Clinton derives great enjoyment from McDonald's hamburgers. His visits to the fast-food restaurant were famous. However, these visits also had the effect of detracting from his role as a symbolic authority. A president, in order to receive the recognition that his symbolic position commands, must sacrifice such displays of enjoyment, which Clinton did as his time in office progressed. Perhaps Clinton continued to enjoy his favorite food in private; nonetheless, this still represented a repression: he could no longer freely have a McDonald's hamburger whenever the urge came over him. As Clinton shows us, social recognition comes with a heavy price—the sacrifice of an enjoyment that one can experience without consideration of the consequences.<sup>32</sup>

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud illustrates this relationship in reference to the trajectory of jokes across class boundaries. Among the lower classes (those who do not receive a great deal of recognition in the social order), the true sexual or smutty nature of jokes can be openly revealed. One can tell a dirty joke in the most direct fashion. As one rises in class status, however, the joke, in order to remain acceptable (and funny!), must undergo more and more deformation and repression, so that its original sexual dimension appears only obliquely or indirectly. In both cases, we enjoy the same thing, but in the latter our path to enjoyment must be more circuitous. As Freud points out, "When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or

it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help.”<sup>33</sup> Because the upper classes receive more social recognition than the lower classes, they have made more of a sacrifice of enjoyment, and hence cannot publicly experience the joke in its original, smutty form. Respectability—what one does to obtain recognition—involves forgoing enjoyment and living according to the dictates of the Law that commands its sacrifice.

This Law is embodied in the Name of the Father, the name that symbolizes, in Freud’s myth, the murdered primal Father. “The Name of the Father,” according to Lacan, “founds the fact that there is law [. . .] It is, in the interior of the Other, an essential signifier.”<sup>34</sup> This name—or primordial signifier—indicates the absence of the unrestrained enjoyment of the primal Father, and it serves to bar anyone entering the symbolic order from enjoyment. On the basis of this evacuation of enjoyment, the symbolic order constitutes itself and thus demands that subjects seek recognition through the Law in lieu of enjoyment outside of it. The Law itself, however, is not entirely free from enjoyment. Enjoyment lives on in the Law in the form of the superego, which is, of course, the Law insofar as the subject has internalized it. Whereas the Law proper—as the Name of the Father—marks the absence or death of the primal Father and his horrific enjoyment, the superego, the internal representative of the Law, is the remnant of this Father that continues to make its presence felt. Overflowing with the primal Father’s enjoyment, the superego, as the underside of the Law, makes evident the obscenity in the Law itself. The obscene superego represents the limit of the society of prohibition; it is the point at which enjoyment infects the prohibition itself. Thus, it should not be at all surprising that it is around the figure of the superego that we can witness the emergence of the society of enjoyment.

#### THE WILL TO ENJOY

Understanding the role of the superego is one of the keys to analyzing the emergence of the society of enjoyment because the presence of the superego indicates that enjoyment continues to persist in the symbolic order despite the Law’s ban on it. However, when we think of Freud’s account of the superego, this association of the superego with obscene enjoyment appears counterintuitive. As Freud describes it, the superego is the agency of morality rather than enjoyment, the agency that restricts the amoral id. Thus, it seems to police—and not embody—enjoyment. Nonetheless, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud makes clear the association of the superego with obscene enjoyment, as he notes that “the super-ego is always close to the id and can act as its representative *vis-a-vis* the ego. It reaches deep down into the id and for that reason is farther from consciousness than the ego is.”<sup>35</sup> The superego receives its

energy from the id, the seat of the subject's enjoyment, and this provides the superego with its ability to be excessively cruel. Freud adds that this connection between the superego and the id allows the former to be "super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be."<sup>36</sup> The obscene dimension of the superego manifests itself in the very form that the superego takes—that is, as a relentless injunction that never leaves the subject alone.

The superego always takes the form of an unconditional injunction, and this form completely betrays the enjoyment-free, neutral guise of the Law itself. If the superego had the neutrality of the public Law, it would not endlessly probe every dark corner of the psyche, seeking out the presence of interdicted enjoyment. Despite its moral appearance, the superego, even as Freud conceives it, is an obscene agency. As a pure injunction, the superego is the form of the Law without any content. It thus embodies the cruelest and most destructive aspects of the Law, the violence of its founding gesture. Even though the Law itself adopts a guise of neutrality, it has a pathological, violent genesis. As Walter Benjamin notes, "at the moment of instatement [the Law] does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it."<sup>37</sup> This link between the Law and violence lives on in the incessant demands that the superego makes on the subject, demands that center around enjoyment.

As we have seen, before the advent of the Law, there is neither enjoyment nor the lack of it. Hence, the introduction of the Law creates the possibility of enjoyment. The Law as such emerges out of a desire for enjoyment, not out of a desire for restraint. But even this very opposition is false. The desire to restrain enjoyment is fundamentally akin to the desire to enjoy. One always derives enjoyment from the act of restraint, as a brief glance at any fundamentalist minister will confirm. In this sense, there is no Law that simply restrains enjoyment. The Law cannot escape the enjoyment that drives it—the enjoyment manifested in the form of the legal imperative—and this aspect of the Law is located in the superego. The superego is the repository for all of the violence and obscenity implicit in the founding gesture of the Law.

As a result, the superego has an ambiguous relation to the Law proper: on the one hand, it supports the Law and encourages obedience, and on the other, it fosters enjoyment, which threatens to undermine the Law. As Lacan says in *Seminar I*, "The super-ego has a relation to the law, and is at the same time a senseless law, going so far as to become a failure to recognize law" (102). The "senselessness" of the superego stems from the enjoyment that it embodies, and this senseless dimension of the Law, while being crucial to the Law sustaining itself, also threatens the destruction of the Law, insofar as the Law is a law of sense that works to make things meaningful. Lacan makes clear the contrast between superego and Law:

The super-ego is at one and the same time the law and its destruction. As such, it is speech itself, the commandment of law, in so far as nothing more than its root remains. The law is entirely reduced to something, which cannot even be expressed, like the *You must*, which is speech deprived of all its meaning. It is in this sense that the super-ego ends up by being identified with only what is most devastating, most fascinating, in the primitive experience of the subject. It ends up being identified with what I call *the ferocious figure*, with the figures which we can link to primitive traumas the child has suffered, whatever these are. (102, Lacan's emphasis)

Whereas the Law provides all sorts of meaningful reasons to obey, the super-ego commands obedience for its own sake, and it is in this pure commandment that the residual enjoyment of the primal Father makes itself felt.

Because the superego is a locus of both Law and enjoyment—two kinds of experience seemingly at odds with each other—we have the ability to enjoy our obedience. It is in this sense that fascism represents the culmination of the logic of the superego. Fascism is not simply a case of mass obedience; on the contrary, its strength resides in its ability to allow those who are doing their duty to—at the same time—enjoy, imagining themselves as the height of transgression. Fascism brings together perfectly the feeling of doing one's duty and the feeling of transgressing moral norms (i.e., enjoying). The increasing predominance of the superego—and its correlate, the emergence of the command to enjoy—produces the terrain on which fascism grows. In fact, the historical burgeoning of fascism and fascistic ideology is unthinkable outside of this emerging reign of the superego.

Thus, we can see that the relationship between the Law and the superego is not only dialectical, but also historical. That is to say, over the course of the twentieth century, the power of the superego has arisen as the power of the public Law has lessened. In one sense, the rise of the superego is the fulfillment of the Law, but in another, it represents the seeming destruction of the Law, the end of its prohibition on enjoyment. Unlike the public Law, which prohibits enjoyment, the superego commands it. According to Lacan, "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy!"<sup>38</sup> The rise of the superego and its demand for enjoyment is correlative to the transformation from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment.

This transformation, though not tied to the onset of capitalism, is not entirely alien to capitalism's development. Capitalism, in its latest manifestations, has played a crucial role in working to de-emphasize prohibition or Law in the social order. The "commodification of everyday life"—the *sine qua non* of late capitalism—has the effect of, at once, undermining figures of authority and stressing the importance of enjoying oneself. With the proliferation of advertisements (all promising immediate and incredible enjoyment) into even

public schools and public buses, one cannot exist for long in late capitalist society without being confronted by signs of or inducements to great enjoyment. We must “Have a Coke and a smile.” Here, indications of enjoyment are everywhere. But this, of course, has not always been the case.

In its initial manifestation, with the ideology of the “work ethic” and an emphasis on the value of delayed gratification, capitalism sustained and necessitated its own form of prohibition and dissatisfaction. As Max Weber puts it in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, early capitalist ideology made clear that “not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of His will.”<sup>39</sup> Liberal or competitive capitalism—the first stage of capitalist development—demanded the renunciation of enjoyment in order that the work requisite for the functioning of the system would be done. The ideal of the work ethic served as the predominant ideological means through which liberal capitalism perpetuated the renunciation it required. Without the ideal of the work ethic and the renunciation of enjoyment it effected, the very emergence of capitalism would have scarcely been possible. This means that early capitalism—the incipience of modernity—thwarted enjoyment to the same extent that traditional societies did. Hence, in one sense, the break that Marxism celebrates between traditional societies and capitalist society was not initially all that radical. Though capitalist society unleashed the productive forces of society in a hitherto unimagined way, it nonetheless continued an explicit prohibition on enjoyment in order to maximize productivity.

Around 1900, however, the structure of capitalism underwent a profound change, as has been chronicled by Marxists from Lenin and Bukharin to Ernest Mandel and Fredric Jameson. At this time, monopoly capitalism emerges, and with the development of this new mode of capitalism, a vast increase in consumption becomes necessary to solve (temporarily) capitalism’s contradictions.<sup>40</sup> As Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy point out, “The stimulation of demand [. . .] becomes to an ever greater degree the leitmotif of business and government policies under monopoly capitalism.”<sup>41</sup> Consumer culture emerges with monopoly capitalism in order to provide the demand that the mode of production requires. At this moment in the history of capitalism, the ideological demands of liberal capitalism—the constraints imposed by the idea of the work ethic—become onerous and restrictive. Capitalist ideology itself begins to become a barrier to the full development of the capitalist mode of production in the epoch of monopoly capitalism. In response, ideology undergoes the initial steps toward a transformation, a transformation that would result, finally, in an ideology no longer explicitly prohibiting enjoyment but instead beginning to command it, which is an ideology associated with the superego rather than with the public Law.

In a work of fiction from 1900, we can see an outline of this ideological shift. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* depicts the emergence of the duty to

enjoy in American society. He does this through the changing fortunes of the novel's two main characters—the demise of George Hurstwood and the rise of Carrie Meeber. When he first appears in the novel, Hurstwood is living a successful if ordinary life within capitalist society. He works as the manager of a prominent Chicago bar, a position that provides both financial reward and social recognition. In exchange for this position within society, however, Hurstwood has sacrificed his enjoyment. He lives monotonously with a wife that he no longer loves, and he longs for the enjoyment that Carrie seems to offer when she enters his life. Even though he desires Carrie, Hurstwood remains in the world of prohibited enjoyment as long as he doesn't act on this desire. But when he runs away with Carrie and steals from his boss to finance their flight, Hurstwood leaves the secure world of prohibited enjoyment and enters alien territory—the world of the command to enjoy. Hurstwood's problem is that he is ill-equipped to exist in this new world; in leaving the world of prohibited enjoyment where he had social recognition, Hurstwood left everything that made possible his success. He was a successful manager because of his good name and the widespread recognition that this good name signified. In the act of leaving with Carrie, Hurstwood ruins his good name and destroys the recognition upon which he built his success. Hence, as the novel progresses, Hurstwood slowly deteriorates—losing Carrie, his apartment, and finally everything—until he ends up killing himself. His destruction indicates the emergence of a new world in which the ethos that he represents—the sacrifice of enjoyment for the sake of recognition—no longer pays off. Through opting to leave Chicago with Carrie, Hurstwood himself abandons the sacrifice of enjoyment, and his subsequent attempts to reenter the old world reveal that that world no longer exists. The new world of the command to enjoy is one in which Carrie Meeber feels herself far more at home than George Hurstwood.

Through his depiction of Carrie's success, Dreiser indicates most emphatically the emergence of the new superegoic command to enjoy. From the beginning of the novel, Carrie makes every effort to obey this command as she also resists the prohibition of enjoyment. Carrie's refusal to respect the prohibition of enjoyment earns her the scorn of her brother-in-law, with whom she initially stays when she arrives in Chicago. She spends hours outside the front door of the apartment eyeing the city's nightlife and imagining herself a part of it. Carrie's brother-in-law warns her sister that this type of behavior reflects badly on them. Later, however, Carrie takes her disregard for the prohibition of enjoyment even further as she moves in with Charlie Drouet without marrying him. In addition, unlike Hurstwood, who succeeds because of his good name, Carrie succeeds because of the image that she projects. While acting as a secondary character in a play in New York, Carrie becomes famous for the frown she wears throughout the play. Her perfor-

mance—consisting solely of the sustained frown—rescues Carrie from obscurity and initiates her rise to success as a Broadway actress. This success is indicative of the emerging society of enjoyment insofar as it stems from an image (that produces enjoyment in the audience) rather than from recognition gained through the sacrifice of enjoyment. Hurstwood depends on symbolic recognition, whereas Carrie depends on her image. The former involves submission to the dictates of the symbolic order, and the latter involves immersion into the imaginary and its enjoyment. The timing of Carrie's breakthrough on the stage underlines this contrast: Carrie has her success just as she leaves Hurstwood, indicating the eclipse of the Hurstwood's world of sacrificed enjoyment. Hurstwood is a figure from the disappearing epoch of prohibited enjoyment, and Carrie is a figure from the emerging epoch of commanded enjoyment. Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie* just as the shift was initially occurring, but it would be almost another century until its full ramifications would become apparent.

Though the emergence of consumer culture within monopoly capitalism marks the beginning of the turn to the command to enjoy, it is not until the epoch of global capitalism that this new command becomes fully ensconced in capitalist ideology. In some sense, the mode of subjectivity in monopoly capitalism (the organization man) does not represent a radical departure from that of liberal capitalism (the autonomous individual). Whereas the organization man does exist within a culture of consumption, he nonetheless consumes in a way commensurate with social restrictions on enjoyment: he buys a house and car for his family, but doesn't spend extravagantly on luxuries. Even more importantly, the organization man remains invested in the social order in which he exists and toward which he feels a deep sense of duty.<sup>42</sup> The organization man, as the very name suggests, loyally devotes himself to the larger social group and readily sacrifices his enjoyment for the good of this group, whether it be the corporation or the nation. In return, the group provides for the organization man, offering him stability and security in exchange for the sacrifice of enjoyment.<sup>43</sup>

In their relationship to enjoyment, both liberal and monopoly capitalism retain traditional society's commitment to prohibition. This is why the modes of subjectivity in these two initial stages of capitalism, the autonomous individual and the organization man, share a fundamental structure despite their differences in appearance. In a discussion of this underlying similarity, Slavoj Žižek notes,

the so-called "decline of the Protestant ethic" and the appearance of the "organization man," i.e., the replacement of the ethic of individual responsibility by the ethic of the heteronomous individual, oriented toward others, leaves intact the underlying frame of the ego-ideal. It is merely its contents that change: the ego-ideal becomes "externalized" as the expectations of the

social group to which the individual belongs. The source of moral satisfaction is no longer the feeling that we resisted the pressure of our milieu and remained true to ourselves (i.e., to our paternal ego-ideal), but rather the feeling of loyalty to the group. The subject looks at himself through the eyes of the group, he strives to merit its love and esteem.<sup>44</sup>

Both the autonomous individual and the organization man continue to see duty in terms of devotion to an ego-ideal, a devotion that manifests itself in the sacrifice of enjoyment. Even though the imperative to enjoy emerges initially with monopoly capitalism, it nonetheless remains overshadowed by the continuance of the prohibition of enjoyment throughout this epoch.

With the emergence of global capitalism, however, the shift toward the imperative to enjoy becomes more readily apparent. The mode of subjectivity that corresponds to global capitalism—pathological narcissism—represents a decisive departure from the shared structure of the autonomous individual and the organization man. As Žižek points out, “the third stage, the arrival of the ‘pathological narcissist,’ breaks precisely with [the] underlying frame of the ego-ideal common to the first two forms.”<sup>45</sup> Unlike the autonomous individual of liberal capitalism and the organization man of monopoly capitalism, the pathological narcissist does not envision duty as devotion to an ego-ideal. In the epoch of global capitalism (and especially since 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the last major barrier to the flow of capital), duty is transformed into a duty to enjoy, which is precisely the commandment of the superego. The superego—the obscene version of the Law, the Law as enjoyment—expands its sway. The superego and its command to enjoy have burdened the subject throughout history, but global capitalism allows the logic of the superego to gain predominance. In the epoch of global capitalism, the rise of the superego and of the society of enjoyment finds its apotheosis, allowing the transition toward the duty to enjoy to occur with incredible rapidity. Rather than living in a society that prohibits enjoyment, we are increasingly living in one that commands it. We live under the reign of a tyrant for the next millenium—the superego.

The superego commanding enjoyment and the epoch of global capitalism exist in a symbiotic relationship. Those who are under the sway of the command to enjoy become perfect global capitalist subjects. They constantly seek the new products that the global capitalist economy proffers in hopes of obtaining more enjoyment. And on its side, the structure of global capitalism makes it easy for the subject to work on heeding the command to enjoy. The credit economy that predominates in our epoch is the most obvious way in which this works. By allowing subjects easy and fast credit, today’s corporations create avenues through which subjects can pursue their enjoyment. In fact, the very idea of the emergence of a society of enjoyment is unthinkable without a credit-based economy. However, the command to enjoy reaches beyond the economy into almost every aspect of contemporary culture.

Within the province of popular American psychology, the idea of a duty to enjoy has even found a direct and explicit articulation. In *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*, Dennis Prager claims that our duty to the social order consists in enjoying ourselves and becoming happy. He says, “we tend to think that we owe it to ourselves to be as happy as we can be. And this is true. But happiness is far more than a personal concern. It is also a moral obligation.”<sup>46</sup> Happiness (enjoyment) becomes an obligation because of its effects on those around us: when we fail to enjoy, this detracts from the enjoyment of the society as a whole. Thus, according to Prager, “we owe it to our husband or wife, our fellow workers, our children, our friends, indeed to everyone who comes into our lives, to be as happy as we can be.”<sup>47</sup> This notion of a duty to be happy radically transforms the very concept of duty, which has historically involved *limiting* rather than *maximizing* one’s own happiness.<sup>48</sup> In reconceiving duty in this way, Prager is not alone but part of a broad trend in American ego psychology toward “positive psychology” (of which Martin Seligman is the most visible proponent). Positive psychology views enjoyment, rather than dissatisfaction, as the normal human state. Whereas Freud, writing in the midst of the society of prohibition, sees “common human misery” as the best that we can hope for, positive psychologists see misery as only an aberration. The very existence—let alone popularity—of such a position itself testifies to transformation that has taken place, the rewriting of the prohibition of enjoyment as the imperative to enjoy. In a society of prohibition, one cannot but conceive of dissatisfaction as *the* human condition. But in the society of enjoyment, it becomes possible to think of enjoyment as the norm. Prager’s book appears in 1998, and one could not imagine it even ten years earlier.

Historically, the social order has always provided some degree of respite from enjoyment. Though the prohibition of enjoyment does, in one sense, deprive the subject of her/his enjoyment, it also frees the subject from the suffocating presence of the Other and the Other’s enjoyment. In other words, the Name of the Father is, in the first instance, liberatory, precisely because it brings with it distance. The evanescence of the Law and the corresponding rise in the sway of the superego has the effect, however, of eliminating this quality of the social order. Rather than being a respite from enjoyment, the social order itself begins to teem with enjoyment. The social order, in other words, becomes increasingly imaginary, while at the same time its symbolic quality diminishes. Under the reign of the superego, one can’t get away from enjoyment in the social order, though protection from enjoyment was, historically, the benefit one received in exchange for submission to the Law. Today, the old “entry fee” into the social order that Lévi-Strauss emphasized has undergone a transformation: the social order no longer explicitly demands a sacrifice of enjoyment, but instead demands enjoyment itself as a kind of social duty.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of this idea of enjoyment as a social duty came from the first George Bush in 1992. Eager to revive the American economy—and his election prospects—Bush told the American public that it was their “patriotic duty” to go shopping (i.e., to enjoy themselves, even if it required signing up for another credit card). This conception of patriotism and duty indicates a profound change in the social order. And revealing that this was not an isolated occurrence, at the beginning of the second Bush presidency, we witnessed a similar imperative to spend for the good of the country as George W. Bush authorized the issuing of tax rebate checks to the American public. Bush insisted that the exigencies of patriotism required Americans to spend money. This demand became most vociferous in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center, when Bush publicly charged American citizens to display their patriotism. To do so, Bush admonished them to “get on board” and “go to Disney World.” In order to resist the terrorist attempt to derail the American economy, Bush reasoned, Americans had to will themselves to spend. On October 3, 2001, the headline for a front-page story in *USA Today* noted that now “Shoppers Splurge for Their Country.” Buttons in New York City saying “Fight Back NY! Spend Money!” began to appear. Led by the president, these calls for us to enjoy ourselves in the name of patriotic duty represent something radically new. When symbolic authority explicitly demands that we enjoy ourselves and warns us against restraining our enjoyment, we can be sure that we have entered into a different kind of world. Whereas even as recently as the early 1960s presidents used to demand sacrifice of enjoyment—“Ask not what your country . . .”—in the 1990s and the 2000s they demand enjoyment itself. The command to enjoy and actual enjoyment, however, are not exactly the same thing.

#### THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN LIBIDO

The absence of an explicit prohibition of enjoyment and the presence of an imperative to enjoy creates the sense that the subjects have lost all restraint, that the social order has run amok. As a result, the society of enjoyment seems inevitably to produce a series of critiques, and these critiques, despite their often reactionary aims, provide a way of grasping what has changed with the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy. Many conservative critiques of contemporary American culture have of course focused on the seeming predominance of enjoyment and absence of dutiful adherence to the law and to figures of authority. In what is perhaps the most infamous example, Dan Quayle launched his attack on the television sitcom *Murphy Brown* on precisely these grounds, complaining that Murphy Brown’s decision

to become a single parent set a bad example for American children. Quayle felt that it was a bad example insofar as it showed a person in a prominent position within society opting to enjoy herself rather than to obey the restrictions proffered by the social order—to have a child on her own terms rather than in accord with the socially mandated marriage union. Horror at the idea of unrestrained enjoyment is even more evident in Allan Bloom's 1987 diatribe against American culture, *The Closing of the American Mind*.<sup>49</sup> Bloom states rather straightforwardly that what appalls him about this culture is the proliferation of sexuality within it. Rock music, for instance, horrifies him, because "rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored."<sup>50</sup> The implication here is that rock's unleashing of sexuality—and the enjoyment that it provides—threatens us with "barbarism," the breakdown of the social order itself.<sup>51</sup> If we give in to the culture that rock music exemplifies and become a society centered around enjoyment rather than prohibition, we will lose civilization itself, according to Bloom, and will revert to barbarism. This is why Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind*: it is a call for us, as a society, to turn away from the dangers (and enticements) of enjoyment and to rediscover the benefits that follow from accepting prohibition.

Has Bloom responded authentically to the turn from prohibition to enjoyment? Does Bloom demonstrate the truth of Fredric Jameson's claim that reactionaries are often able to recognize accurately the contradictions of their historical moment, even though they can't discover a viable solution to them (because they look for solutions only nostalgically in the past, as Bloom, for one, certainly does)? My contention here is that what Bloom misses about this situation—and what should be emphasized in the critique of the society of enjoyment—is that though the social order today demands enjoyment instead of a sacrifice of enjoyment, *this in no way allows subjects within the social order to enjoy themselves*, anymore than they were ever able to. The transformation at work here, in one sense, does not exist. It is merely a transformation in the way subjects experience the social order, a phenomenological transformation; it occasions no substantive change in the relationship between society and enjoyment. Society remains, despite the fears of Bloom and Quayle, free of the enjoyment that would precipitate its dissolution. Contemporary American society has become a society of enjoyment only in the sense that enjoyment, rather than prohibition, is its governing commandment.

Despite this transformation from demand for renunciation to the demand for enjoyment—a change impelled by the increasing predominance of the superego over the Law—enjoyment has not burgeoned. In fact, enjoyment is now just as elusive as ever. The existence of the superegoic command "Enjoy!" merely produces a sense of obligation to enjoy oneself; *it does not produce enjoyment*. And insofar as it creates this sense of obligation, the imperative to enjoy

makes enjoyment that much more difficult. As Žižek points out in *For They Know Not What They Do*, “superego marks a point at which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy—which, one must add, is the most effective way to block access to enjoyment.”<sup>52</sup> When subjects feel enjoined to have a certain experience, even the experience of enjoyment, this inevitably creates a psychic barrier to achieving that experience. Just as telling oneself “I must fall asleep right away” is the surest way *not* to be able to sleep, feeling that one must enjoy makes enjoyment next to impossible. Consequently, the unavoidable effect of the command to enjoy is the barring of enjoyment in a heretofore unequalled way.

The imperative to enjoy produces the same problem for the subject that imperatives in general produce: they have the effect of creating an impossible situation for the subject. The more that the subject complies with an imperative—even the imperative to enjoy—the more poignantly she/he feels her/his failure to comply *fully*. This is why the most moral subjects often proclaim their great immorality. Their attempt to heed the moral imperative leads to an endless cycle of moral failure. As Lacan points out, “whoever attempts to submit to the moral law sees the demands of his superego grow increasingly meticulous and increasingly cruel.”<sup>53</sup> With the imperative to enjoy, this dynamic becomes even stronger. The subject who attempts to obey the command to enjoy cannot help but notice all the ways that she/he is not fully enjoying because contemporary society so highlights the endless possibilities for enjoyment. This sense of not fully enjoying themselves leads contemporary subjects to move so quickly—from commodity to commodity, from internet site to internet site, from channel to channel. Each new thing seems to hold the elusive enjoyment that would fulfill the imperative, and yet each new thing disappoints the subject in its turn, perpetually revealing the impossibility of complying with the command to enjoy.

The problem with the command to enjoy is already anticipated in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant rejects the idea that the moral law might command our happiness precisely because such a command would prove impossible to obey. According to Kant, we can obey—or at least envision the possibility of obedience—when the law demands the renunciation of all enjoyment; the moral law’s object is here clearly identified. However, in his discussion of the moral commandment in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he insists that the indeterminacy of happiness renders it an impossible object of this commandment: “the problem of determining surely and universally which action would promote the happiness of a rational being is completely insoluble, so that there can be no imperative with respect to it that would, in the strict sense, command him to do what would make him happy.”<sup>54</sup> For Kant, the more we attempt to calculate our enjoyment and nail it down, the more it escapes us. As a result, there is no path that we can establish that

will allow us to obey the command to enjoy. If the law commands enjoyment, we cannot comply. We necessarily find ourselves even more bereft of enjoyment than in the society of prohibition.

The example of Kant is instructive because Kantian morality doesn't foreclose the possibility of enjoyment, even though it indicates that enjoyment cannot be legislated. What Kant shows is that subjects can only obtain enjoyment or happiness indirectly. In aiming for morality, according to Kant, we can gain enjoyment as a side benefit of our moral activity. This is the indirect path through which we can access enjoyment. The very nature of enjoyment demands that we approach it in this way—through aiming elsewhere. It is precisely this indirection that the society of commanded enjoyment does not allow us. The imperative to enjoy establishes a direct route to enjoyment and thereby, paradoxically, renders it inaccessible.

It is in this way that Bloom's horrified response to proliferating enjoyment misses the mark.<sup>55</sup> We are not witnessing an explosion of unrestrained enjoyment today, but its opposite. Hence, though I often employ the term "society of enjoyment" to indicate the society structured around the superegoic imperative to enjoy, this shorthand should in no way be taken to suggest that this is a society where subjects are actually enjoying themselves. There is, instead, an absence of enjoyment today. We see this absence of enjoyment in the widespread apathy of contemporary subjects, their aggressiveness, their cynicism, and in the other symptoms of the society of enjoyment that the following chapters will discuss. The command to enjoy thus reveals itself as simply a more nuanced form of prohibition. Rather than creating subjects of unrestrained enjoyment (as Bloom fears), the command to enjoy effectively continues the traditional function of the symbolic Law.

Despite the explicit absence of the Law of the Father demanding sacrifice and obedience to its dictates, we are not witnessing an explosion of radical behavior, a mass breaking free from the confines of the social order. The Law of the Father continues to predominate even as the authority of patriarchal fathers evanesces.<sup>56</sup> This complacency with the social order, however, is not experienced as complacency, but as defiance. Our complacency—our conformism—feels as if it is radical activity: today, we think we are challenging authority at precisely the moment we are most wholly following its dictates. This is why political conservatives increasingly see themselves—and paint their conservatism—as rebellious. For them, conservatism represents a willingness to defy the ruling structure of contemporary society. FOX News represents its conservatism as an "alternative" to the dominant ideology. And even someone like Rush Limbaugh can imagine himself (like the Leftist of old) "telling truth to power." Most of its practitioners today define conservatism as a radical program—thus the "Republican *Revolution*" of 1994—despite how this contradicts the very definition of the term "conservative."

Whereas within the society of prohibition it is relatively easy to distinguish between conformity and defiance, this becomes increasingly difficult within a society structured around the command to enjoy. This is because, in a society of enjoyment, we no longer experience the explicit prohibition from the social order, which lets us know that the symbolic order is structuring and determining our behavior. We don't experience the symbolic law in its prohibitory form, and so we imagine that, when we act, we are acting without reference to the symbolic law, that it does not shape our actions. Our failure to experience the impinging of the symbolic law, however, doesn't mean that it does not exist.

Insofar as symbolic authority operates today undetected, less obtrusively than when it manifested itself through prohibition, it increases its power over contemporary subjects. The less we feel symbolic authority as a repressive power, the more likely we are to submit to its dictates, as Michel Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This is precisely the ruse that the symbolic order perpetuates, with relative success, in the society of enjoyment. We no longer experience the symbolic order taking its "bite" of enjoyment out of us, the extraction of its "entry fee." Nonetheless, the symbolic order continues in its constitutive role in our lives, though we become increasingly unable to experience it. This change in our experience allows us to imagine ourselves enjoying—not bound by the symbolic strictures that once deprived people of enjoyment. This enjoyment that we experience, however, is only the image of enjoyment, an imagined enjoyment. In contrast to the society of prohibition, the society of enjoyment thrives on imaginary enjoyment. But as we will see in the following chapters, enjoyment in the Real—an experience delimited by the symbolic Law—remains just as scarce.

## *Chapter Two*

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# THE DECLINE OF PATERNAL AUTHORITY

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### ABSENCE . . . OR PRESENCE?

The emergence of the society of commanded enjoyment enacts a dramatic shift in paternal authority. In contrast to the society of enjoyment, the fundamental feature of the society of prohibition is a strong paternal authority who enforces this prohibition and thus acts as a barrier to enjoyment. Keeping society free of open displays of enjoyment, the symbolic father helps to keep subjects content despite their lack of access to prohibited enjoyment. Subjects realize that their duty to the father involves refusing enjoyment, and they see that the prohibition of enjoyment applies to everyone else as well. Thus, the figure of the symbolic father helps to make existence under the prohibition tolerable. Though there always remains a distance between the actual flesh-and-blood father and the symbolic father, the actual father stands in for the latter, attempting to embody symbolic authority. As Lacan puts it, symbolic authority “is incarnated in persons who will bear this authority.”<sup>1</sup> The actual father’s failure to fully realize symbolic authority—his inevitable signs of weakness resulting from his actual existence—do not render symbolic authority any less efficacious. “What is essential,” Lacan adds, “is that the subject [. . .] has acquired the dimension of the Name of the Father.”<sup>2</sup> In the society of prohibition, the actual father makes himself into a vehicle for symbolic authority (i.e., for the Name of the Father), and as such, he has a status within that society commensurate with this authority.

Though the society of prohibition requires and values the symbolic father, this figure has almost completely disappeared from the contemporary cultural

landscape. This absence of the traditional father is a symptom of the emergence of the command to enjoy. To understand the turn from prohibition to commanded enjoyment one must recognize the change at work in the status of paternal authority. The emergent society of enjoyment coincides with a decline in the overt functioning of the father and of symbolic authority. There is no room in this society for the traditional symbolic father because his presence bars enjoyment and commands subjects to accept dissatisfaction. As a result, Paul Verhaeghe notes, “Nowadays, we are living in a period when the symbolic father as such is murdered, together with the belief in him.”<sup>23</sup> This murder of the symbolic father has transpired, first of all, on the level of structure.

For Lacan, the symbolic father is crucial because he embodies the Master Signifier (the Name-of-the-Father). This signifier arrests the sliding of signification that occurs within the symbolic order and thereby produces stable meaning. Unlike all the other signifiers, the Master Signifier does not fluctuate, providing a ground for the system of signification. Whereas all other signifiers acquire meaning through their relationship to other signifiers—we can identify a table because it isn’t a chair, which isn’t a couch, and so on—the Master Signifier refers only to itself. It is a self-justifying signifier-without-signified. Without this signifier, meaning becomes difficult to pin down and remains in flux. As Lacan notes in *Seminar III*, “The relationship between the signified and the signifier always appears fluid, always ready to come undone.”<sup>24</sup> The Master Signifier quilts this tenuous relationship between signifier and signified by providing a point at which the relationship between signified and signifier ceases to be fluid. This is the one signifier that always means the same thing, and its meaning does not rely on any other signifiers. It is the signifier that is what it is. But today it has become increasingly difficult to find evidence of a Master Signifier. We seem to lack the self-referential signifier that puts a definite end to the slippage of meaning.

The role that the Master Signifier plays in putting an end to the slippage of meaning and cutting off possibilities has made it unfashionable throughout the emerging society of enjoyment. Because it has the function of excluding certain meanings, the Master Signifier seems the enemy of tolerance and inclusivity. To side with the Master Signifier—no matter which one—is to side with exclusivity. For instance, to take up class as a Master Signifier in one’s theoretical approach, in the manner of the traditional Marxist, is to marginalize race, gender, and sexuality. However, the more we emphasize tolerance, the more we eliminate the place for this kind of privileged signifier. In this way, the structural position of the symbolic father disappears as a viable social identity for actual fathers. Actual fathers “neglect” their role as fathers not simply because they are irresponsible individuals but because the role itself has ceased to be socially viable.

Of course, it has long been the contention of conservative cultural critics that paternal authority has undergone a precipitous decline, that the father no longer holds the position that he once did in American society. These critics—among them, Dan Quayle, William Bennett, and David Blankenhorn—link the decline in paternal authority to the chaotic and permissive nature of contemporary society: all our social problems result from the absence of the father who would lay down the law and utter his prohibition. Dan Quayle exemplifies this position, as he attacks liberals for their role in the father's decline, for having “undermined parental authority over children, weakened discipline in schools and obstructed the moral education of the young.”<sup>5</sup> For Quayle, liberal egalitarianism has unleashed the anarchic enjoyment of children, and we need the father to restore the safeguards against this enjoyment. Quayle identifies the actual father with symbolic authority—the introduction of “moral education” (i.e., prohibition). The implications of this line of thought suggest that removing the father from the family removes the only barrier against unrestrained enjoyment, and thus there exists a direct link between the father's absence and adolescent promiscuity and violence.

In *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn takes up the conservative case for the traditional father at greater length. He sees fatherlessness as characterizing the contemporary American landscape, and he laments what has become of the father: “The United States is becoming an increasingly fatherless society. A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, an American child can reasonably expect not to. Fatherlessness is approaching a rough parity with fatherhood as a defining feature of American childhood.”<sup>6</sup> For Blankenhorn, this increasing absence of fathers from the home represents a fundamental shift in the very social organization of American society. Whereas traditionally the father was present to provide discipline in the home, now there is no source for discipline and prohibition. In short, to put it in our terms, he views this fatherlessness as a crisis because he recognizes the central role played by the father in prohibiting enjoyment. Without the father prohibiting enjoyment, nothing stops boys from turning to violence and girls from turning to sex, which is why American society has become increasingly bloody and promiscuous. As Blankenhorn puts it, “One primary result of growing fatherlessness is more boys with guns. Another is more girls with babies.”<sup>7</sup> The absence of the father not only disrupts the structure of the family, but it also triggers all of our most serious social problems. This mantra has become a standard refrain from conservatives, but today even cultural critics on the Left have taken notice of the father's absence and its supposed nefarious effects. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi, a self-proclaimed feminist (and author of the feminist manifesto *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*), details the negative ramifications of the missing father.

While conservatives such as Quayle and Blankenhorn blame liberals for undermining the status of the father, Faludi contends that in the era of what she labels “ornamental culture” the father no longer has a role to play. The predominance of enjoyment and images of enjoyment leave no place for the father to pass on knowledge (about how things work) and values (about the value of loyalty and hard work). The father’s knowledge and values have no place in the contemporary world. As Faludi puts it, “In an age of celebrity, the father has no body of knowledge or authority to transmit to the son.”<sup>8</sup> Formerly, paternal authority did not just consist of laying down a prohibition, but included communicating everything that the father had mastered. But in a society where the command to enjoy predominates, “there is no role for the father. Where there is nothing for him to master and so nothing for him to hand on, he becomes at best a glorified baby-sitter.”<sup>9</sup> All of the knowledge that the father once embodied and passed on to the son has become useless because, according to Faludi, success doesn’t require knowledge today. The basis for success has become celebrity, not knowledge. The figure of the father once served as the master, the one who seemed to have all the answers, but now this figure has become superfluous. And the absence of a role for the father in contemporary society has produced an absence of actual fathers. *Stiffed* chronicles numerous cases of men living without fathers, without any examples on which to model their masculinity. Without the direction of a father figure, Faludi contends, these men lose track of their place in the social order and their connection to the world around them.

Though Faludi grasps the phenomenology of the decline of the father in contemporary American society, she does at the same time betray a nostalgia for an older masculine ideal—that of the organization man, the man who sacrifices his individual pursuits for the sake of the social good. In *Stiffed*, Faludi apotheosizes the men of the Long Beach Naval Shipyard (along with male icons such as Daniel Boone) for their commitment to their community. They sacrificed so that their community could prosper, and Faludi celebrates this as a model for “constructive” masculinity that has been lost today. (As she writes, the shipyard is closing down.) This attitude places Faludi surprisingly close to groups that have formed to restore this lost masculinity (such as the Promise Keepers), groups that Faludi discusses in her book with an ambivalence that belies her political distance from them. The problem with Faludi’s nostalgia is that a return to the traditional father is impossible. The symbolic father can only appear today in the form of its desperate (and ultimately failed) reassertion. Though Faludi does not go so far as to advocate a return to traditional notions of paternity, most critics of the father’s demise have taken this next step.

The absence of the traditional father, the disappearance of his social role, has spawned many attempts to reconstitute paternal authority. In fact, the

fight against the permissiveness of contemporary culture is often couched in terms of fathers once again reasserting their authority and taking paternal responsibility. The huge 1997 gathering of the Promise Keepers group in Washington is only the most prominent example of this culture-wide movement. This group of men came together in order to proclaim a renewed commitment to the paternal role that they had in the past failed to fulfill properly. In his advice for fellow Promise Keepers, Tony Evans, a leader of the group, makes clear that reclaiming paternal authority is its fundamental goal:

The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: “Honey, I’ve made a terrible mistake. I’ve given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.” Don’t misunderstand what I’m saying here. I’m not suggesting that you *ask* for your role back, I’m urging you to *take it back*.<sup>10</sup>

The project outlined here is one of restoring manliness. According to the logic of the Promise Keepers, the sorry state of paternal authority has produced subjects who don’t know that they must accept limitations and who refuse to compromise their own enjoyment for the sake of societal restrictions. We are experiencing so many social problems because fathers have not taught their children the word “no!”—or they haven’t been there to teach them this. If we want to avoid children spiraling out of control, we must have fathers who are more present in the lives of their children. This position represents the prevailing conservative response not only to the absence of the father, but also to the society of enjoyment as a whole.

Because they laud the bygone era of prohibition, calls for a return to paternal authority seem as if they represent a longing to escape the society of enjoyment and its “excessive permissiveness.” But as the mantra of Promise Keeper Tony Evans indicates, the case for a restored fatherhood is actually an attempt to produce enjoyment—and thus to comply with the command to enjoy. In the advice cited above, Evans tells men that they no longer have to worry about all the restraints of courtesy and political correctness when relating to their wives; they can enjoy openly. His advice—“I’m not suggesting that you *ask* for your role back, I’m urging you to *take it back*”—frees men to enjoy like “real men,” to act decisively and freely. Here is perhaps the chief indication that we are in the midst of a society of enjoyment: even the attempt to restore prohibition follows the logic of the demand for enjoyment, albeit in the guise of opposing it. When we resurrect the father today, he doesn’t appear in the form of the symbolic father, the barrier to enjoyment. Instead, he appears in a form consonant with the society of enjoyment.<sup>11</sup>

The overt prohibition and the kind of father embodying it have largely disappeared, but this disappearance has not—as the Promise Keepers claim—left a void. According to Joan Copjec, “the old modern order of desire, ruled

over by an Oedipal father, has begun to be replaced by a new order.<sup>712</sup> In this new order, a new father has emerged—a father Slavoj Žižek calls the “anal father of enjoyment.” Rather than prohibiting enjoyment, this new father commands it. The mistake of the Promise Keepers is to see an absence of the father where there has been, in fact, an increased presence. The new father is an *anal* father because he obsessively attends to every detail of our lives, prying into every private enclave where we might hide enjoyment. His anality consists in his controlling everything. For the anal father, the very conception of a private space (or a private enjoyment) does not hold. In contrast to the old symbolic father (who was an absent ruler and the ruler over a world of absence), the new father is overly present in our lives. The different incarnations of paternal authority bring with them a different fundamental problem. The traditional father ruled through absence, and his very distance from the subject made him seem indestructible. The anal father rules through presence, which renders him vulnerable but also inoculates him from critique. The problem today is not that we can’t find the father, but that we can’t get away from him.

The emergence of the anal father is the salient feature of the incipient society of enjoyment. He is the authority figure that corresponds to this society, just as the traditional father functions as the authority figure in the society of prohibition. However, the authority of the anal father is much more difficult to identify than that of the traditional father. The traditional father directly takes up a position of authority, whereas the anal father insinuates himself as—and believes himself to be—just another subject. He is no longer an ideal that looks down on the subject from on high (from a position of authority), but an ideal that exists side-by-side with the subject. We can see the evidence for the existence of this new father in the transformation that actual authority figures have undergone in the last forty years. In contrast to yesterday’s aloof executive who issues commands but always remains out of sight of his employees, the figure of the anal father manifests himself in the contemporary CEO with an open-door policy, always seeking input from his employees rather than simply giving orders. He is, in other words, an ideal ego rather than an ego ideal (which was the position of the traditional father). This seems like a democratizing of authority: no longer does symbolic authority remain aloof and unconnected with the activity of subjects, but it now enters this activity itself. The problem is that in the process of becoming less aloof, the anal father becomes a rival of the subject. Because he was distanced and removed, no one could compete with the traditional father, but the anal father immediately strikes us as a rival—specifically, a rival for enjoyment. As one of our rivals, the anal father lacks the conspicuousness of the traditional father.

The more that symbolic authority—in the figure of the anal father—assumes the position of just another subject among subjects, the more difficult

it becomes to identify this authority. By remaining aloof and by demanding the renunciation of enjoyment, the traditional father distanced himself from those he commanded. The anal father eschews this distance. In doing so, he appears less despotic, but his friendliness inoculates him to critiques and to questions. Though the anal father represents a leveling of paternal authority, he also represents an increase in its power. In this sense, we should view this new father in radically ambivalent terms: he is more democratic and yet more powerful than the traditional father (because the authority that we can't recognize as authority is always more powerful than the openly authoritative authority). One thus cannot say that the anal father represents "progress." But it isn't a question of judging the anal father or choosing between the traditional father and the anal father. It is instead a question of grasping the effects of the change in the status of authority.

#### OUR FRIEND, THE NEW AUTHORITY

The contrast between the two fathers makes itself felt in Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Though the film clearly sides with the newly emergent anal father of enjoyment, it depicts his emergence through a struggle with traditional paternal authority. The fact that Weir sets the film in the 1950s and at an exclusive all-boys boarding school highlights the conflict between the two fathers and has the added effect of placing the anal father in the position of the outsider. The filmic milieu offers the traditional father home-court advantage: this is a world in which traditional symbolic authority polices all enjoyment and demands its complete renunciation; symbolic authority's overt presence here serves to make subjects quite aware of their castration. This authority manifests itself conspicuously in the *mise-en-scène* of the film's opening. The film begins with a new school year at the prestigious Wellton Academy. We see the students dressed formally and speaking to both teachers and parents in a highly respectful manner. When, at the opening assembly, the headmaster asks the students to identify the school's "four pillars," the students all rise and recite them in unison. From these initial shots of the film, it quickly becomes apparent that symbolic authority rules Wellton efficiently and thoroughly.

Against this backdrop, the anal father emerges in the form of Mr. Keating (Robin Williams), a new English teacher. Unlike the other teachers and administrators at Wellton—and unlike the parents of the boys he teaches—Keating does not preach obedience but encourages his students to find their own path to enjoyment, to, as he puts it, "seize the day." Reciting Thoreau and Whitman, Keating tells them that they must avoid conformity to demands of symbolic authority and instead enjoy themselves. Keating's first class illustrates

the difference between his authority and the headmaster's authority depicted in the opening sequence. Whereas the headmaster ordered and expected disciplined behavior from the students, Keating shows them pictures of past students from the school who are now dead, and he encourages them to enjoy themselves before they too are "food for worms."

The struggle that ensues for the hearts of the students is clearly no struggle at all; traditional symbolic authority has no chance against Keating's call for enjoyment. In response to Keating's command that they pursue enjoyment, some of the students come together to form the film's titular group, a group that meets in a cave in the woods late at night, in defiance of school rules. This defiance, however, does not at first arouse the suspicion of the school authorities: because it takes place literally underground and under cover of darkness, none of the school authorities even notice it. Historically, traditional symbolic authority has always permitted such transgressions as long as the enjoyment in them remained hidden and underground. The conflict develops only at the point when the boys in the film bring their pursuit of enjoyment out into the open. When they unabashedly pursue enjoyment publicly, the figures of authority in the film respond with the full weight of the symbolic prohibition, demanding unequivocally that the enjoyment cease. This becomes most apparent in the case of Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard), the leader of the Dead Poets Society.

Encouraged by Keating's proclamations about the importance of finding one's own individual enjoyment, Neil discovers that acting is his particular path, the way in which he enjoys. It is precisely this enjoyment, however, that Neil's father prohibits, laying down the commandment that Neil give up this "acting nonsense." As Alenka Zupančič concisely puts it, "Neil's situation can be described as follows: he has his Thing—acting—but Father forbids it."<sup>13</sup> Neil's father not only forbids this enjoyment, but he also demands that Neil take up a prescribed symbolic role: he tells Neil in no uncertain terms, "you're going to go to Harvard, and you're going to be a doctor." Here, Neil's father occupies the position of symbolic authority, and the commandment of this authority is unambiguous: sacrifice your enjoyment for the sake of symbolic recognition and identity. Neil feels the crushing power of this symbolic authority over him and the dissatisfaction that its prohibition occasions. (In fact, the prohibition of enjoyment even drives Neil to kill himself.) Faced with the clear functioning of symbolic authority, Neil has no respite from the experience of his castration—being barred from enjoyment—and its attendant dissatisfaction. These are the effects of the symbolic order that he—and other subjects in times of conspicuous symbolic authority—can't help but feel.

But Mr. Perry does not have the last word in *Dead Poets Society*. Even though Mr. Perry and the school authorities blame Mr. Keating for Neil's suicide and even though they recognize the disruptive impact of Keating's

esposal of enjoyment, they are unable to extirpate his influence. At the end of the film, Wellton fires Keating for his role in the formation of the Dead Poets Society and in Neil's death, but the film's famous final scene makes clear that Keating has won the hearts of the students. In that scene, the school's headmaster takes over the English class formerly taught by Keating, and he attempts to return the class to the rigid, authoritative structure that predominates at Wellton. But as he is leaving the campus, Keating interrupts the class to retrieve his personal belongings. After gathering his things together, Keating opens the door to leave, and one of the students, Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), stands on his desk (a gesture Keating had earlier championed) and proclaims, "Oh Captain, my Captain" (Whitman's address to Lincoln, which Keating encouraged the students to apply to him). Many of the other students follow Anderson in his act, and they remain standing on their desks despite the headmaster's repeated demands that they step down. The headmaster employs all of his symbolic authority on this occasion—even threatening expulsion—and it is still no match for Keating's appeal. In this way, the film lays out the struggle between two competing modes of authority, and it leaves no doubt about the winning side. One of the reasons the anal father has prevailed over the traditional symbolic father is this personal appeal. Unlike the imposing symbolic father, the anal father, because he licenses our enjoyment rather than prohibiting it, seems much more approachable and kind.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does the film depict the victory of the anal father over traditional symbolic authority, but it also reveals its investment in the anal father through the very way that it lays out the struggle. While the figures of traditional symbolic authority are clearly staking out an ideological position (championing the prohibition of enjoyment), Keating seems to be simply an innocent victim, guilty only of stimulating the boys to do what they wanted to do anyway. When the headmaster blames Keating for Neil's death, we cannot but feel the injustice of this: obviously it is Mr. Perry's prohibition of Neil's enjoyment—not Keating's encouragement of it—that resulted in Neil's suicide, since the suicide occurs immediately after Mr. Perry punishes Neil for his disobedience in pursuit of his love for acting. Thus, Keating appears as an innocent victim, a scapegoat for Mr. Perry's own guilt in the death of his son. And this is how the film reveals the depth of its attachment to the new brand of authority that Keating represents: *Dead Poets Society* is invested in Keating (as a representative anal father of enjoyment) to such an extent that it does not even depict his authority as authority. The film presents Keating as a benevolent teacher interested only in the welfare of his students, not as a rival authority to Mr. Perry or the headmaster. Precisely because he doesn't appear in the guise of an alternate authority, Keating's authority is all the more powerful—over both his students and over us as viewers of the film. It is nearly impossible to view the film without seeing Keating as the innocent victim of the cruelty of traditional symbolic

authority. This situation alone indicates the degree of the film's ideological commitment to Keating and what he represents.

As *Dead Poets Society* demonstrates, the anal father himself always seems less than authoritative. Unlike traditional symbolic authority, the anal father appears in the guise of one of us; he's on our side, not on the side of authority. But as one of us, he exerts his authority in ways that traditional symbolic authority could never imagine. We aren't suspicious of an authority who doesn't appear to be an authority. Hence, Mr. Perry and the headmaster can only look on in envy at the authority Keating wields. When they stand on their desks in the film's final scene, the students express their willingness to bow down to the new authority and eschew the old, thereby clearly demonstrating the power of the new.

#### ENJOYING ONE'S COIN

The anal father is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, emerging with the leveling of traditional authority, but it is especially with the development of global capitalism that the sway of this new father has increased. Global capitalism functions by submitting all cultural life to the process of commodification, and this process can only be sustained if everyone is engaged in the endless pursuit of enjoyment, a pursuit that the anal father authorizes. Under the reign of the anal father, I am constantly confronted with the Other's enjoyment in its most unbearable dimension. Wherever I turn, I cannot escape the Other's enjoyment. Whereas the dead Oedipal father's name presides over a society devoid of enjoyment, the anal father presides over a society crawling with it. The omnipresent advertisements calling us to enjoy ourselves attest to the anal father's reign, and this reign represents a dramatic shift in the deployment of the father's authority. Whereas the old father ruled as a present absence, the new father's presence is suffocating; we can never get away from sensing his enjoyment, even when he is physically absent. And his enjoyment doesn't bar us from enjoying. The presence of this enjoyment instead calls us to enjoy ourselves, and we never feel as if we are doing so adequately enough. Our duty today lies not so much in going to work and working hard as in, for instance, going on a cruise and really having fun. This enjoyment also makes its presence felt in the form of a more powerful superego. The superego keeps the anal father's standard of enjoyment constantly at the fore of our thoughts, constantly present. It is precisely this dimension of the anal father—the overwhelming, suffocating presence of his enjoyment—that becomes clear in David Mamet's play *American Buffalo*.

In *American Buffalo*, Don, a junk dealer, has unknowingly sold a valuable coin to a collector. The play consists of Don's effort—aided by, alternately, his

“friends” Bob and Teach—to steal the coin back, now that he has realized its true value. The play’s opening exchange between Bob and Don establishes Fletcher—whom they play cards with and who never physically appears in the play—as the anal father of enjoyment. When Don begins to teach Bob, his young charge, the ins and outs of life, he immediately cites Fletcher as exemplary, as what “a standup guy” should be. Fletcher is exemplary precisely because of his ability to enjoy; he allows no one to steal his enjoyment, to get the better of him. In fact, he is such an expert at enjoying, he can render even the most disadvantageous situation enjoyable. Don tells Bob, “You take him and you put him down in some strange town with just a nickel in his pocket, and by nightfall he’ll have that town by the balls. This is not talk, Bob, this is action.”<sup>15</sup> The key to the father’s enjoyment is his ability to bridge the gap between talk and action, a gap that constantly plagues ordinary subjects. The word is the absence of the thing, and ordinary subjects must satisfy themselves as best they can with this absence, with this sacrifice of the enjoyment of the thing. The father, because he doesn’t have this gap between his words and his actions, gets to enjoy the thing. This is why Don tells Bob, “Just one thing, Bob. Action counts. Action talks and bullshit walks” (4). For Don, action is the father’s enjoyment, and bullshit is the castrated experience of the ordinary subject.

We see Fletcher’s action—his enjoyment—most clearly in his card playing. Fletcher wins at cards because he knows how to enjoy, as Don and Bob’s conversation about the previous night’s card game indicates:

BOB: You win?

DON: I did all right.

BOB: Yeah?

DON: Yeah. I did okay. Not like *Fletch* . . .

BOB: No, huh?

DON: I mean, Fletcher, he plays *cards*.

BOB: He’s real sharp.

DON: You’re goddamn right he is. (6, Mamet’s emphasis)

Neither Don nor Bob can say exactly what Fletcher has, but he has *it*—a certain *je ne sais quoi* that allows him to hoard enjoyment for himself. In this sense, it is important that Fletcher’s talent lies in cards and having a town “by the balls.” No one can say precisely what this sort of talent is, save that it is something which allows him to get the best out of every situation. In a word, he knows. This knowledge is what makes Fletcher an exemplary instance of the contemporary anal father. As Žižek puts it in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* this kind of father has “a very special kind of knowledge, a *knowledge of enjoyment*,

i.e., the knowledge which is by definition excluded from the Law in its universal-neutral guise: it pertains to the very structure of Law that it is 'blind' to this knowledge."<sup>16</sup> In the contrast to the Law and to the Name of the Father, the anal father has this knowledge. What this father knows is the underside of the social order, the hidden, criminal world that is full of enjoyment.<sup>17</sup> He has a talent for cards (because he cheats, of course), for shady business deals, and for all kinds of criminal activity—for anything that involves the secret of enjoyment.

The tie between the anal father and the criminal underworld becomes readily apparent in the films of David Lynch, in which the anal father appears as almost a standard character. He is Baron Harkonnen in *Dune*, Bob in *Twin Peaks*, Mr. Eddy in *Lost Highway*, and, most famously, Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*. All four characters are associated with the underworld or the world of crime, and each of them—rather than a traditional public figure—is the central authority figure in their respective films. The power of traditional symbolic authority today, as Lynch demonstrates in each case, pales in comparison with the power of these figures. In *Blue Velvet*, the police in Lumberton are either unable to thwart the machinations of Frank Booth, or they are part of his organization. In *Lost Highway*, Mr. Eddy makes the only show of authority in the film, when he runs a tailgater off the road and lectures him on the rules of driving etiquette.<sup>18</sup> The police remain, for the duration of the film, in the position of impotent observers, never once taking authoritative action. This dynamic, present throughout Lynch's oeuvre, indicates that a fundamental shift has occurred in the nature of authority. Whereas authority previously had to make at least the pretense of preventing corruption and eschewing criminality, now it is openly corrupt and criminal. It is openly on the side of enjoyment, not prohibition.

This becomes most evident on an aesthetic level in the character of Baron Harkonnen from Lynch's film version of *Dune*. The Baron's body itself suggests his excessive enjoyment: he is obese, but even more importantly, oozing sores cover his body. Though they would seem to clearly detract from the Baron's attractiveness and appeal, these sores in no way serve as a source of shame for the Baron. In fact, he has his servants constantly complimenting him on his diseases. We hear one say, "Your diseases—love to me." The Baron prides himself on these open sores precisely because they are indications of his enjoyment. They indicate points at which the inside of the Baron's body has bubbled over onto its surface. What usually remains hidden within—our private enjoyment—is, in the case of Baron Harkonnen, completely visible on his bodily surface. In addition to the presence of his oozing sores, the Baron also displays his enjoyment through flight. He is the only character in the film who levitates, flying around his castle while everyone else remains confined to the ground. These readily visible indications of enjoyment in the character of the

Baron, a figure of authority, have the effect of making him a far more horrifying figure than the traditional father. Seeing the corruption and enjoyment of the anal father makes it clear that he has an intimate knowledge of what the traditional father could only prohibit.

#### STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

Because we constantly see the enjoyment of the anal father, he lacks, in contrast to the symbolic father, the illusion of omnipotence. The authority of the symbolic father depends on collective belief in his power. This is what makes the subversion of this father a relatively straightforward matter. It consists in simply showing that the father doesn't really have the strength that he pretends to have. With the anal father, however, things become much more difficult. As a present father (rather than an absent one), the anal father always shows off his impotence. Though we constantly see his failures and impotence, the anal father loses none of his authority over us in the process. Fletcher, the anal father in *American Buffalo*, ends up getting mugged and having his jaw broken. This indication of his fallibility, however, does nothing to lessen his authority over the other characters. After learning of Fletcher's hospitalization, the other characters, in fact, feel their own failure to enjoy even more emphatically. Immediately after hearing the news, Teach proclaims, "I mean, we're fucked up here. We have not blown the shot, but we're fucked up" (97). They, not Fletcher, have "fucked up." Instead of relieving his pressure on them to enjoy, Fletcher's weakness increases it. Even in his weakness, Fletcher—at least in the minds of the other characters—continues to enjoy, thus marking an even greater contrast with the others than before they saw his weakness.

This kind of enjoyment in impotence makes subversion in the late capitalist world of the anal father doubly difficult. It isn't enough to simply reveal the failure of mastery in contemporary society, because every such effort serves only to increase the power of that mastery. Perhaps the exemplary instance of the way in which exposing the anal father's impotence increased his mastery occurred in the case of Ronald Reagan. Even when the press put his impotence or corruption clearly on display (in exposing, for instance, his naps during cabinet meetings or his lying about the Iran Contra scandal), his popularity—i.e., his mastery—never abated and, in fact, grew.<sup>19</sup> This is how we can be sure of Reagan's status as an anal father; like Reagan, the anal father is a "teflon" master, one to whom no critique can ever manage to stick.<sup>20</sup> The anal father's weakness has the paradoxical effect of increasing his resistance to critique.

This resistance to critique is the predominant feature of power in global capitalism. With the old paternal authority, a critique that unmasked the

functioning of its power had the effect of disabling that functioning. Or, as the Enlightenment mantra would have it, knowledge had a certain power over power. Just as we can see the development of a resistance to critique in the figure of Reagan, something similar occurs in film and television. The threat that knowledge posed to power led film and television, until recent years, to hide their means of production, to conceal the apparatus that produced the end-product that we see on the movie or television screen. The necessity of this concealment led Brecht to conceive the act of laying bare the productive apparatus as a radical, counterhegemonic activity. Ideological art, according to Brecht, was ideological because it presented the illusion of a completed product and hid the productive mechanism (the process) that created this product, in the same way that capitalism hid the labor that produced the commodity—the labor of the proletariat—within the commodity form itself. In order to be radical, then, art had to show the backstage, to provide the spectators with a knowledge of its power of illusion—thereby alienating the spectators from their positions within the functioning of power. This explains the radicality of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, for instance, in which we see the camera shooting the scene during the film's climax. According to the theory of Brechtian alienation effects, the knowledge that the scene has been produced dislodges our investment in it and breaks the hold that the power of the film has over us.

Today, however, it is no longer just radical works of art such as Bergman's films and Brecht's plays that lay bare that apparatus of production. This exposure of the apparatus of production is an everyday occurrence, happening in the most mainstream films and television shows.<sup>21</sup> These revelations of the working of power do not provoke an alienation effect. They have no ability to dislodge the functioning of power, but instead work to sustain it. Even television news programs—engines for the dissemination of ideology—freely expose the backrooms where they assimilate and “produce” news. Watching the television news, we are able to see workers behind the news anchor, busily manipulating the information that the anchor will present to us. We can see, in other words, the ideological machine that decides what information we should receive and what we shouldn't—and yet this in no way undermines the authority of the presentation. This insight into the functioning of power, like the insights into Reagan's foibles, has the effect of cementing power's hold over us rather than relaxing it. It does this by cutting off all lines of critique prior to their articulation: if we try to claim that producers of television news have prepackaged the news for us, they have already admitted this in the very form of the program's presentation, and so our critique has no sting. In this sense, the contemporary television news program is just another version of the anal father, made stronger by its ability to make its weaknesses—potential lines of critique—into additional signs of strength.

This resistance of the anal father to critique becomes especially apparent in the case of Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*. While the film's final scene shows the students successfully transgressing the demands of the headmaster (the representative of the symbolic father), no such transgression occurs with Keating. Earlier in the film, Keating commands three students to walk around the school courtyard, and when they begin to walk uniformly with the other students clapping in unison, Keating stops them and upbraids them (kindly of course) for their conformity. He urges each student to discover his own individual way of walking—i.e., to find his own private enjoyment. When Charlie Dalton (Gale Hansen) refuses to walk at Keating's command, this moment of disobedience does not in any way subvert Keating's authority. On the contrary, Keating points out that Dalton proves his point: his subversive display fits right into Keating's "lesson plan." In the face of the anal father's demand for each student to find his private enjoyment, there is no clear path to subversion. In refusing to play along, one plays along all the more. Unlike the symbolic father, the anal father invites our subversion and thereby quells its subversive sting.<sup>22</sup>

The problem arises because subverting the anal father plays directly into his hands. The effort to undermine him inevitably forces the subject into the position that the anal father commands the subject to occupy. This becomes evident in Jonathan Glazer's *Sexy Beast* (2000). The film depicts the story of a retired gangster, Gal (Ray Winstone), and a figure of underworld authority, Don Logan (Ben Kingsley), who works to lure Gal out of retirement in order to work on a heist. Logan functions precisely like the anal father within the film: he visits Gal at his Spanish villa and begins to demand incessantly that Gal accept the job, refusing to accept Gal's repeated refusal. Logan insists that Gal immerse himself again in the underworld—the world of enjoyment. In addition, Logan's efforts at coercing Gal involve the gratuitous display of his own enjoyment and the humiliation of Gal. He boasts to Gal and his friend Aitch (Cavan Kendall) that he has had sex with Aitch's wife, and he mocks Gal for being married to a former porn star whom so many other men have enjoyed. Logan parades himself as the master of enjoyment at the same time that he calls Gal to the world of enjoyment. Unable to fend off this anal father in any other way, Gal's wife finally shoots him, an act that seemingly frees Gal from Logan's demands. However, in order to hide Logan's death from the underworld boss who sent him to retrieve Gal, Gal must return to England and perform the job. Hence, at the moment he escapes Logan's dominance, Gal finds himself compelled to do the exact thing that Logan was demanding. Even in death, the anal father continues to exert his authority and to place nearly impassable barriers in the way of subversion. To subvert an anal father such as Logan is to fit nicely into his plans.

In the face of this figure who is so impervious to critique or attack, the situation seems hopeless. The nostalgic efforts of Susan Faludi and Charles Blankenhorn to return to the traditional symbolic father offer one potential path. This is a path that must be thoroughly rejected. As Paul Verhaeghe points out, the attempt to return to the old traditional father always results in producing more new anal fathers. He says, “these days the symbolic authority function itself has disappeared. Consequently, any solution based on this line of thought inevitably results in the establishment of crude, unnegotiated power figures. In other words, primal fathers.”<sup>23</sup> But we can go even further. Not only is such a return ultimately impossible, it also fails to recognize that one of the fundamental insights of psychoanalysis: the symbolic father has always been dead, even before the anal father took his place. This is what Lacan means when he says that “he has never been the father except in the mythology of the son.”<sup>24</sup> We sustain the position of the symbolic father because we do not want to abandon the image of an ultimate enjoyment—the kind of enjoyment that can only exist on the other side of the symbolic father’s prohibition. The prohibition allows us to believe in a total (and totally satisfying) enjoyment even if it constitutes this enjoyment as inherently unreachable. In this sense, prohibition protects us from impossibility. To abandon the symbolic father, then, is to abandon this image of an ultimate enjoyment and to accept that enjoyment can only be elusive and fractured, never complete or securely defined. This is the opportunity that the demise of the traditional father offers us. When we attempt to reassert the authority of the traditional father, we evince our failure to take up this opportunity. But we also fail to be equal to it when we attempt to heed the command of the anal father and commit ourselves to the project of enjoyment. In each case, we succumb to the lure of a total enjoyment.

Today, the most common response to the changing status of the father is the pursuit of enjoyment, following the path that the anal father lays down for us. But as we have seen, this path does not lead to authentic enjoyment. Through the characters that appear onstage in *American Buffalo*, we see the way in which the anal father—and the society of enjoyment—renders enjoyment impossible to come by. Don, Teach, and Bob all experience the imperative to enjoy, but their attempts to heed this imperative fall short because their enjoyment pales in comparison with that of Fletcher. This over-present anal father constantly reminds the subject in the society of enjoyment that she/he has failed to really enjoy—to enjoy in a way that the ideal ego (i.e., the anal father himself) does. This is why Don, Teach, and Bob are such pathetic figures in the play. Their inadequate enjoyment relative to that of Fletcher remains perpetually on display, thus illustrating the hopelessness of obeying the command to enjoy.

Nonetheless, the path that the command to enjoy lays down for us remains enticing. What makes this path so attractive is that it seems to allow

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us to bypass the demands of castration, to access the enjoyment that the old father had hitherto prohibited. But the enjoyment that the anal father allows us always remains imaginary: we are permitted to lose ourselves in a world of images. Whereas the symbolic father's prohibition of enjoyment had the effect of reminding us of our position within the symbolic order (as subjects of castration), the anal father's command to enjoy forestalls this kind of recognition. It prompts us to view ourselves and the other on the imaginary plane—to miss our situatedness within the symbolic order. Thus, the world of the anal father is at once a world of the image.

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## Chapter Three

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# EMBRACING THE IMAGE

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### IMAGES EVERYWHERE

It is a truism to note that we live in an increasingly image-dominated society. This dominance of the image is integral to the society of enjoyment because it provides an avenue for the imaginary enjoyment that characterizes this society. The image allows subjects to imagine that they are complying with the command to enjoy, though the enjoyment that one derives from the image is only imaginary. In this sense, an emphasis on the image is symptomatic of the society of enjoyment because it provides the illusion of total enjoyment and freedom without the kind of enjoyment that might disturb the functioning of the social structure itself. Just as the word and its absence of enjoyment are central in the society of prohibition, the image and its illusion of present enjoyment are central in the society of enjoyment. According to Mitchell Stephens, “the image is replacing the word as the predominant means of mental transport.”<sup>1</sup> Or, as Roland Barthes describes it, “The image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image.”<sup>2</sup> This shift in primacy from the word to the image corresponds, in the terms of psychoanalysis, to a change in emphasis from the symbolic order to the imaginary. Juliet Flower MacCannell points this out in her *Regime of the Brother*: “the modern symbolic has been displaced and modified by an increased power in the imaginary.”<sup>3</sup> This means, most obviously, that images have more of an effect on us today than words, that we are increasingly dealing with images rather than words. When we prepare to cross the street, rather

than seeing a sign that says “walk,” we see an image of a person walking. When we turn on the computer, rather than typing in the name of the program we wish to begin, we click on an icon indicating the program.<sup>4</sup> In these commonplace examples, the image is now doing the work that the word once did. But the turn from the symbolic order to the imaginary extends far beyond this kind of mini-revolution.

We can see the effects of the prevalence of imaginary experience today not only in the ubiquity of television and video, but even more significantly in its effect on older art forms that must accommodate themselves to the imaginary if they are to survive in this video age. The novel is primarily a symbolic, not an imaginary, form. That is to say, it attests to the primacy of words because it uses words to form images. However, the contemporary novel has not been able to ignore the increasing power of the imaginary. Many novelists writing today are attempting to transform the novel, to create a narrative form that is somehow adequate to—or indicative of—this new subject matter. This kind of effort is apparent in the fiction of, for example, Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow, and Toni Morrison, as well as many others. But perhaps no novelist has taken this project as far as Don DeLillo, who has engaged it in some way in each of his novels, from *Americana* to *White Noise* to *Underworld*.

DeLillo’s fiction grapples with the way in which the increased power of the image has transformed our existence. As one of the characters in his novel *The Names* points out:

Film is more than the twentieth-century art. It’s another part of the twentieth-century mind. It’s the world seen from inside. We’ve come to a certain point in the history of film. If a thing can be filmed, film is implied in the thing itself. This is where we are. The twentieth century is *on film*. It’s the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there’s anything about us more important than the fact that we’re constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves. The whole world is on film, all the time.<sup>5</sup>

What DeLillo’s character articulates here is that the turn to the imaginary changes our fundamental experience of the world. Events become imaginary even before they become images because events occur as ready-made images.

DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana* (1971), makes this structural priority of the image evident on the level of its form. In fact, the very effort of the novel to depict the prevalence of the imaginary betrays the structure of narrative, which is fundamentally a symbolic structure. That is to say, the novel fails on the level of its narrative because it becomes just a series of images. But it is precisely this failure that testifies to the novel’s grasp of the contemporary situation—to the power of the imaginary over the symbolic order. The image predominates today to such an extent that one cannot narrativize it successfully or contain it within a symbolic form.

In *Americana*, DeLillo creates a world in which the image is the ultimate measure of reality. In the world of this novel, the image determines what exists. This is why David Bell, the narrator and protagonist of *Americana*, tells his lover, "There are no old times, Wendy. The tapes have been accidentally destroyed."<sup>6</sup> If a recorded image of an event doesn't exist, then the event itself hasn't really happened. In the second half of the novel, David begins to shoot footage for a film while traveling through a small Indiana town. When David films the various people in the town, they are immediately cheered, as if being on film authenticates and justifies their hitherto unnoticed lives. The image provides for them a sense of being present, a sense of actual existence. It does this because all of the characters in the novel believe in the authority of the image: the image is truth. Being captured on film thus supplies them with a sense that their lives have been realized. This kind of logic devalues language—truth can no longer be found in words, only in images—as it grants absolute primacy to the image. In DeLillo's novel, nothing can be more real than an image, and no one questions the image's foundational status.

In addition to depicting the ubiquity of this imaginary mode of experience, DeLillo also produces characters who are isolated within the imaginary realm and who evince a total devotion to the image. David Bell works producing television programs for a network, disseminating images to the American public. Not only does David work for a television network, but both his father and grandfather were advertisers. His entire existence revolves around the image. He claims that in his childhood movies functioned as his religion, and in college, he studied film. The novel culminates with David's effort to make his own film. In all of the work he does and with most of the people who surround him, David is immersed in the image and its promulgation. This professional devotion to image making has its complement in David's personal life: he spends his private time admiring his own mirror image. He recounts, "I had almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts. When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell."<sup>7</sup> The mirror image provides an ideal ego for David with which he identifies fully. This ideal ego finds further support in another image—the figure of Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*, a figure in which David also sees himself. David is nothing but the series of images with which he identifies; he has no sense of an underlying symbolic identity that grounds this series of images. But his imaginary identity, this ideal ego, allows him to avoid bouts with alienation and questions about his identity. It allows him, in short, to avoid the experience of alienation that accompanies one's insertion into the symbolic order. David never experiences alienation or questions about who he is or what he is doing. His traffic with images provides an instant answer to any question that might arise.

But the image also leaves David completely unable to interact with other characters in the novel. At one point, he is unable to have sex with a woman because he cannot conjure up an image of what they would look like together. Because David has no experience of his alienation into the symbolic order—no experience of a symbolic bond that constitutes him in the big Other—he lives a completely isolated life. His encounters with other characters lack proper symbolic mediation, and hence they are inevitably awkward. He interacts comfortably only when he is filming. But the film that he constructs is just a series of images. David shoots a series of scenes of people in Fort Curtis, Indiana, the small town where he is staying while traveling. However, nothing links these scenes to each other: DeLillo offers no sense of any narrative structure that David is constructing, and it's clear that none exists. But what's even more important than this is what happens to the narrative structure of DeLillo's novel. Like David's film, it becomes a series of images strung together. The narrative continuity that animates the first half of the novel disappears in the second half, when David begins making his film.

It is as if the intrusion of an image-driven film into the novel's narrative cripples that narrative, overpowering the logic of words with a logic of images. Novelistic narrative relies on the logic of cause and effect and the interplay of subject and object, even when it plays with these structures. But the image introduces a different logic, radically undermining symbolic narrative. As Jean Baudrillard points out, because of the predominance of the image, "It is the whole traditional world of causality that is in question: the perspectival, determinist mode, the 'active,' critical mode, the analytic mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means."<sup>8</sup> Narrative that occurs in words necessarily relies upon this "traditional world of causality," but imagistic narrative—if this can still be called narrative at all—abandons this world. According to Mitchell Stephens, imagistic mediums such as video will soon largely abandon narrative altogether. But "when it does deign to tell stories," Stephens contends, video "will want to tell them from an excess of perspectives."<sup>9</sup> This excess, while appropriate for the television commercial, has disruptive effects when introduced into the narrative structure of a novel such as *Americana*.

After David begins making his film, the novel's narrative comes to an abrupt halt. He remains in Fort Curtis working on the film but without any sense that this activity is leading to some result. And at one point, David simply decides to leave, and he ends up wandering around the country. The final scene of the novel depicts David in a wild orgy with strange men and prostitutes. But this scene, like the scenes in David's film, doesn't follow from the other events in the novel. It represents a break from the novel's narrative structure. DeLillo produces images, like this final scene, that have no evident rela-

tionship to what has already happened. The images appear not because they advance the narrative but because they are striking images. In this way, DeLillo's novel attempts to capture the rise of the imaginary at the expense of a symbolic narrative structure. But because it attempts to capture this in a symbolic form (the novel), its very success causes *Americana* to fail as a novel: if the image really dominates the word, then one should not be able to contain the flow of images in the linguistic form of the novel. In the imaginary, there is no distance; everything is immediately present, though it is present as image. This ubiquitous presence makes traditional narrative impossible because narrative requires distinction and distance. By depicting narrative giving way to the image, DeLillo offers us a sense of the contemporary power of the imaginary.<sup>10</sup>

In following the trajectory of the career of filmmaker Wim Wenders, we can see another attempt to wrestle with the predominance of the image. The power of the imaginary has led Wenders to turn away from films centering on images and to embrace narrative as a way of resisting this power. Wenders began his career making films that attempted to capture a series of images without subjecting those images to a narrative context. His early film *Im Lauf der Zeit (Kings of the Road)* (1976) exemplifies this style of filmmaking, as it follows two characters on the road without providing an aim or direction for their journey. What the characters see—and the spectator watching them sees—is important, not what they do or where they are going. With this and his other early films, Wenders hoped to present the spectator with pure images in order to inaugurate a more authentic way of seeing. But his faith in the power of the image to revolutionize experience diminished as the image became increasingly predominant in the culture at large.

Wenders began to turn to narrative as a way of counteracting the influence of images, realizing that his image-driven films had become symptomatic of the culture that they aimed to critique. Narrative became for Wenders a way of resisting the image. As Wenders himself puts it at the time of this transition, "I have put more emphasis on a concise use of language [. . .] in order to have language control the images and not just accompany them: language not only as dialogue, because that's something you find in every film, but language as something *above the images*."<sup>11</sup> Language or narrative has to play this role because of the changed status of the image. In his later films (such as *Paris, Texas* [1984], *Der Himmel über Berlin [Wings of Desire]* [1987], and *Bis ans Ende der Welt [Until the End of the World]* [1991]), the image becomes the danger rather than the source of a critical vision. Through these films, according to Gerd Gemünden, Wenders depicts "the threat of the seduction through images within a world of simulacra."<sup>12</sup> As a result, Wenders's later films abandon the attempt to follow the flow of images and begin to follow a narrative logic, as we see in the case of *Paris, Texas*, which chronicles a character's search

for his origin. Images remain an important part of *Paris, Texas*, but unlike in the earlier films, they exist within a narrative logic. Ironically, it is in turning away from the image and toward this kind of film that Wenders attests to the image's power over narrative today. Whereas DeLillo uses language to expose the primacy of the image, Wenders uses the primarily imagistic medium of film to counter it.

#### A POSTMAN WITHOUT LETTERS

It is sociologist and popular cultural critic Neil Postman who has most emphatically detailed in the popular press the historical turn toward the image and its consequences. Postman points out that images have replaced words as our vehicle for interacting with each other. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he claims that "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images."<sup>13</sup> For Postman, the point is not only that images outnumber words in the contemporary world, but that the predominance of the image produces an epistemological revolution: we begin to believe on the basis of images we identify with rather than arguments that we find convincing. Postman traces the development of advertisements, which prior to 1900 relied primarily on argumentation to sell their products. At the turn of the century, however, a radical shift occurred: advertisements abandoned all propositional claims and replaced them with images with which consumers could identify. Postman notes that

the picture forced exposition into the background, and in some instances obliterated it altogether. By the end of the nineteenth century, advertisers and newspapermen had discovered that a picture was not only worth a thousand words, but, where sales were concerned, was better. For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing.<sup>14</sup>

Today, what counts as truth is what can be shown, not what can be argued.

The ultimate support for Postman's contention that our epistemology has changed—that image has replaced argument—lies in the public response to the Rodney King beating. In the public consciousness, none of the accounts of this event by the various participants revealed its truth. Instead, the image of the beating provided the truth of the various (symbolic) accounts of it that the participants gave. No account in words could possibly have had the truth-value that the images on videotape had. When the white police officers were acquitted in the first trial, even those of us who didn't hear the testimony were outraged—we had seen their guilt. (Which is not to say, of course, that this wasn't the proper reaction to the verdict.) As a juror in the second trial put it, "We went through the video forwards, backwards, frame by frame, slow

motion, regular motion. I think the tape basically speaks for itself.”<sup>15</sup> For the jurors, the image, in short, tells it all. And if the jurors who actually heard the testimony displayed this degree of faith in the image, the public at large displayed even more. The images from the video gave us all the truth we needed to see.<sup>16</sup> The images were the truth behind whatever words either the police or Rodney King himself uttered: while we regarded all testimony to the event as tendentious or unverifiable, we regarded the image as epistemologically pure—nonfalsifiable.

This belief in the truth of the image leaves us especially vulnerable to ideological coercion (which is not to say, of course, that the image cannot be subversive as well). The image, much more than the word, inspires trust, and this trust is precisely what ideology hopes to engender. This is why fascists rely so heavily on imagery. In fact, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy links the rise of the image to the rise of fascism in the mid-twentieth century. According to Gilroy:

The application of image-building and image-maintaining techniques has created a condition in which icons severely qualify and often dominate the vivid authority of the spoken word in ways that recall the operations of fascist propaganda. The power of speech, already substantially reduced by the imperative to supply empty but memorable sound bites, has declined even further since Hitler’s innovations.<sup>17</sup>

In valuing the image over the word, we fall victim to the image’s appearance of full revelation. Whereas the word prompts suspicion and questioning, the image produces belief and devotion. It is in this sense that Gilroy sees a latent fascism in the contemporary elevation of the image. The image today signifies the possibility of a completely successful process of manipulation.

According to Postman, however, the great danger of this epistemological transition—toward faith in the image—is not the possibility for manipulation but the inescapability of distraction. The flow of images in contemporary society serves to keep subjects constantly entertained and distracted. We are amused, but we are also isolated and docile. In the final pages of his treatise, Postman articulates this danger in dramatic terms: “When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.”<sup>18</sup> What Postman labels “culture-death” is the breakdown of symbolic mediation, the inability of language to link subjects to each other. There is no symbolic authority demanding that subjects leave the imaginary realm and enter into the social world. Without this authority, subjects remain within the private world of the image, confined to what Jean Baudrillard calls “the hell of the same.”

Postman laments the contemporary rise of the imaginary order because he sees in this the possibility that subjects will choose enjoyment over societal obligations and bonds. With all the opportunities for immediate enjoyment that the image offers, there seems to be no reason to forego this enjoyment for the sake of the public good. In this way, Postman suggests an implicit link between the turn to the image and the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy. In a society predominated by the image, the subject has innumerable opportunities for enjoyment: the possibility of enjoyment is always close-at-hand. Furthermore, the image seems to allow the subject to avoid the sacrifice of enjoyment that the symbolic order demands. The image liberates the subject from the symbolic world of prohibition, offering a route to enjoyment that bypasses the threat of castration. The turn from the symbolic to the imaginary order that Postman identifies thus functions as a symptom of the transformation to a society of enjoyment. The imaginary provides a way for the subject to respond positively to the command to enjoy, offering the immediate enjoyment that the symbol denies.

#### THE EGO AND THE IMAGE

By allowing the subject seemingly to escape the prohibition of enjoyment, the image cuts the subject off from the Other. Postman links—implicitly following Lacan on this point—the predominance of the image with narcissistic isolation. And if we now turn from Postman to Lacan, the ramifications of this narcissistic isolation will become clearer. The subject in the society of enjoyment exists predominantly in a state of narcissistic isolation, an isolation that provides a sense of imaginary enjoyment. The narcissist, of course, takes his or her own ego as a love object, and Lacan emphasizes that the ego is itself imaginary: the ego first develops as a bodily image, as a way that the subject sees itself. According to Lacan, the ego forms as a result of a mirror relationship: one sees one's image in the mirror, and the image offers an illusion of wholeness (an illusion that covers over the fragmentary state of the real body). This illusion prompts the infant to love the image and to take the image as its ego. The ego is thus an imaginary other that the subject showers with love in exchange for the illusion of wholeness.<sup>19</sup> This illusion of wholeness that the ego provides for the subject serves to obscure both the lack in the subject and the lack in the big Other. Through the illusion that the ego provides, the subject can visualize an image of enjoyment, an image that seems to overcome all lack.

In the narcissistic relationship with the ego (the bodily image), the subject avoids facing the lack in the Other—the *objet petit a*. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar X*, “through [. . .] my image, my presence in the Other is without a

remainder. I cannot see what I am losing there.<sup>20</sup> That is, the ego serves to obscure the fact that there is a remainder, the *objet petit a*, that cannot be made present in the Other. This is why narcissistic enjoyment is only imaginary and never actual. Narcissism precludes the possibility of actual enjoyment because it obscures the subject's relation to the *objet petit a*, the lost object that is the source for the subject's enjoyment. Even though the subject can never attain this object, it nonetheless opens the sole avenue through which the subject can access enjoyment in the Real. Thus, the narcissism of the subject in the society of enjoyment reveals in yet another way the inability of this subject to obey the command to enjoy. Real enjoyment involves an experience that the Other is incomplete and lacks the *objet petit a*, an experience that the narcissist does not have.

If the Other is lacking, this means that not only doesn't the subject know what the Other wants from it but the Other itself doesn't know. That is to say, an Other that lacks is an Other that doesn't know what it wants from its subjects. This is why the subject so often retreats to the illusory security of the ego: it is bad enough if I don't know what I must do to comply with the Other's desire, but it becomes unbearable when the Other itself doesn't know. If, for instance, the secret of popularity eludes me, I can at least take consolation in the fact that someone knows this secret, that someone has grasped the essence of popularity, because I can then hope to one day acquire this knowledge as well. But if no one knows the secret of popularity, my search for it becomes ipso facto interminable. I've lost this object before I have even begun to search for it. Faced with the lacking Other, then, a subject's desire is perpetual—and perpetually dissatisfied—because it seeks after this desire of the Other, this *objet petit a*, that remains obscure. The lack or hole in the big Other proves an objective barrier to the subject's desire, a barrier that is ontological rather than epistemological. No matter how diligently the subject seeks, its desire will remain dissatisfied because the Other's desire is itself inconsistent. Symbolic authority doesn't know what it wants from the subject when it utters its commands—even the most popular people don't know the secret of popularity because the secret does not exist—and this is the rock against which desire always crashes. But narcissism closes off this openness in the Other and thus also closes off the possibility of enjoyment.

To examine the alternatives of narcissistic identification with the imaginary other and desire initiated by the *objet petit a*, we can look to contemporary cinema. The difference between these alternatives becomes clear in David Fincher's *The Game* (1997). The film begins with a depiction of the narcissistic self-satisfaction of Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas), an obscenely wealthy corporate executive who lives a life of near-total isolation. In its mise-en-scène, the film emphasizes both the self-satisfied nature of Nicholas's life and his disconnection from other subjects. He lives in an opulent mansion

with all the signs of wealth (expensive décor, a servant preparing his meals, a security fence guarding the entrance, etc.), but he exists alone in the mansion's largely empty space. But from the moment Nicholas's brother Conrad (Sean Penn) introduces Nicholas to the "game," he exchanges the imaginary satisfactions of this narcissistic world for the dissatisfactions of desire. Organized by an illusive corporation, the enigmatic and amorphous "game" is designed for the person who has everything, and it promises to provide this person with the one thing she or he is missing. In the case of Nicholas, a subject without desire, it provides him with dissatisfaction—destroying the wealthy, stable life that sustained his imaginary world. By ruining Nicholas's business, stealing his fortune, and turning him into a fugitive, the game produces desire in Nicholas, even as it takes everything else away from him.

As the film develops, Nicholas becomes increasingly desperate to figure out the secret of the game: he realizes that the Other has taken everything from him, but he doesn't know why. Which is to say, he doesn't know the desire of the Other, and he desperately pursues the secret of this desire. The second half of the film depicts this frantic pursuit as Nicholas becomes the model of the desiring subject: he is certain that the secret of the game is located somewhere within the Other, but he has no idea where. This fundamental uncertainty about the desire of the Other constitutes the subject itself as desiring. In this way, the events of the film transform Nicholas from a narcissistic subject who exists in a state of imaginary satisfaction to a desiring subject who perpetually searches for an answer he cannot find. When it turns out that Nicholas hasn't really lost everything (that this was just part of the game), Nicholas nonetheless remains within the world of desire, pursuing Claire (Deborah Unger), the woman from the game who was central in upsetting his life, as the film ends. He pursues Claire because he is still uncertain as to her desire, uncertain that the game has really come to an end. Through this denouement, *The Game* indicates its investment in desire over narcissism, but it also reveals the uncertainty and dissatisfaction that necessarily plagues desire as it seeks out the secret of the Other.<sup>21</sup>

*The Game* reveals what also becomes apparent in Lacan's account of narcissism—the source of its power over us as subjects. The great attractiveness of narcissism stems from its ability to obviate this perpetual dissatisfaction of desire. In the narcissistic relationship, rather than relating to a point of lack in the big Other (the point of the *objet petit a*, that which is in the Other more than the Other), one relates to a nonlacking image, an image of wholeness. The narcissist (i.e., the subject in the society of enjoyment) avoids the aporia of desire itself—not knowing what the Other wants of the subject—by clinging to the image and avoiding the *objet petit a*.<sup>22</sup> In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Jean Baudrillard draws attention to this transformation of desire enacted by narcissism, this shift from the *objet a* to the image: "Images have become our

*true sex object*, the object of our desire. The obscenity of our culture resides in the confusion of desire and its equivalent materialized in the image."<sup>23</sup> Turning desire narcissistically toward the image (which is a turning away from desire itself) allows respite from the subject's own lack and the lack in the Other. Thus, the narcissist avoids recognizing the effects of castration.

When narcissistic subjects experience their egos as strong and healthy, they necessarily feel that a barrier exists between subject and Other, that they are independent of the Other. Strength implies independence—and hence isolation as well. However, this isolation that corresponds to the ego does not eliminate social restrictions; it leaves one within the domain of the social order and its restrictions, precisely because it is only an imaginary isolation. Even if a subject's self-image is one of strength and isolation, this in no way frees this subject from the actual influences of the social order. To believe that a strong ego frees the subject would be the equivalent of believing that closing one's eyes has the effect of rendering one invisible. But the relationship to the imaginary other does allow the narcissistic subject to avoid facing the traumatic fact of her/his initial subjection to the symbolic Law. In the midst of the narcissistic sense of isolation, the subject in the society of enjoyment doesn't see that lack is constitutive for its existence as a subject, that subjectivity emerges out of lack itself. By avoiding this recognition, such a subject never has to acknowledge the inaccessibility of total enjoyment.

To explore the relationship between narcissism and the possibility of total enjoyment, we can again turn to the cinema. In fact, this relationship is the explicit subject matter of Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963). In *8½*, Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) is a famous director who, when given the freedom to make the film of his choice, cannot decide what film to make. But his inability to choose a film to make is only the beginning of the indecisiveness that plagues every area of his life. Guido's indecisiveness in the film stems from his inability to accept that enjoyment must necessarily be partial. He believes in—and insists on—the possibility of an enjoyment that would allow him to become complete. This becomes most obvious in Guido's relationship to the different women in the film. Guido enjoys the arrival of Carla (Sandra Milo), his mistress, to the site of the film shoot, but he subsequently invites his wife Luisa (Anouk Aimée) to join him there as well. Because he can't decide between the two women—a decision that would require abandoning the image of total enjoyment—Guido tries to have both of them at once. This inevitably creates tension between Guido and his wife when she sees Carla, but Guido remains powerless to choose between them. Choosing would imply a movement from the image of total enjoyment that accompanies narcissism to the dissatisfaction and partial enjoyment that accompanies desire.

Wedded to the possibility of total enjoyment, Guido is unable to move in the direction of desire. This is also why he cannot begin (let alone finish) his

film: to choose a direction that the film will take would be to cut off all other directions, to abandon the total for the partial. This inability to rid himself of the image of total enjoyment leaves Guido isolated within his own imaginary world, and the film is constantly drifting back into Guido's childhood in order to convey this. Fellini seamlessly moves back and forth between Guido's childhood experiences and those of the present in order to emphasize that for Guido, a subject immersed in the imaginary, there is no difference. Guido wants to sustain the plenitude of the imaginary—where he can have all women simultaneously, not just one at a time, and where he can make a film that involves no compromises—and not give in to the exigencies of castration and desire.<sup>24</sup> To leave the imaginary world would involve giving up this imaginary plenitude, which is why Guido opts to remain within the imaginary. The genius of *8½* stems from its ability to illustrate precisely where the appeal of the imaginary lies—in the image of an enjoyment that would be complete and that would complete the subject.<sup>25</sup>

Nowhere is this sense of completion more manifest than in cyberspace. The “wired” experience is the apotheosis of imaginary satisfaction.<sup>26</sup> When I am in cyberspace, I no longer have to deal with an intersubjective partner that I might potentially find dissatisfying. Cyberspace promises an other both perfectly suited to us and constantly changing so as not to bore us. Thus, it eliminates the need for any dissatisfaction—for any encounter with the other in her or his Real dimension. It even allows me to overcome dissatisfaction with myself: through a cyber identity, I can create a “realized” version of my ideal ego. The image delivers a satisfaction that the symbol doesn't—and hence leaves us without the feeling that we are lacking, without desire.

This imaginary world of the narcissistic subject is the necessary complement to the transformation from the explicit prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy. The society of commanded enjoyment finds itself in a paradoxical position: it drives the subject toward an enjoyment that would threaten the society's very existence. Hence, this enjoyment must be given a direction that sustains it while securing social stability. The image provides this direction. Rather than allowing for enjoyment in the Real, it allows for an image of enjoyment—enjoyment without its traumatic dimension. Real enjoyment occurs when the subject abandons the security of its symbolic identity and thereby breaks from the constraints of the symbolic order. In this enjoyment, the rules of the symbolic game cease to apply. The subject neither obeys nor disobeys: she/he enjoys through a disinterest in these prevailing rules. Thus, enjoyment in the Real is a radical experience, but at the same time it is necessarily traumatic because it leaves the subject without any ground on which to stand. Whereas imaginary enjoyment promises completion and plenitude, Real enjoyment depends on the refusal of the image of completion. This kind of enjoyment also disrupts the symbolic order because it evinces an

indifference toward all symbolic barriers. But imaginary enjoyment—the image of enjoyment, not enjoyment as such—allows the subject to remain securely rooted in its symbolic identity; it respects symbolic barriers, even as it offers the subject the illusion of transgressing them, which is why it doesn't threaten the stability of the symbolic order. To take the simplest example, one can imagine an adulterous affair freely without ever disturbing the stability of one's symbolic identity as a loyal spouse. The imaginary enjoyment is perfectly consonant with the functioning of the symbolic order.

Because Real enjoyment poses such a threat to the social order, the contemporary command to enjoy cannot find an outlet in this kind of enjoyment. Only imaginary enjoyment—enjoyment of the television, the computer screen, the ego—offers an acceptable path through which to obey this command. In this sense, the predominance of the image today indicates most emphatically the presence of the command to enjoy. The image provides a way—the only way—for us to respond. All of the images that surround us offer the allure of a complete enjoyment—a *jouissance* unperturbed by any lack. And yet, this avoidance of lack is purely imaginary: because the image has its foundation in the symbolic order, because it is projected from the symbolic order, the image does not escape lack and provide the completeness (and the complete *jouissance*) that it promises. The image is beset by an incompleteness that its form denies. Imaginary enjoyment represents a failure to enjoy, which is why the images that predominate the society of enjoyment provide an outlet for a kind of enjoyment that stabilizes rather than threatens the social order. When someone decides to “enjoy Coca-Cola”—embracing the image from the advertisement, she/he provides support for the system of exchange. This imaginary enjoyment doesn't interfere with the functioning of the social order but rather keeps it going and furthers it. Whereas enjoyment in the Real provides a fundamental threat to the social order and has the potential to transform that order, imaginary enjoyment keeps things going as they are.

Today, the symbolic Law no longer demands that subjects sacrifice their imaginary enjoyment in order to enter into the social order because imaginary enjoyment does not threaten the structure of that order. In this sense, the Law today is more tolerant: it allows the imaginary transgressions that it once circumscribed and punished. But this increased tolerance for imaginary transgressions merely serves to disguise an increased intolerance for Real transgressions. Accommodating itself to the prevalence of imaginary enjoyment allows the Law to become ever more vigilant in policing Real enjoyment. This dramatically changes the way the subject experiences the symbolic Law. Rather than experiencing the Law as a cut that disrupts an imaginary plenitude, subjects experience only minor impositions on their sense of imaginary plenitude: no Law, but a series of rules designed to circumscribe the imaginary

experience. Thus, the image offers subjects a zone where they are seemingly free to enjoy, a zone where the Law doesn't interfere. It is this semblance of the freedom to enjoy that makes the experience of the imaginary so attractive to contemporary subjects. But the more we embrace imaginary enjoyment, the more we miss a Real alternative.

#### NOT SO IMAGINARY AFTER ALL

In contrast with symbolic order, the imaginary is based on a relationship of duality: in it, I relate directly to the image of an other—my counterpart or alter-ego—without the mediation of a third party (provided by the symbol). Because it lacks the mediation of a third party, the imaginary relationship lacks any evident connection to what exists beyond it. In *Seminar I*, Lacan calls the imaginary sphere a “closed world of two.”<sup>27</sup> Closed off in this way, without the absence or lack that the symbolic order would introduce, the imaginary provides a kind of enjoyment—or, more correctly, an image of enjoyment—that the symbolic order cannot. In the imaginary, I relate to myself and to the other in the same way—and in a way that seems entirely undisturbed by a third party (the big Other).

The predominance of the imaginary and the experience of it is what allows contemporary subjects to imagine themselves as isolated monads. The image hides the experience of castration—the requisite sacrifice of enjoyment—from subjects who nonetheless exist within the confines of the symbolic order. Whereas a strong symbolic authority creates dissatisfied subjects because it forces them to come face to face with the sacrifice of enjoyment required for entrance into the symbolic order, the imaginary keeps the subject satisfied, not with the Real of her or his desire, but with its image. Enjoyment in the imaginary is an enjoyment that is imagined or fantasized. Though it seems—especially to the subject her/himself—as if this fantasized enjoyment transgresses the norms imposed by symbolic authority, it actually poses no real threat to symbolic authority. As theorist Walter Davis points out:

Rather than an “otherness” to dominant ideologies, the image is by and large the realm of ideologies' triumphant circulation and consumption. Proximally and for the most part one finds in most images the conventional, the commodified, that which reinforces and reifies the dominant culture, not that which alienates or estranges us from it. This is especially true today of most of those images that claim to do the opposite: the primitive, the vital, the liberatory, the erotic—these are now thoroughly colonized matters.<sup>28</sup>

Imaginary enjoyment seems to occur in open disdain of symbolic authority, thumbing its nose at that authority. But symbolic authority depends on this

imaginary enjoyment that would “subvert” it because this enjoyment renders subjects docile. For symbolic authority, the danger of the imaginary is only an *imaginary* danger.

Though the society of prohibition views imaginary enjoyment as an actual threat, the society of enjoyment no longer does. Today, imaginary enjoyment is so far from being a threat that it is our fundamental duty. And it results in a society of increasingly docile subjects. Imaginary experience has the effect of rendering subjects more willing to accede to the dictates of the social order precisely because it provides for them an imagined enjoyment. If I feel as if I’m enjoying myself, whether I really am or not, I’m not likely to revolt, or even to concern myself with the social as a whole or its governance. As the power of the imaginary increases, the hold that symbolic authority has over subjects increases as well. Ironically, imaginary satisfaction inevitably leads to greater productivity: the number of hours contemporary subjects spend working continues to increase because we see work as a way of securing the money to purchase our imaginary enjoyment. We will work innumerable more hours when we are working not just out of duty but in order to pay for a new DVD player. The more imaginary enjoyment increases, the more productive we become, thereby indicating the extent of our investment in the ruling late capitalist symbolic structure. In this way, the command to enjoy eviscerates our possibilities for enjoyment and for freedom. It becomes nearly impossible for us to gain any distance from—or have an experience that transcends—the power of the prevailing structure. As Alice Kuzniar puts it in her discussion of the cinema of Wim Wenders, “we are completely immersed in the image, emptied out before it. There is no moment of detachment.”<sup>29</sup> Entrapped by the image, contemporary subjects come to inhabit a world without distance.

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## *Chapter Four*

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# SHRINKING DISTANCES

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### TRANSCENDING TRANSCENDENCE

While the society of commanded enjoyment is one based on the image and its overproximity, the society of prohibition is a society of distance. The explicit prohibition of enjoyment makes possible the idea of transcendence—the idea that in the distance or beneath the surface there exists something radically different. Prohibition establishes a barrier that one must not transgress, but in the process it also establishes a space beyond that barrier (even if that space exists only in our imagination). Through the act of prohibiting, as psychoanalysis has long pointed out, we carve out a transcendent space that we know only through its absence: it exists in a negative way, as that which we don't have access to. We lack immediate access to objects of desire, and thus a distance exists between subject and object. This distance can be spatial or temporal: either the subject must travel through space in order to approach its object or it must wait for the object to become available. The necessity of traveling and waiting—what we must do because we do not have a direct experience of the object—produces the idea of a beyond: the beyond houses the object that the subject will travel toward or wait for. But without the explicit prohibition, this beyond begins to disappear, and, more importantly, all distance and depth disappear with it. Without the idea of a transcendent beyond, all objects seem present and accessible because they lie on the surface, readily available. This is what Jean Baudrillard calls “the ecstasy of communication.” As he puts it, “There is no longer any transcendence or

depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication."<sup>1</sup> The absence of transcendence consigns us to a world of total presence, where both spatial and temporal distance evaporate. As we turn from a society that overtly prohibits enjoyment to one that commands it, we begin to feel the suffocating effects of this increasingly total presence.

Baudrillard is most well known as the theorist of simulation.<sup>2</sup> But he has also—and perhaps more significantly—recognized more clearly than anyone else the revolutionary effects of the system of universal communication. Simulation works to liquidate all reference (or to make evident the hitherto obscured absence of reference), but universal, instantaneous communication leaves us without any distance—and thus without any sense of transcendence.<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard's *The Ecstasy of Communication* is his response to the evaporation of distance and transcendence. Here, Baudrillard focuses on what we lose with this transformation—and what we lose is value. In a world of instant accessibility where nothing is off-limits, all value flattens out.<sup>4</sup> Objects derive value from their inaccessibility, from the dimension of the Real we attribute to them: the most valuable objects are always the most inaccessible. But when universal communication renders everything accessible, then nothing retains any value. Universal communication, like universal commodification, reduces even the most valuable object to just another object in a series. In this way, the process of symbolization fills in the gaps within the symbolic order, thereby occluding the Real. We are left without a gap, a void, indicating what cannot be symbolized (which is how Lacan defines the Real, as that which resists symbolization absolutely).

For Baudrillard, this elimination of the Real manifests itself most conspicuously in the emergence of sexuality and the discourse of sexuality into everyday life. Today, sexuality has become increasingly less a taboo subject, no longer confined to hidden, private moments. From television talk shows to college classrooms, sexuality has become viable subject matter for discussion, and this discussion has become normalized to such an extent that it now raises few eyebrows. The sense of sexuality as a forbidden topic—as something to be discussed privately, if at all—has largely disappeared, resulting in a specific instance of the disappearance of the transcendent. According to Baudrillard, "Sexuality itself has become part of life, which means that it, too, no longer has transcendent value, neither as prohibition, nor as principle of analysis, pleasure, or transgression. It has been 'ecologized,' psychologized, secularized for domestic use. It has become part of the way of life."<sup>5</sup> One can now speak publicly and openly about sexuality, but this liberation of sexuality destroys the transcendent position—and thus the value—that it once had. It is the very distance between sexuality and everyday expression that gives sexuality its allure, and this distance has disappeared.

What Baudrillard calls the obscene nature of the contemporary world is not the result of sexual liberation but of this destruction of the space for transcendence. In a society of prohibition, transcendence is predominantly imaginary—an illusory beyond—but it nonetheless provided a gap within the functioning of the social order so that everything did not have to be revealed. That is to say, imaginary transcendence sustained the Real gap within the functioning of the symbolic order. The illusion of a beyond allowed subjects to recognize the prevailing social order itself as limited, as *not* the only possible social terrain. The absence of the Real gap produces the obscenity of the society of enjoyment. As Baudrillard puts it, “Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.”<sup>6</sup> Theater and illusion sustain depth because they allow for the possibility of something hidden that remains behind the spectacle they present. Universal communication, in contrast, penetrates behind every illusion and exposes every secret. Obscenity is the result of this total exposure. Such total exposure is the *sine qua non* of the society of enjoyment. To keep something hidden is to violate the imperative to enjoy because the hidden object always embodies the enjoyment that we are currently missing. As a result, the society of enjoyment involves subjects in an unending parade of revelations of what the society of prohibition kept concealed.

The hidden object is, as we have seen, what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. It is the object that holds out the promise of the ultimate jouissance for the subject. And yet, at the same time, it is an impossible object: it remains always just out of reach, which is why it must remain hidden. As Paul Verhaeghe puts it, “Object *a* lies beyond the signifier, it is the last term of desire which can never be expressed in signifiers.”<sup>7</sup> If we gain access to the object, it necessarily ceases to be *the* object. No empirical object ever embodies the *objet petit a*. As Lacan points out, it is “this object that is never there, that is always situated elsewhere, that is always something else.”<sup>8</sup> If, for instance, we find the long out-of-print book that we have been searching for in a series of used book stores, at the moment we find it the book loses its transcendent value for us and becomes just another book (albeit perhaps more treasured than others). In order for the book to remain our *objet petit a*, it must remain out of reach—missing. Finding the book would reveal that the book did not contain the secret enjoyment that we posited in it; it would not be the missing piece of the puzzle. It embodies this secret enjoyment only in its hidden form, but in that form, this enjoyment remains beyond our grasp. This is why we are continually trying to gain access to the hidden object in hopes of cornering the enjoyment that always eludes us. Insofar as this object promises the ultimate enjoyment, it is imaginary, but insofar as it constantly eludes us and haunts us with

its absence, it is Real. Today, with the impending elimination of distance, we move closer to losing this Real dimension of the *objet petit a*.

Just as the experience of cyberspace indicates the contemporary predominance of the imaginary, it also illustrates the loss of the Real. Cyberspace eliminates distance not so much through the instant communication that it provides as through its ability to fill in the gaps within any symbolic structure. In her encomium on cyberspace, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray makes this clear, though she sees it as one of the main benefits of the new technology. For Murray, cyberspace fundamentally alters the narrative process in exciting and beneficial ways. While interacting with a cyberspace narrative—or cybernarrative—we break from the confining nature of traditional narrative and become free to move both forward and backward, exploring fully each possible turn. This gives readers of cybernarratives considerable freedom. According to Murray, the medium allows readers “to decide for themselves when the story is over.”<sup>9</sup> The freedom that cybernarrative provides also radically transforms the idea of a narrative conclusion. Whereas traditional narrative achieves closure with its endpoint, cybernarrative does not. According to Murray, cyberspace “could offer an encyclopedic fictional world whose possibilities would only be exhausted at the point of the interactor’s saturation with the core conflict.”<sup>10</sup> Which is to say, in cyberspace narrative ends when one grows weary of following its possibilities rather than at any definite point. This lack of a decisive endpoint means that the interactor can explore all narrative possibilities without constraint and without end, thereby eliminating all gaps in the narrative. In this way, the flexibility and freedom that cyberspace offers has the effect of closing the space of the Real.

Not only does cyberspace fill in the gaps within the narrative forms produced within this medium, but it also has this effect on other narrative forms when it interacts with them. This becomes apparent in Murray’s vision of cyberspace supplementing narratives from other media, such as television serials. In this scenario, cyberspace would allow viewers to explore aspects of a serial that remained unexplored in the televised narrative. If, to choose Murray’s example, viewers of *ER* wish to know more than the serial reveals about the relationship between a doctor and a nurse who are romantically involved, they could explore this relationship through cyberspace, visiting the couple at home, following them on dates, etc. Through these new avenues for exploration, cyberspace would permit the serial viewer access to the empty spaces in the serial. Murray sees this as one of the great advances of this technology. As she says, “By filling out the holes in the dramatic narrative, holes that prevent viewers from fully believing in the characters, and by presenting situations that do not resolve themselves within the rhythms of series television, the hyperserial archive could extend the melodramatic broadcast drama into a more complex narrative world.”<sup>11</sup> Murray is sanguine about the possibility of

“filling out the holes in the dramatic narrative” because she sees that it increases the realism of traditional narrative, allowing it to approach the complexity of life itself. But she fails to notice what one misses without these holes: by filling in narrative gaps (the Real) with imaginary plenitude, one loses the space for the *objet petit a*.

Sustaining the gaps for the *objet petit a* becomes completely unacceptable under the reign of the imperative to enjoy. In response to this imperative, we are continually drawn to the process of exposing the hidden in order to access its secret enjoyment. Nothing can remain in a transcendent position because this indicates that an opportunity for enjoyment is being wasted. Exposure of the hidden promises enjoyment, which is why so-called reality television has such appeal today. Reality television shows such as *Survivor* and web sites that offer a continuous view of a person’s daily life appeal to us because they provide a look at what we cannot ordinarily see—the aspects of daily life of other people that usually remain hidden to us. On a “reality” web site, we can see what people look like while sleeping, masturbating, brushing their teeth, and so on. We can see the underside of life that we otherwise cannot access. We are drawn to this exposure of the hidden because we believe that we will discover the *objet petit a* of the people we watch, the secret of their enjoyment. But reality television and web sites inevitably disappoint us because the exposure of the secret does not expose the enjoyment; on the contrary, it destroys it. In *Freud as Philosopher*, Richard Boothby points out that every attempt to reveal the *objet a*—to show it all—necessarily fails to produce the enjoyment that it promises. He claims, “The result of the ‘show it all’ strategy is to create even more intense hunger for the thing that cannot be imaged: the *objet a*. The more you see, the less you find what you are really looking for. The ‘proof’ of the Lacanian view lies in the compulsiveness with which the consumer of pornography moves from one girlie image to another, to another, and so on.”<sup>12</sup>

The more we seek the *objet petit a* through the act of exposure, the further it retreats from us because what we desire is not the object itself but the object in its absence. As Lacan points out:

What is the subject trying to see? What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence. What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete. What he is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus—but precisely its absence, hence the preeminence of certain forms as objects of his search.<sup>13</sup>

Rendering the object present eliminates precisely what is appealing about it—its Real dimension, that dimension of the object that doesn’t fit smoothly into our world of sense—and foregrounds its imaginary status. And yet, the

imperative to enjoy compels us to uncover this evanescent object, to unlock its secret. Thus, we find ourselves in an impossible position—driven to seek enjoyment in a way that destroys the very possibility of enjoyment. As we eliminate the transcendent space of the *objet petit a* in the effort to obey the command to enjoy, we lose the space through which we might enjoy. This loss of transcendent space is one of the symptoms of the turn to a society of enjoyment and one of the reasons why we aren't really enjoying in the society of enjoyment. It manifests itself not only in our everyday experience but within contemporary theoretical and philosophical work as well.

#### PHILOSOPHIES OF IMMANENCE

Not only does the society of enjoyment involve a loss of transcendent space in our daily experience, it also tends to produce theories and philosophies of immanence, theories that militate against transcendence. By looking at these theories, we can see another indication of the pervasiveness of the logic of the command to enjoy, at least insofar as it manifests itself in the loss of transcendence that appears in both continental and analytic philosophy. Despite a few efforts to bridge the gap that separates them, continental and analytic philosophy today occupy separate worlds. The ocean that separates them seems an apt metaphor for the distance between their concerns. But there is one point on which these two divergent lines of thought come together: not coincidentally, they both eschew the idea of transcendence, the idea that we can “touch the Real.” Within both continental and analytic philosophy, the sense that there is no transcendence predominates as the critical doxa. In both cases, it manifests itself in the rejection of metaphysics, the rejection of a subject that raises itself above its milieu in order to reflect upon it. The main figures of late-twentieth-century continental philosophy (Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, etc.), while diverging considerably in their thought, take common aim at transcendence, especially the transcendence of the subject. This is because, for one reason, transcendence implies authority and mastery, raising oneself above what one transcends. Transcendence violates the temporality and finitude of existence, positing a moment that escapes the confines of finitude. To correctly apprehend our finitude, according to this line of thought, it is necessary to produce—or at least aim at—a wholly immanent philosophy.

The refusal of transcendence becomes immediately apparent in Derridean deconstruction. Derrida's insistence on *différance* represents his effort to avoid any philosophy of transcendence. *Différance* is what can never be reduced to meaningfulness in the signifier, what eludes a final closure. Thus, Derrida claims that *différance*, in contrast to philosophical concepts, escapes the pitfall of transcendence. As he notes:

*Différance* is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach *différance* with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter.<sup>14</sup>

Not only is *différance* itself not transcendent, but it also has the effect of subverting every attempt at transcendence. In fact, Derrida stresses *différance* precisely because it is the moment that renders transcendence impossible and reveals its imposture. For Derrida, moments of transcendence within the symbolic structure are purely imaginary, never Real, because the Real can never be isolated as such. Deconstruction is first and foremost a practice of uncovering the illusions and pretensions of the “transcendent.” In doing so, deconstruction works theoretically to the same ends as the imperative to enjoy: it deconstructs every beyond—and thus all distance that might prove a barrier to enjoyment. Deconstruction did not, to be sure, emerge as Derrida’s attempt to heed the command to enjoy, but part of its popularity (a popularity that lives on, despite the fact that there are very few who explicitly identify themselves as deconstructionists) derives from its correlation with the underlying logic of the society of commanded enjoyment and the latter’s rejection of transcendence.

Though the link between deconstruction and immanence is dramatic, it is with Foucault that the rejection of transcendence reaches its apotheosis. For Foucault, power functions immanently, and thus the only proper critique of power is an immanent critique—what he calls a genealogy. To invoke transcendence in response to power, as part of a fight against power, represents a failure to grasp how power works: by invoking transcendence, one falls for the fundamental illusion of power—that transcendence is possible. Power dupes us into investing ourselves in ways of transcending it, and in doing so, we become the perfect subjects of power. To put it in Lacanian terms, power holds out the idea of the Real in order to blind us to the functioning of the symbolic. The Real is never anything but an imaginary illusion, created in order to seduce us, and it remains, as such, fundamentally impossible. Though Lacan accepts, in a sense, this Foucaultian idea that the Real is impossible, he also insists that the impossible can happen, that it only seems impossible from the standpoint of the symbolic order and its constraints on our thought. Through the act of going beyond this order, the subject can encounter the impossible Real. As he says directly in *Seminar XVII* (and elsewhere), “the Real is the impossible. Not because it is a simple obstacle that we bump our

heads against, but because it is the logical obstacle that, in the symbolic, is expressed as impossible. It is from there that the real arises.”<sup>15</sup> This psychoanalytic belief in the possibility of the impossible touches on, for Foucault, the fundamental error of psychoanalysis, which responds to the Law (and the repression it demands) by aiding the subject in uncovering repressed desire, in struggling to transcend the Law and its effects. Through this process, Foucault sees psychoanalysis as unwittingly assisting power through the production of (a necessarily illusory) transcendence. However, in giving up the idea of transcendence, Foucault also gives up the hope of ever uncovering the roots of power. This is why Joan Copjec sees Foucault’s refusal of transcendence as the fundamental stumbling block within his thought.

Foucault aims at conceiving how power arises, but his studies consistently stop short of arriving at this. Copjec claims, “despite the fact that [Foucault] realizes the necessity of conceiving the mode of a regime of power’s institution, he cannot avail himself of the means of doing so and thus, by default, ends up limiting that regime to the relations that obtain within it.”<sup>16</sup> This limitation stems from his refusal of any notion of transcendence, “his disallowance of any reference to a principle or a subject that ‘transcends’ the regime of power he analyzes.”<sup>17</sup> Without the moment of transcendence, one cannot grasp the regime of power in its incipience, and hence Foucault necessarily posits the regime of power as always already existing, which makes any attempt to counter it fundamentally impossible. The result of this rejection of transcendence is Foucault’s historicism—a mode of analysis that eschews the search for truth in favor of uncovering the presuppositions of regimes of truth, in favor of “pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.”<sup>18</sup> This type of uncovering of historical presuppositions is one of Foucault’s chief legacies today, and it indicates the extent to which any idea of transcendence has become an anathema.

In the wake of Foucault, contemporary cultural criticism has largely taken up this contextualizing mode. Today, the predominant response to any articulation of truth claims is a demand for the historicization of these claims: one must reveal the cultural context out of which they emerge. This has become the fundamental operation of contemporary cultural studies. In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek describes this intellectual situation: “the basic feature of cultural studies is that they are no longer able or ready to confront religious, scientific or philosophical works in terms of their own inherent Truth, but reduce them to a product of historical circumstances, to an object of anthropologico-psychoanalytic interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> This reduction of every truth claim to the circumstances of its enunciation represents the ultimate rejection of transcendence: nothing escapes the immanence of history itself. According to this prevailing historicism, no truth claim ever touches the Real; instead, the

very pretension to truth is itself imaginary. The popularity of this kind of historicism today indicates the extent to which transcendence has become theoretically untenable. It also highlights the link between contemporary theory and the command to enjoy: the operations of both work to reduce what appears as transcendence to conditions of immanence.

Perhaps even more revealing, however, is the fact that main currents in analytic philosophy share the opposition to transcendence popular within cultural studies. Analytic philosophy tends to see cultural studies and continental philosophy as embarked on a project closer to “poetry” than philosophy.<sup>20</sup> And yet, contemporary analytic philosophy also rejects the idea of transcendence, embracing instead a philosophy of immanence (albeit a different kind of immanence than that of continental philosophy and cultural studies). Here, the rejection of transcendence is not tied primarily to ethical or political considerations but is, as A. J. Ayer puts it, “a matter of logic.”<sup>21</sup> Ayer cannot imagine a “valid process of reasoning” that could lead a philosopher “to the conception of a transcendent reality.”<sup>22</sup> On the basis of logic, one cannot transcend the phenomenal world, the world of language. One cannot arrive logically at the Real. In fact, the very attempt to do so results in absurdity: “the labours of those who have striven to describe [transcendence] have all been devoted to the production of nonsense.”<sup>23</sup> For Ayer, as for most analytic philosophers, the transcendent is akin to the nonsensical precisely because it would transcend the world of sense. As beings of language, our thought remains confined within the language that structures it. This is why W. V. Quine points out that the task of philosophy is not speculating but “focusing on words, or how they are learned and used, and how they are related to things.”<sup>24</sup> Since no moments of transcendence exist within the structure of language (or logic), philosophy must be practical and devote itself to concerns immanent to language.

Already in 1963, Theodor Adorno saw this shared rejection of transcendence in logical positivism and Martin Heidegger, the main precursors of today’s analytic and continental philosophies. According to Adorno, “In both positivism and Heidegger—at least in his later work—speculation is the target of attack. In both cases the thought that autonomously raises itself above the facts through interpreting them and that cannot be reclaimed by them without leaving a surplus is condemned for being empty and vain concept-mongering.”<sup>25</sup> Both the positivists and Heidegger resist speculation because it suggests transcendence. Metaphysics becomes suspect because it implies an ability to gain a distance from one’s situation or experience. It imagines that distance is possible: for the positivists, this distance has no philosophical justification—it is a flight of fancy—and it only serves to obscure the immediately given empirical facts; for Heidegger, this distance indicates a flight from one’s being-in-the-world and a forgetting of Being.

Both privilege proximity. As Adorno puts it, “Being, in whose name Heidegger’s philosophy increasingly concentrates itself, is for him—as a pure, self-presentation to passive consciousness—just as immediate, just as independent of the mediations of the subject as the facts and the sensory data are for the positivists.”<sup>26</sup> The efforts of the logical positivists and Heidegger to escape distance through escaping transcendence not only prefigure those of contemporary analytic and continental philosophy but also prefigure the contemporary society of enjoyment as a whole, which demands the elimination of distance. Just as the web-cam shows all and eliminates the space for the *objet petit a*, the logical positivists and Heidegger (and their philosophical inheritors) eliminate this space theoretically.

In this sense, both the logical positivists and Heidegger produce symptomatic philosophies, lines of thought that are suggestive of the turn toward a command to enjoy. But if we can see the later Heidegger’s philosophy of Being as a symptom of the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the imperative to enjoy, the same is not true of the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*. In that work, Heidegger offers the first extended expression of his rejection of metaphysics and its transcendence. Nonetheless, *Being and Time* stresses the irreducible significance of Dasein’s encounter with death. For the early Heidegger, Dasein’s individual death is precisely what cannot be reduced to any other event; it is fundamentally singular. As such, it introduces precisely the sense of distance that is vanishing in the midst of the demand for enjoyment.

#### BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER

The subject’s relationship to death undergoes a substantive transformation in the turn from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. Despite the latter’s reduction of everything to immanence, the one transcendent moment that no amount of communication would seem to be able to eliminate is that of death. Death is a moment that transcends the immanence of life, indicating a radically inaccessible beyond (even if this beyond is nothingness itself). It acts as a barrier that every subject must endure, and it is the necessity of this barrier that, for Heidegger, confirms our being-in-the-world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger sees the inevitability of death as the one nonrelational moment within existence. That is to say, unlike every other moment of life, universal communication cannot reduce death to the level of the ordinary; it proves an insurmountable barrier. As Heidegger famously puts it, “The non-relational character of death understood in anticipation individualizes Dasein down to itself. This individualizing is a way in which the ‘there’ is disclosed for existence. It reveals the fact that any being-together-with what is taken care of and any being-with the others fails when one’s ownmost poten-

tiality-of-being is at stake.”<sup>27</sup> Death provides the subject with an experience of necessity—a necessary barrier—that constitutes the subject as such and that cannot be communicated or relativized. As such, it represents the moment of transcendence in the midst of immanence, a moment that universal immanence cannot include.<sup>28</sup> Subjects experience their own death as a fundamental limit.

However, at a time, as Baudrillard says, “when everything is available”<sup>29</sup> and all distance evaporates, even the necessity of death disappears. Death becomes something contingent, not constitutive. One might encounter it—and then again one might not. The controlling idea in a world without distance is not that death doesn’t exist—one is confronted with it all the time in undeniable forms—but that it is avoidable. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes at length this attitude toward death (an attitude he of course labels “inauthentic”). According to Heidegger, “characteristic talk speaks about death as a constantly occurring ‘case.’ It treats it as something always already ‘real,’ and veils its character of possibility and concomitantly the two factors belonging to it, that it is nonrelational and cannot-be-bypassed.”<sup>30</sup> We experience death as the result of “errors” in human calculation or behavior, rather than a moment constitutive for human existence proper. When death is just a “case” or the result of certain “behavior patterns,” I can focus entirely on my behavior that might prevent it—diet, exercise, “healthy living” in general—and not on the possibility that “cannot-be-bypassed,” the necessity that cannot be evaded.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the idea of an insurmountable barrier disappears.

Today, often when someone dies, we tend to look for the analogue to the fatal illness in their behavior: lung cancer results from smoking, heart disease from a lack of exercise, colon cancer from not eating enough fiber, etc.<sup>32</sup> By linking death to a specific behavior, we deontologize it; we make it seem as if death is only one possibility for life, a possibility that we ourselves—or someone, someday—might manage to escape. The same thinking applies to aging as well: all the formulas for the conquest of aging (skin creme, the baldness pill, plastic surgery, low fat diets) implicitly view aging itself as just one option among many. When we view death as a “case” or an “option,” we reject its necessity as a limit. Death no longer indicates a moment of transcendence that we must encounter. According to Baudrillard, “We are dealing with an attempt to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity, exempt from death itself.”<sup>33</sup>

In the society of enjoyment, death becomes an increasingly horrific—and at the same time, an increasingly hidden—event. Not only does death imply the cessation of one’s being, but it also indicates a failure of enjoyment. Death is above all a limit to one’s enjoyment: to accept one’s mortality means simultaneously to accept a limit on enjoyment. This is why it is not at all coincidental that with the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command

to enjoy we would see an increase in efforts to eliminate the necessity of death. Today, human cell researchers are working toward the day when death will exist only as an “accident,” through the modification of the way in which cells regulate their division and creating cells that can divide limitlessly. As Gregg Easterbrook points out, the introduction of such cells into the human body would not create eternal life, but it would make death something no longer necessary: “Therapeutic use of ‘immortal’ cells would not confer unending life (even people who don’t age could die in accidents, by violence and so on) but might dramatically extend the life-span.”<sup>34</sup> The point isn’t that death would be entirely eliminated, but that we might eliminate its necessary status as a barrier to or a limit on enjoyment.

This potential elimination of death as a necessary limit to enjoyment follows directly from the logic of the society of enjoyment. As long as death remains necessary, it stands, as Heidegger recognizes, as a fundamental barrier to the proliferation of enjoyment. If subjects know that they must die, they also know that they lack—and lack becomes intolerable in face of a command to enjoy oneself. But without the idea of a necessary death, every experience of lack loses the quality of necessity. Subjects view lack not as something to be endured for the sake of a future enjoyment, but as an intolerable burden. In the society of enjoyment, subjects refuse to tolerate lack precisely because lack, like death, has now lost its veneer of necessity.

#### TRAGEDY, TWENTIETH-CENTURY STYLE

The command to enjoy is at the same time a command to overcome all distance. Hence, in order to forestall the experience of lack, an ethos of constant motion develops. Subjects speed themselves up and thus work to overcome all distance between themselves and what they want. The faster one moves, the more one eliminates the very possibility of dissatisfaction. Rather than enduring a gap between desire and its object—rather than experiencing desire as such—the contemporary subject feels this gap as unbearable, as a failure to enjoy (and as a violation of the command to enjoy). Thus, distance threatens to disappear in the society of enjoyment. As Paul Virilio puts it, “To eradicate the gap, to put an end to the scandal of the interval of space and time that used to separate man so unacceptably from his objective: all this is well on the way to being achieved.”<sup>35</sup> This “interval of space and time” is disappearing today because its very existence indicates that we have failed to enjoy, that we have accommodated ourselves to lack. Nonstop motion becomes our way of trying to assure ourselves that we are not lacking—that is, nonenjoying—subjects.

This turn to nonstop motion to avoid the experience of lack or distance makes itself felt in Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*. Kushner wrote

*Angels* in response to the AIDS epidemic, an epidemic that would seem to offer conclusive proof of the persistence of distance between contemporary subjects and their objects of desire. That is to say, AIDS seems to indicate that absence and lack remain operative even in the society of enjoyment. AIDS, as an epidemic that reels beyond human control, should reveal that there is a limit to our enjoyment and that the experience of complete enjoyment remains elusive. In short, it should reveal the Real deadlock that continues to haunt all efforts to symbolize it. The importance of Kushner's play, however, lies in its ability to show that this is not the case, through its depiction of how the society of enjoyment responds—or doesn't respond—to AIDS.

*Angels in America* tells the story of the impact of the AIDS epidemic on a variety of characters, some afflicted with AIDS and others reacting to their affliction. The play centers around a New York City gay couple, Louis Ironson and Prior Walter, and Part I (*Millennium Approaches*) begins with the discovery that Prior has AIDS. Unable to cope with his lover's illness, Louis leaves Prior, and, desperate to forget about his former lover, he starts a relationship with Joe Pitt, a Mormon law clerk who works for Roy Cohn. Roy, like Prior, discovers that he has AIDS early in the play. Through Louis, Joe discovers his homosexuality, which prompts his wife, Harper, to leave him. Prior, meanwhile, as he becomes sicker, receives a visitation from an angel, who announces that Prior is a prophet, which is the event that ends Part I of the play. In Part II (*Perestroika*), Belize, a friend of Prior (and a former drag queen), becomes Roy's nurse during his hospital stay. Because of Belize, Roy's fate intersects with Prior's. Belize convinces Roy to demand AZT from his doctor, which allows Belize to take some of Roy's supply of the drug for Prior. Prior, summoned to heaven by the angels, refuses the prophetic mission that the angels have for him—which is advocating an end to motion and progress. The angels hope to put an end to human progress, because this constant forward motion has even infected God—prompting him to leave heaven—and the angels believe that if the humans stop moving, God will return to them. The play ends, after the death of Roy, with an embrace of progress by Prior (and many of the other characters in the play), a thorough rejection of the angels' plea.

For Kushner, our failure to address the AIDS crisis results from an inability to confront the Real and from the use of motion and speed in order to deny distance. To acknowledge what AIDS represents would mean acknowledging the inevitable failure of motion and acknowledging that something (i.e., the power of AIDS) remains a transcendent beyond. There can be no American tragedy—no proper response to the AIDS crisis—because tragedy is impossible in a society of constant motion, which American society has become.<sup>36</sup> The genesis of this motion, as Harper recognizes near the end of Part II, is an

experience of dissatisfaction. She says, "Devastation. That's what makes people migrate, build things. Heartbroken people do it, people who have lost love."<sup>37</sup> As *Angels* shows, movement has become the fundamental ethos of contemporary American society; we must keep moving in the face of any dissatisfaction in order that we might escape it. Motion allows us to conceive of devastation—and the dissatisfaction it produces—as something we might leave behind, provided we move fast enough.

The enjoyment that so many Americans derive from driving their cars on the open road—"leaving their cares behind"—exemplifies this idea. While moving rapidly, one can readily imagine that one can overcome all distance and eliminate the gap that distance creates. This conception of the fast-moving car as a way of escaping dissatisfaction gets played out in almost every "road movie" that Hollywood produces. In Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), for instance, Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) take to the road after Louise shoots a man who attempted to rape Thelma. Even though the police finally catch up to them, the movement of the car provides a sense of respite for both Thelma and Louise, a sense of respite that lasts for as long as they remain moving. This movement prompts Thelma to tell Louise that, for the first time in her life, she feels "awake." To be "awake" is to be enjoying oneself, and the movement in the car makes it possible for Thelma to enjoy in a way she never has before. The ending of the film illustrates this even further: cornered by the police, Thelma and Louise decide to drive their car into the Grand Canyon—to die in motion—rather than to allow the police to put a stop to their movement by arresting them. In their attempt to escape dissatisfaction through motion, Thelma and Louise exemplify contemporary subjectivity. This impulse to move, to eliminate distance, makes it impossible to recognize the crisis of the AIDS epidemic, which represents a Real that movement cannot outrun.

The failure to experience the Real of the AIDS crisis, the failure to experience the AIDS crisis as the trauma of human existence itself, reaches its apotheosis in the most memorable figure in Kushner's play—the character of Roy Cohn. We first see Roy, in the second scene of *Millennium Approaches*, sitting at his desk and yet, at the same time, in an exaggerated state of motion. As Kushner's stage directions indicate, "Roy conducts business with great energy, impatience and sensual abandon: gesticulating, shouting, cajoling, crooning, playing the phone, receiver and hold button with virtuosity and love."<sup>38</sup> Completely committed to nonstop movement and activity, he tells Joe, "I wish I was an octopus, a fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers" (1:11). More arms means more possibility for activity and motion. All of this frenetic activity—and all of Roy's connections to the activity of the powerful in the country—is driven by Roy's avoidance of dissatisfaction. Inso-

far as he keeps moving, Roy can convince himself that dissatisfaction plagues other people, not him. He knows that there is dissatisfaction in existence—as he tells Joe, “Life is full of horror” (1:58)—but he believes that he (and a certain few) can outrun it. This becomes even more apparent in Roy’s response to the news that he has AIDS.

Power, for Roy, means being plugged in to a movement that can remove him from any dissatisfaction that he encounters. When he learns that he has AIDS—that is, when he learns that he is going to die very soon and, much more importantly, that his homosexuality may become public—Roy immediately invokes his connections to power in order to deny this.<sup>39</sup> In the most famous line of the play, he tells Henry, his doctor, “AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (1:46), thereby fleeing the dissatisfaction that he associates with the disease and with homosexuality. Roy believes that through nonstop motion he can eliminate all sense of lack. Whereas Louis flees lack via his own personal movement, Roy does so through his identification with the movement of history itself. This kind of identification acts as a bulwark against his own mortality (i.e., his own failure to enjoy). He proclaims to Ethel Rosenberg, “I’m immortal. Ethel.[. . .] I have *forced* my way into history. I ain’t never gonna die” (1:112, Kushner’s emphasis). Entering into the great motion of history itself—what Roy sees himself doing here—represents the ethos of perpetual motion taken to its endpoint. When one enters into the nonstop motion of history, one enters into eternal enjoyment: distance no longer infects one in this domain.<sup>40</sup>

In a society of enjoyment, subjects work to avoid anything that erects a barrier to enjoyment. This is why, as Roy Cohn recognizes, contemporary America has no use for those who are sick or aged. He tells Ethel Rosenberg:

The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan: He’s so healthy he’s hardly human, he’s a hundred if he’s a day, he takes a slug in his chest and two days later he’s out west riding ponies in his PJs. I mean who does that? That’s America. It’s just no country for the infirm. (2:62)

America “is no country for the infirm” because infirmity indicates a failure of enjoyment. To be sick is thus to be guilty. The sick illustrate the persistence of dissatisfaction and distance within the society of enjoyment. In acknowledging the sick, one acknowledges lack as well. Hence, like Roy Cohn, we opt instead for nonstop motion, for trying to eliminate the distance that the sick would introduce into the contemporary world. Through this focus on Roy Cohn (clearly the most compelling character in *Angels*), Kushner demonstrates the power and appeal of the ethos of motion: it allows us to cover over the experience of dissatisfaction, to imagine ourselves in a state of complete enjoyment.

## COSMIC REACTIONARIES

Though the society of enjoyment works to eliminate distance, it also spawns an opposite movement—an attempt to restore distance and transcendence. This accounts for the contemporary rise in fundamentalism, which emerges in response to the absence of distance. Fundamentalism seeks to restore the central role of prohibition in society and thereby restore a sense of distance and of a transcendent beyond. Both religious and nationalist versions of fundamentalism raise their central value (e.g., ethnic identity, religious practices) to a transcendent level: it cannot be captured through universal communication. In order to sustain this kind of elevation, fundamentalism attacks the nonstop motion such as we see in *Angels in America*. Nonstop motion has the effect of breaking down every barrier, and fundamentalism needs at least one barrier.

In *Angels in America*, the play's titular characters represent this fundamentalist position. They call for an end to human motion because this motion has driven God out of his transcendent position. The angel that summons Prior to the "Great Work" comes to him because the human proclivity for motion has wrought havoc throughout creation, even in heaven itself. The angel tells Prior, "In creating You, Our Father-Lover unleashed Sleeping Creation's Potential for Change. In YOU the Virus of TIME began!" (1:49). With their constant motion forward, humans disrupted the peaceful stasis of heaven. As Prior himself puts it, "As the human race began to progress, travel, intermingle, everything started to come unglued. Manifest first as tremors in Heaven" (2:50). Not only did human motion disrupt heavenly stillness, it also changed God. God became "humanized" and began to imitate the motion of humans. According to the angel, "He began to leave us! Bored with His Angels, Bewitched by Humanity, In Mortifying Imitation of You, his least creation, He would sail off on Voyages, no knowing where" (2:50). And finally, on April 18, 1906, the day of the San Francisco earthquake, God left heaven altogether.<sup>41</sup> The departure of God from heaven signifies—at least, in the view of the angel—that human motion has completely eradicated all transcendence.

The angel comes to Prior in order to anoint him the prophet of God's return, of the end of motion. The angel commands, "**YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING!**" (2:52, Kushner's emphasis). The angel (and the other angels whose interests he represents) hope that by arresting motion, humans will undo the changes which that motion has caused. When Prior tells him of this vision, Belize correctly identifies the angel's position as that of a "cosmic reactionary." He accuses Prior of being "afraid of the future, afraid of time. Longing to go backwards so bad you made this angel up, a cosmic reactionary" (2:55). What is attractive about the reac-

tionary mantra is its promise of a world with an end to perpetual motion—and with that, a “return” to a world of stability and distance.

The problem with the fundamentalist attempt to re-create a world of distance is that it itself emerges as a way of enjoying in the guise of its opposite. That is to say, contemporary fundamentalism is not so much an alternative to the command for enjoyment as an attempt to comply with it. The fundamentalist recognizes that the lack of enjoyment that plagues this society of enjoyment; he or she recognizes that *the command to enjoy bars enjoyment much more effectively than the prohibition of enjoyment*. Hence, one turns to fundamentalism in an effort to rediscover the enjoyment that the society of enjoyment commands and yet militates against. Fundamentalism is thus not the enemy of enjoyment but a desperate attempt to unleash it. This is why the stories about the September 11th suicide bombers’ activities the night before the attacks should not surprise us. If these fundamentalists indulged in the very decadence of the society of enjoyment that they were going to attack the next day (drinking, going to strip clubs, etc.), this testifies to the kinship between fundamentalism and the society of enjoyment. Both are structured around maximizing one’s jouissance. In this sense, the fundamentalist alternative is no alternative at all. It evinces an underlying fealty to the society of enjoyment against which it supposedly constitutes itself.

We can see this dimension of fundamentalism in Wendy Shalit’s *A Return to Modesty*, an argument for restoring traditional sexual prohibitions in contemporary society. In attacking the culture of sexual liberation and its destruction of the intersubjective distance that modesty provides, Shalit implicitly confronts the society of enjoyment and condemns the evanescence of clear limits within this society. *A Return to Modesty* argues for a return to the vanished society of prohibition and its demand for the elimination—or at least the curtailment—of enjoyment. As Shalit says, “Maybe instead of learning to overcome repression, we should be prolonging it.”<sup>42</sup> Despite this call for a return to prohibition, Shalit’s justification for returning to a society of prohibition betrays her underlying allegiance to a society of enjoyment. While on the one hand Shalit insists that we must promote modesty and prohibit enjoyment, on the other hand the basis for her argument for modesty lies in the enjoyment that it promises. According to Shalit, the fundamental problem with the society of enjoyment is its failure to provide enjoyment: “without any restraint and without any rules, we just don’t have as much fun.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, the return to prohibition becomes simply a better way of facilitating this enjoyment—a better way of obeying the imperative to enjoy. *No authentic advocate of prohibition would put the claim this way*. For the genuine partisan of prohibition, the prohibition is not a vehicle for enjoyment; it must be adopted and obeyed purely for its own sake. In abandoning this absolutist ground, today’s proponents of prohibition betray their underlying investment in enjoyment.

As Shalit puts it, “the most compelling rationale for a return to modesty is our discovery that our culture of immodesty isn’t, finally, as sexy as we thought it was going to be.”<sup>44</sup> Shalit bases her argument for a “return to modesty” on this claim that modesty, not sexual liberation, is the real key to enjoyment. This is the instructive feature of Shalit’s book. It reveals that subjects turn to the fundamentalism that Shalit and others offer not because it restores a limit on enjoyment—not because it seriously promises renewed distance—but because it promises an enjoyment beyond any limit, which is to say, a complete absence of distance.

*Angels* avoids falling for this fundamentalist trap, but it does depict fundamentalism as the only possible alternative to the society of enjoyment. Though *Angels* is a play about the angels choosing Prior as their prophet, it is, finally, a rejection of their plea for return and an embrace of progress—an embrace of the motion that erases distance. Even though Prior recognizes the problems attending nonstop motion, he feels, in the end, as if he has no option but to endorse the idea of motion and progress. Not to do so would be to side with the forces of conservatism and reaction, forces that want to turn the world to stone, to ossify our lives. But in doing so, what distinguishes Prior from Roy Cohn? Don’t both of them, in the last instance, come down on the side of nonstop motion? No matter what we may think of Prior, his embrace of motion does place him clearly in Roy’s camp, leaving us with a puzzling situation. The problem is an insoluble one, precisely because it is a product of the very way in which the play establishes the alternatives. The dilemma, as the play sets it up, is either/or: either one chooses motion or one chooses stasis; there is no third way.

The choice between motion (erasing distance) and stasis (reestablishing distance) is an antinomy of the society of enjoyment. Given the two (false) choices in the play, it is not difficult to see why Prior elects for motion, proclaiming to the angel repeatedly, “I want more life” (2:135). The phrase “more life”—which becomes, at the close of the play, something like the mantra of *Angels*—illustrates in a capsulized form why *Angels* exemplifies the society of enjoyment. The demand for “more life” is a demand for more enjoyment—an unwitting attempt to comply with the duty to enjoy. If fundamentalism doesn’t provide an authentic alternative, it would seem as if Kushner is right. Under the circumstances, opting for “more life” looks like the best we can do. But this represents one of the great triumphs of the society of enjoyment: it so circumscribes our alternatives that we cannot imagine what a way out would look like.

*Angels in America* can depict no alternative to conformism or fundamentalism because of the very elimination of distance to which the play is responding. Distance—the existence of a gap within the symbolic order—allows us to grasp the possibility of an alternative. But today all alternatives seem purely imaginary; they never appear to touch the Real. This reduction of the Real to

the imaginary and the symbolic makes it increasingly difficult to make sense of our experience. We can discover meaning only through reference to some foundational point at which the sliding of signification stops—a point where the Real seems to make itself felt within the symbolic order. Without a sense of this point of exception within our system of signification, we lose the ability to universalize, which is the key to discovering meaning. Thus, the society of enjoyment is a society in which one must labor to find meaning.

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## *Chapter Five*

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# INTERPRETATION UNDER DURESS

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### THE VANISHING UNIVERSAL

The distance that prohibition provides for subjects offers them the space for critical reflection. Through this distance, the structure of the society of prohibition thus allows for subjects to make sense of it. When this distance collapses under the weight of the imperative to enjoy, we lose our ability to interpret events occurring in the world—to connect isolated events to the larger social order. Interpretation requires distance and separation, and the society of commanded enjoyment allows us neither. We become so caught up in the immediacy of events that we lack ability to reflect on the mediations that underlie this apparent immediacy. A sense of immediacy prevails in the society of enjoyment to such an extent that events seem meaningless—as if they occur outside of any context that might allow us to decipher them. What is lacking is a sense of universality that would mediate particular events and render them comprehensible.

In his account of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson describes the widespread failure of interpretation symptomatic of the society of enjoyment, a failure he links to the contemporary collapse of distance. This means, first of all, that we lack the ability not only to interpret events but even to locate ourselves in the world. According to Jameson, “this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable

external world.”<sup>1</sup> Unable to discover how our spatial world is organized—to perform what Jameson calls cognitive mapping—we experience events as random and disconnected. Cognitive mapping relies on the universalizing, seeing the necessity at work within the seeming randomness of events. But the ability to universalize is precisely what the society of enjoyment militates against. As a result, interpretation appears only in disguised forms.

Jameson sees conspiracy theory as one of these forms. The conspiracy theorist attempts to interpret events, to plot their connection to the whole, and this act involves universalizing. Jameson says, “conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.”<sup>2</sup> Grasping the totality is impossible today because, paradoxically, global capitalism is authentically total: we can’t access the point beyond it that would allow us to see it as a totality. However, conspiracy theory makes an effort at universalizing, even if this effort involves a fallacious belief in its own transcendence. That is, the conspiracy theorist believes that she/he can attain the (impossible) perspective of an outsider, one looking at the contemporary world system from a point beyond it. But despite this fundamental error, the very prevalence of conspiracy theory indicates the extent to which the society of enjoyment resists the act of interpretation. Today, interpretation finds itself denigrated to such an extent that it appears only in the form of paranoia.

Contemporary works of art frequently display the society of enjoyment’s resistance to meaning and interpretation. As Jameson points out, modernist art, despite its difficulty, is nonetheless fundamentally directed toward the act of interpretation. In fact, the difficulty of modernist art is an index of its interpretability. The difficulty allows for—and even invites—the act of interpretation. With postmodern art (or, to translate into our terms, art in the society of enjoyment), interpretation becomes beside the point. According to Jameson:

We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts—such is the logic of postmodernism in general, which finds one of its strongest and most original, authentic forms in the new art of experimental video.<sup>3</sup>

In video and other contemporary art, the resistance to interpretation does not appear as part of the work’s content. It is instead a matter of form. While experiencing the continuous flow of experimental video—just as when watching television or surfing the internet—it becomes difficult to isolate a text for

interpretation. Art becomes an experience rather than a text that one interprets, and an experience resists universalization.<sup>4</sup>

The inability to universalize manifests itself not just in contemporary works of art, but also—and even more emphatically—in contemporary theory as well. Theory itself has become, as Jameson notes, hostile to theory. This becomes readily apparent in New Historicism, where “extreme theoretical energy is captured and deployed, but repressed by a valorization of immanence and nominalism that can either look like a ‘return to the thing itself’ or a ‘resistance to theory.’”<sup>5</sup> This “valorization of immanence,” as we saw in the previous chapter, is the preeminent “theoretical” position today. It is theorizing that works to confine itself to the particular, to resist the temptation to lift events and texts out of their particular context. Such a focus on immanence and particularity misses the functioning of the system as a whole, the way in which the universal informs the emergence of particularity. As Jameson puts it, “a relaxed consent to immanence [. . .] can yield no experimental information as to the shape of the system and its boundaries, the specific social and historical fashion in which an outside is unattainable and we are turned back in on ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> For Jameson, even if we are trapped within the contemporary world system, the abandonment of the attempt to think the whole—the abandonment of the attempt to interpret—will not allow us to see the way that we are trapped. Only the effort to think to totality can bring our inability to think the totality into view. But this requires a commitment to universalizing, a process that the society of enjoyment renders increasingly difficult.

#### THE ETHICS OF THE PARTICULAR

Universality has fallen into ill repute in part because of the link between universalizing and violence. As it mediates the competing claims of different particularities, universality necessarily forces particularities to sacrifice their particularity. It is this violence implicit in universality that has occasioned so much opposition to it in recent years, so much insistence that we resist the lure of universality and confine ourselves to the less violent (and less grandiose) claims of multiple particularities. This dissatisfaction with universality has been, in part, responsible for a turn away from Marxism among the Left, a turn to what some call post-Marxism.<sup>7</sup> Marxism, because it demands the universalization of the class perspective of the proletariat and the prioritizing of the proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie, necessarily subsumes other, perhaps equally important, struggles beneath this one—struggles against things such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, two former Marxists themselves, formulate the move away from universality most forcefully:

The epistemological niche from which “universal” classes and subjects spoke has been eradicated, and it has been replaced by a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity. This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to “the truth,” which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects.<sup>8</sup>

According to Laclau and Mouffe, we must give up the pretensions of universality because this is the only way of avoiding authoritarianism and the only way of sustaining a democratic Leftist politics.

However, as we can see in the passage from Laclau and Mouffe, there is some slippage between the impossibility of universality and the call for a prohibition against “the discourse of the universal.” In other words, they begin by claiming that universality is no longer possible, that the universal position “has been eradicated,” and then they insist that we must renounce universality. By making universality seem to be a possibility that we must avoid, Laclau and Mouffe cover over their insight into the evanescent nature of universality today. There is no need to avoid or renounce universality, precisely because we are no longer capable of it. And we are no longer capable of it insofar as we experience our subjectivity as one of, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, “a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity.” For Laclau and Mouffe, as for much of the contemporary Left, this turn from universality to particularity is a turn away from domination and from the violence of trying to speak for others. What they miss, however, is what is lost along with the loss of universality. When we can no longer take up a universalizing perspective, we can no longer escape our isolated position in order to understand the social order as a totality. Without the universal, we lose the ability to interpret the events occurring in our everyday lives—we lose the ability to find meaning—because it is only the universal that makes interpretation possible.

Interpretation operates by relating the particular to the universal, by taking a seemingly isolated event and seeing its larger importance. The universal provides the framework of meaning through which the particular acquires whatever sense it will acquire. Without the possibility of a reference to the universal, particular events lose their connection to the whole and thus take on the appearance of contingency. We can see this phenomenon at its most egregious in the contemporary attitude toward crime. People fear crime today in large part because it always threatens to take them by surprise. Rather than being the product of definite sociohistorical conditions, the criminal seems to emerge out of nowhere, strike, and then return to anonymity. As the victim (or potential victim) of the crime, I experience it as a wholly random act, disconnected with the functioning of the social order as a whole. What I expe-

rience most forcefully is the fact that the crime could have happened to anyone—that it could have happened to someone else just as easily as it happened to me. Certainly it is never anything that I did that triggered the crime—or at least such is my experience. Crimes appear, in other words, in almost every instance as particular acts without any link to the universal, without any connection to the social order in which they exist. One might have a theory about crime—blaming it on “liberal judges,” for instance—but when crime actually strikes, it seems random and irreducibly singular. Hence, it becomes impossible to interpret crime, to grasp particular crimes within their universal significance.<sup>9</sup> But nonetheless crime does have a universal significance, and it does emerge from localizable conditions, despite its appearance of isolation and particularity. In fact, one could convincingly argue that crime should be easier to understand within the current context of global capitalism than ever before in human history, simply because never before have those who live in squalor been bombarded on a daily basis with nonstop images of opulence. Making connections like this is increasingly difficult today, however, because subjects increasingly view their experience as an isolated, essentially private experience.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to fostering paranoia about crime, this contemporary failure to recognize the universal—and the inability to interpret that it produces—renders subjects unable to see any way out of the isolated particularity that engulfs them. A sense of claustrophobia sets in: without the possibility of universality, I have no means through which I might escape my insular, private world. From this perspective, one can understand yet another reason for the appeal of fundamentalism today. In addition to promising a return of transcendence (as we saw in the previous chapter), fundamentalism (grounded in religion, ethnicity, nation, etc.) provides the subject with a way out of his or her private world, a way of rediscovering the possibility of the universal. It assures us that there is a universal frame of reference that holds for everyone and that isn't subject to the variegations of our relativistic world. Whereas traditional religions today make allowances for other religions (other particularities) and thus tend to eschew universalizing, fundamentalism has no such qualms. The subject in the society of enjoyment feels incapable of universality, and fundamentalism comes along to provide an avenue through which it can be attained and experienced. As long as subjects continue to feel themselves isolated within their particularity, fundamentalism will continue to have an appeal. It provides the missing universal framework that allows us to make sense of our particular situation, to discover its meaning. Fundamentalism, however, is not the only path to universality. In fact, the turn toward it is based upon a misperception involved in the experience of late capitalist subjectivity.

Though subjects don't recognize the existence of the universal today, they nonetheless continue to exist under its sway. As speaking beings, we are all the

time employing the universal, discussing a particular situation through the vehicle of the universal. From the moment that we use words at all, we have moved from the level of the particular to that of the universal. This is the point that Hegel insists upon in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*:

Of course, we do not *envisage* the universal This or Being in general, but we *utter* the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say in this sense-certainty what we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*.<sup>11</sup>

Hegel's claim here is that though we may intend to communicate a *particular* content when we speak, the very act of speaking itself—using words—necessarily implies that we are dealing with *universals*, not *particulars*. Whatever words we use to describe the particular that we are trying to describe will be universals—words that describe other particularities as well. Hence, we cannot speak that particular that we are trying to speak. As Hegel puts it, “the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e., to that which is inherently universal.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than speaking about particulars, we are always involved with the universal while we inhabit the world of language, the symbolic order. The point, then—and this is what the fundamentalist misses—is that we haven't lost the universal, that the universal continues to persist despite the current difficulties we have in discerning it. Though our experience seems bereft of the universal, it is nonetheless there, providing the frame through which we encounter the particulars of our everyday lives. The key to interpretation today is the ability to grasp this silent functioning of the universal. We can continue to interpret—we can continue to move from the particular to the universal—because the universal persists. Interpretation becomes, however, more difficult and, at the same time, more exigent. In the face of the seeming absence of the universal, we must interpret all the more, because without interpretation our experience is simply a series of randomly arranged events, wholly without significance.

#### FIRST-YEAR PHENOMENOLOGY

One need not spend too much time in a college literature classroom before one discovers on a very practical level the widespread difficulty with interpretation that exists today. Asking fledgling students of literature to interpret a work of fiction or a poem results not, as we might expect, in reductive

or even moralizing interpretations—like interpreting *Othello* as a warning against excessive jealousy or *Hamlet* as an admonition against thinking too much. Instead, what ensues is inevitably a variety of descriptions about what happens in the literary text, rather than what the text might mean. The question of meaning is, in other words, completely foreign to most students when they come to college. It is enough to decipher what is happening in a text, so that one never arrives at interpretation. Interpretation is a luxury—“reading too much into things”—and an indication of wasted time. In short, students today often act as if they are followers of the Baudrillard of the 1980s, believing that resisting meaning is akin to resisting domination. As Baudrillard puts it in *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities*, “Defiance always comes from that which has no meaning, no name, no identity—it is a defiance of meaning, of power, of truth, of their existing as such, of their pretending to exist as such.”<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard’s image of a mass resistance to meaning correctly apprehends the contemporary situation, but he wrongly sees it as resistance to power. To resist meaning, to refuse interpretation, is to succumb a priori to power, not to defy it, because meaning is the only way we have of grasping how it is that power functions, which is why Jameson champions cognitive mapping as a form of class consciousness. Thus, even Baudrillard’s analysis of resistance to meaning as a mode of resistance to power relies upon the very ability to interpret and make meaning that he ostensibly eschews. *Without interpretation and meaning, we have no way to understand the social order, let alone a means of contesting its inequities.* The difficulty that students have in interpretation is only an impoverishment of their ability to resist, not a sign of it.

The proclivity of students to confine themselves to descriptions of what happens in texts, rather than to move to interpretation of them, is not without its philosophical antecedents. They are, in fact, taking the basic directives of phenomenology and existentialism to their most extreme point. The mantra of Husserlian phenomenology—“Back to the things themselves”—expresses a desire to arrive at a level prior to interpretation and meaning, the level of experience itself. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, “Looking for the world’s essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization.”<sup>14</sup> Phenomenology insists that interpretation—what Merleau-Ponty calls “thematization”—deforms experience, and that the task of philosophy is to counter the damage done by interpretation. The ultimate goal is description, not interpretation. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says, “all [phenomenology’s] efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status.”<sup>15</sup> This rejection of interpretation in favor of what is prior to it—“direct and primitive contact with the world”—

has as its premise the belief that there is experience prior to thematization, description prior to interpretation. That is to say, the phenomenologist believes in an immediacy—the experience of life itself—that is prior to all mediation, even if we can never successfully arrive back at this immediacy through the enterprise of thought.<sup>16</sup> Phenomenology, in this sense, lends some credence to the complaint of the first-year literature student that all efforts at interpretation are “reading too much into things.” We should, according to this position, confine ourselves to the process of getting at the original experience of the text, prior to the imposition of meaning upon it.<sup>17</sup>

Phenomenology’s mistake consists in failing to see the radicality of the subject’s insertion into the world. For phenomenology, the subject emerges against and in the midst of an already-existing background; the subject always already exists in the world. This is what Heidegger means by the term “being-in-the-world”: Dasein never emerges except contextually, within its particular world and within history, and Dasein is inextricably tied to that world. The problem is that this schema smoothes over the precarious entrance of Dasein into its world. As Heidegger would have it, the process is always successful because it is part of Dasein’s “fundamental ontology,” because the life-world is the always already, the *sine qua non* of Dasein. Heidegger envisions no act in which the subject decides to invest her or himself in the goings-on of the world, in which the subject decides that the world *matters* to her or him. He refuses to grant that it is possible to exist within a world and not invest oneself in it, as the existence of psychotics attests to.<sup>18</sup>

For Heidegger, the great philosophical question—“How can I be certain of the existence of an external world?”—represents a fundamental error even in its very conception. Its error consists in failing to grasp Dasein’s primordial being-in-the-world: Dasein is not first an isolated subject that later enters a world, but its very existence necessarily presupposes a world. The call for a proof of the existence of the external world is thus nonsense. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, “The ‘scandal of philosophy’ does not consist in the fact that this proof is still lacking up to now, but *in the fact that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again.*”<sup>19</sup> Dasein’s worldliness has for Heidegger a constitutive priority, and this means that all efforts at interpreting the world necessarily come after the experience of it. Heidegger does allow that Dasein is always interpreting its world, but this interpretation always comes, as it were, too late. We interpret after we experience. Because it comes too late, the goal of *Being and Time* is to work its way back through interpretation—to overcome metaphysics—to what is prior. Heidegger’s contention that experience is prior to interpretation finds an ironic echo in the first-year literature student’s complaint that interpretation is an essentially foreign activity imposed upon life after the fact—and thus it does violence to that life, forcing life into a box that ill fits it.

Interpretation—or theory—obscures our originary relationship to things. To return to the terms of Heidegger, it transforms an understanding of things as ready-to-hand (*zuhause*), as useful, into an understanding of things as present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), as independent objects. Rather than seeing things in their handiness, we see them in their objective presence. That is, we experience the hammer not as a tool that has the function of pounding nails—we don't know it in its usefulness—but as an object of theoretical contemplation, existing apart from us and from our use of it. It may even lead us to ask the—scandalous—question: Does the hammer really exist, or is it just a product of our thought? Such a question is the apotheosis of the error of thinking in terms of objective presence. Thinking things in their objective presence, the end result of the theoretical or interpretive attitude, causes us to conceive of a barrier between us and the world, to think in terms of subject and object.<sup>20</sup> Thus, theory itself becomes the mystification that the existential analysis of *Being and Time* must traverse in order to arrive at the coordinates of our originary being-in-the-world and our originary relationship to things as ready-to-hand.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger implicitly associates the transformation induced by theory (from readiness to objective presence) with the ideological manipulation of the They (*das Man*). The They levels down primordial experience to the confines of its own averageness; it allows nothing exceptional or individual to remain independent of its purview, thereby fundamentally distorting Dasein's experience. For Heidegger, the They is ideology, appropriating all difference and integrating this difference into its sameness. But one of the decisive moments of *Being and Time* is the implicit identification of the They and theory: both have the effect of obscuring our originary being-in-the-world, of transforming our relationship to things from readiness-to-hand to presence-at-hand. Through this equation, Heidegger takes up a position quite similar to that of Baudrillard, insofar as he condemns the act of interpretation to the status of ideology. Interpreting, like the distortions of the They, removes us from our own experience, making it seem as if the world is something distinct from us, something that merely might—or might not—exist. Even though Heidegger himself is doubtless interpreting in *Being and Time*, he nonetheless embraces there a thoroughgoing hostility to interpretation, a hostility that is the reverse side of his prioritizing of experience.

The phenomenological conception—so clearly present in Heidegger's thought—that prioritizes experience and description is the prevailing conception today. It plays a part in (to a greater or lesser extent) many of the theoretical movements prominent in contemporary thought, such as Derridean deconstruction, Foucaultian new historicism, cultural studies, and even the post-Marxism of figures like Laclau and Mouffe. Despite their many differences, these lines of thought focus on the experience that has been neglected

and forgotten by conceptual (and universalist) thinking. Though perhaps all of the proponents of these positions would emphatically reject phenomenology (and certainly existentialism!), this is nonetheless part of the heritage informing contemporary theory. The result of this line of thought is a lingering resistance to the act of interpretation because of its violent imposition of the universal upon experience. This determination to respect experience, however, leaves experience itself something completely alien, something we cannot understand. So long as we remain hostile to interpretation, we will remain unable to gain any purchase on the experience that we are so determined to respect.<sup>21</sup> As Alain Badiou insists, “we can never go back on universalism. There is no earlier territoriality calling for protection or recovery. The whole point is that differences be traversed, conserved and deposed simultaneously, somewhere other than in the frozen waters of selfish calculation.”<sup>22</sup>

#### MORRISON BEYOND NIETZSCHE

If we are attempting to discover the continued importance of interpretation and of the universal, then turning to the work of Toni Morrison certainly seems a strange choice. From her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to her most famous one, *Beloved*, Morrison’s fiction seems to emphasize what universalizing fails to capture and to stress the way in which trauma limits the possibilities of universalizing. *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, demonstrates the damage that the universalizing of white experience does to a young African American girl. And *Beloved* is constantly at pains to point out that words—that is, universality—fail to capture the horror of the slave experience, which led a mother to kill her own child.<sup>23</sup> (The repeated insistence in the epilogue of *Beloved* concerning the inadequacy of narrative—“It was not a story to pass on”<sup>24</sup>—illustrates this point most emphatically.) Critics have stressed repeatedly that the salient feature of Morrison’s fiction is its insistence on respecting “a world of difference”<sup>25</sup> and on resisting “critical and ideological closure.”<sup>26</sup> According to Lisa Garbus, Morrison “unearth[s] graves in order to de-symbolize death, to bring back its real, and to unseat the dead masses from a lie of language, from the pretense that their story has been told.”<sup>27</sup> And Denise Heinze claims that “in all of her novels, writer, text, and audience converge on the indeterminacy of meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Something essential in Morrison’s work calls attention to the failure of universalizing (or language, the instrument of universalizing) to account for everything. James Phelan even coins the category of the “stubborn”—that textual element which absolutely resists interpretation—in response to his encounter with Morrison. He claims that “*Beloved* herself is a paradigm case of the stubborn. Despite the best efforts of many careful readers, her character escapes any comprehensive, coherent account.

No matter how we arrange or rearrange the information about Beloved, there is always something that does not fit with the experience of everything else.”<sup>29</sup> Morrison’s emphasis on what “does not fit” is crucial to the ethical dimension of her fiction: by pointing to what universalizing cannot explain, she makes clear the violence involved in the very act of universalizing.

The novel *Paradise* seems to be firmly rooted in this tradition. Rather than asserting the presence of the universal in the face of its seeming absence, Morrison’s *Paradise* appears at first glance to be doing the reverse—revealing that there is no universal, that all we have are particulars. In this sense, the novel would be one in a series of modern and postmodern works bent on revealing the perspectivist nature of all truth. According to this prevailing perspectivism, there is no absolute perspective that one can inhabit vis-à-vis human experience, but only a series of limited, local perspectives. It is Nietzsche who, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, gives this line of thinking what is perhaps its most coherent expression. “There is,” according to Nietzsche, “only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be.”<sup>30</sup> The perspectivist work of art, then, rather than articulating a unitary narrative vision, deconstructs such a vision, making evident the existence of multiple perspectives on the events it depicts. Because we delude ourselves into believing in one—our—perspective as *the* perspective, the novelist must disabuse us of this notion through the presentation of a multifaceted narration. *Paradise*, in this view, would be tacitly acknowledging that in order to understand its content, we must not rely on a single perspective of it, but must piece together a series of perspectives into a more complete picture.

The above certainly appears consonant with the image of Morrison as the quintessential postmodern novelist. If we look only at the structure of the novel, it is easy to see it as a refutation of universalizing in the name of perspectivism and hence as a rejection of the possibility of interpretation. The effect of this structure in Morrison’s novel is, however, precisely the opposite of what one would expect. Rather than complicating a seemingly universal perspective with a series of particular perspectives, the different sections provide the universal frame through which we can understand the “particular” event that opens the novel. Morrison uses the different perspectives not to espouse perspectivism, but to make evident the hidden universal frame that informs all of our particular experiences. In this way, the novel completely confounds the expectations created by its structure.

The structure of *Paradise* approximates the structure of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*: it is divided into different sections bearing the names of different characters, and each section provides the background and perspective of its titular character (though the narration in Morrison’s novel is, unlike

Faulkner's, in third person). Rather than beginning with a false universality and exposing it as simply the sum of various particular perspectives, *Paradise* begins with what appears to be the absence of universality and subsequently illustrates its presence. In short, Morrison's project in *Paradise* is at once to present the phenomenology of contemporary experience—with its seeming nonuniversality—and to make clear, through the progress of the novel, that a universal frame does exist, albeit one that we do not experience as such.<sup>31</sup>

The novel is centered on a group of nine African American families who fled Louisiana at the turn of the century, looking for some respite from white racism in Oklahoma. When they arrive in Oklahoma, an all-black town refuses them entrance, citing their dark skin color. This event, called the "Disallowing," serves to unify the families and bond them into a community. They found their own town and call it "Haven." Haven falls apart in 1949, and the current town fathers move the families and found a new town, which they call "Ruby." The novel begins with a group of nine men from Ruby in the midst of an attack on a house outside of town, where five women reside. This house, named the "Convent" because it was once home to a number of nuns, has become a refuge for wayward women, primarily for women fleeing from men. These women, we learn through the course of the novel, have proven a constant source of temptation and irritation for the people of Ruby. In the attack that opens the novel, the town elders kill the five women living at the Convent, in an effort to free the town from their untoward influence. The effort fails, however, as the bodies of the women disappear immediately after the attack and the women subsequently reappear in various locations. But what is most striking about the novel is not its story line; it is the form that the story takes.

Morrison begins *Paradise*, much as she begins her prior novel *Jazz*, with a statement that cannot but fail to make sense to someone reading the novel for the first time.<sup>32</sup> The novel begins abruptly—"They shoot the white girl first"—and without immediate explanation.<sup>33</sup> The striking violence of this initial sentence seems to arrive from nowhere. It seems, in short, to be an act that occurs outside of any symbolic frame, standing on its own. The sentences that immediately follow do little to clarify who is doing the shooting, who is being shot, or why it is happening. Indeed, the entirety of the novel's first section, entitled "Ruby," provides no help in answering these questions. As we read the rest of the novel, however, we gradually begin to grasp who is involved and why it has happened. We learn that the men of Ruby have perpetuated this violence upon the women of the Convent because they want no more of the disruptive feminine *jouissance* that these women seem to embody. Nonetheless, it requires the entirety of the novel for this to become clear. As J. Brooks Bouson puts it, "the narrative slowly and circuitously spirals around this central act of violence."<sup>34</sup> Morrison devotes the rest of *Paradise* to clarifying this

first line, to providing the frame through which we can properly understand the seemingly isolated event that it depicts.

The salient feature of *Paradise* is that, as a reader, I experience events long before I can make sense of them.<sup>35</sup> Events initially seem to exist outside of any frame of meaning, and it is only afterward that the frame through which the event is comprehensible becomes visible. The event itself initially appears as a violent irruption of the Real, occurring outside of any symbolic context. What Morrison is tapping into here is one of the key aspects of contemporary experience. Rather than experiencing the events in our lives as a part of a whole, within the context of the universal, we tend to experience events in isolation, as if each event exists in its own sphere, untouched by any other. The lack of an evident universal is what makes interpretation so difficult today. This appearance, however, is misleading, and it is through the act of interpretation that we can see the connection between events, the way in which they are all situated within a universality. On the level of its form, the novel illustrates both the illusion of nonuniversality and the hidden universality that makes interpretation possible.

Like the novel's opening, the "Mavis" section begins with a startling event, coming without warning. Mavis is the first of the Convent women that the novel introduces, and her section begins, "The neighbors seemed pleased when the babies smothered" (21). Again, the startling violence seems, to the reader, to burst forth spontaneously, completely removed from any symbolic context in which it might be interpreted. Not only do we not know which babies smother, how they smothered, or who is responsible for their being smothered, we don't know why it pleased the neighbors. Nor do we know why it occurred. Without any of this kind of knowledge, interpretation seems impossible; the event seems to be an unexplainable irruption of the Real.<sup>36</sup> However, as the section progresses, Morrison provides the context that allows us to understand both the details of the event and also why it happened. It soon becomes apparent that Mavis (who left her infant twins in a hot, enclosed car while she went into the grocery) had definite reasons for wanting her children dead, even if these reasons were not conscious ones.

After the death of the twins, Mavis comes to believe that her children and her husband are conspiring to kill her. She imagines the children snickering behind the door while Frank (her husband) has sex with her, and then she imagines that Frank's yawn after sex is a signal to them. Rather than simply indicating Mavis's descent into madness, this paranoia, while on one level perhaps baseless, nonetheless taps into the truth about her relationship with Frank and her children. Morrison's description of their sex the night before Mavis leaves makes her position evident: "He didn't penetrate—just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face. She could have been a life-size Raggedy Ann" (26).

Though we may assume that Frank and the children have no active plan to do away with Mavis, they do consistently brutalize her. Earlier, during an interview with a journalist concerning the smothering, Mavis endures silently her daughter Sal squeezing her waist and then kicking her shin, not daring to “swat Sal’s hand away or acknowledge the pain even slightly” (23). Only the twins, the youngest of the children, were not a part of the mechanism that dominates Mavis. They were “the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren’t a trial” (25). But the twins were also only newborns. By allowing them to smother when she did, Mavis provides assurance that they will not grow up and become like Frank and the other children; the newborn twins remain “the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren’t a trial” only so long as they remain at the age they are. With the twins, Mavis has the relationship that a mother is “supposed” to have. They function as an ego ideal, allowing her the only position from which she can see herself as she wants to be seen. Rather than have this ideal turn against her, Mavis destroys it. In destroying it, she tries to preserve it as best she can.

Rather than emerging spontaneously, then, the event that begins the “Mavis” section occurs within a specific symbolic context, within which it is possible for the reader to locate the event and thus to understand it. Of course, the event remains a violent irruption of the Real. It indicates the point at which Mavis’s desire, repressed (and denied by her family) in the symbolic, returned in the Real. Interpretation doesn’t mean reducing this Real act to its symbolic underpinnings, but grasping the symbolic frame in which it occurs—and the point at which the symbolic frame breaks down.<sup>37</sup> As Lacan points out in *Seminar XI*, “Interpretation is not directed so much at the meaning as towards reducing the non-meaning of the signifiers, so that we may discover the determinants of the subject’s entire behaviour.”<sup>38</sup> That is, interpretation does not discover a universe replete with meaning, but reduces nonmeaning in that universe. In short, interpretation can achieve comprehension without being comprehensive, without saying it all. Before we acquire the symbolic context through which we can look at Mavis’s act, it appears non-sensical and completely unlocalizable. After Morrison provides the symbolic context in the pages following the description of the act, the act still seems non-sensical, but at least we can now locate it within a universe of meaning, isolating this kernel of non-sense—a process which *is* the act of interpretation.

To see the difference between making the Real meaningful and locating its nonmeaning within a symbolic context, let us take a contemporary version of the irruption of the Real—the idea of a meteor or comet colliding with the earth. As we can see from the popularity of films such as *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998), this idea resonates today: Why? To understand its importance we must understand the symbolic context in which the event would occur—rather than grasp a meaning within the event itself. The latter

approach, one which would symbolize the Real, might, for instance, take the oncoming meteor as a message from God, telling us that we have been sinful and that, therefore, we must be destroyed. Needless to say, this would not be the common response today. The common response would be a refusal of the possibility of interpretation, a proclamation about the nonsensical status of this event. This anti-interpretive approach would see the event as wholly incomprehensible, irreducible to any meaning whatsoever.

Reducing the Real event to a meaning and refusing interpretation altogether, however, are not the only possibilities. There is a third way—that of situating the Real event within a symbolic context. This path allows us to attain comprehension without becoming comprehensive and thereby foreclosing the Real. According to this line of thought, the collision of the meteor with the earth would remain a nonsensical event, but we could nonetheless understand why this event seems to have such a powerful hold over us today. At the moment when the hegemony of late capitalism as a world system has become secure, the meteor serves to remind us that no social structure is immune to the return of the Real. In this sense, the meteor (as represented in the film) indicates the presence of a desire for something beyond late capitalism, a yearning for what cannot be reduced to a commodity. That a beyond to late capitalism can only be envisioned as a world-ending catastrophe indicates most vividly the degree of late capitalism's hegemony today. The only way to escape the commodification of everything seems to be the destruction of everything. Such an interpretation of the potential meteor collision does not render the collision itself meaningful (or any less traumatic); instead, it discovers meaning around the collision, in the investment in and responses to the event. The difficulty of this kind of interpretation lies in the prevailing absence of any universalizing efforts today. In the absence of this universalizing, we gaze speechless upon every irruption of the Real, unable to embark upon the interpretation that the event demands.

#### AGAINST INTERPRETATION

*Paradise* makes very clear why we suffer from an absence of interpretation. In addition to depicting the phenomenology of the seemingly inexplicable event in the form of her novel—that is, in the experience of the reader—Morrison also shows the same thing taking place on the level of content, to the characters in the novel. The form and the content of the novel closely parallel each other. What the form of the novel effects upon the reader, the content illustrates happening to the characters. The act of violence that frames the novel—the murder of the women at the Convent—has its roots in the failure of the leading men of the town of Ruby to interpret their series of encounters with

the Convent women and their enjoyment. As the history of the town evinces, the failure of interpretation is the direct result of a change that has been taking place in Ruby—the change from being a town governed by prohibition to being a town governed by an imperative to enjoy. Whereas the prohibition of enjoyment allows for the existence of an evident universal Law (laid down by the symbolic Father), in the society of enjoyment this Law is less evident, more amorphous—and thus the universal is less clearly evident as well. This change leaves subjects increasingly incapable of interpretation, which ultimately leads to a paranoid experience of the world (as we see in the male leadership of the town) and to the attack on the Convent women.

The town of Haven was originally established, as its name suggests, as a place for those who had no place. The nine families who founded Haven collectively identify themselves as “eight-rock” (which stands for “a deep, deep level in the coal mines” [193]), because of the purity of their stand against white racism and oppression—they are “descendents of those who, after the Civil War, had defied or hidden from whites doing all they could to force them to stay and work as sharecroppers in Louisiana” (193)—and because of their racial purity. Led by Zechariah or Big Papa, the grandfather of Deacon and Steward Morgan (who are the town leaders in Ruby), these eight-rock families journey from Louisiana to Oklahoma, looking for a place outside of direct white control. Once they arrive in Oklahoma and attempt to settle in the all-black town of Fairly, Oklahoma (which they had read about in advertisements), they encounter a new manifestation of racism. The town rejects them because of their dark skin color, exhibiting an intraracial racism that catches the eight-rock families by surprise, which they haven’t witnessed before.<sup>39</sup> The rejection by the town of Fairly, the Disallowing, brings the group of families together:

Afterward the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. (189)

Prompted by the Disallowing, Big Papa leads the group farther into Oklahoma, where they establish their own “Haven” from the humiliations that they have received.

Big Papa and the other “Old Fathers” establish the town of Haven through the erection of a monument—the Oven. Building the Oven is the first act of the town fathers, and Big Papa forges on it the Prohibition that

would hold the town together. He writes, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." These words, in some sense, hold the key to the entire novel, because the change that they undergo provides a precise indication of a fundamental historical shift. "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" compels the subjects of Haven to obedience, to the sacrifice of their private enjoyment for the sake of the community. Anyone unwilling to make this sacrifice will be ostracized, and we know that Big Papa has the determination to exclude even those closest to him. Prior to the journey to Oklahoma, some white men with a gun compelled Big Papa and his brother to dance for them. His brother complied; Big Papa refused and received a bullet in his foot. Afterward, Big Papa never said another word to his brother—who was no longer his brother, because "from that moment on they weren't brothers anymore" (302)—and left him behind as he headed for Oklahoma. This willingness to exclude his own brother provides empirical support for the threat written on the Oven: everyone knows that Big Papa isn't afraid to take action against those who refuse to "Beware the Furrow of His Brow."

In the world of Big Papa, one always knows where one stands. The clarity of the Law facilitates interpretation. The symbolic father will not tolerate deviance (or enjoyment)—no one can refuse to "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" and continue to "enjoy" the protection that Haven offers—but, in return for obedience, in return for the sacrifice of one's enjoyment, one gains respite and distance from enjoyment as well. Haven is, Morrison shows us, not just a haven from a racist society, but, more importantly, a haven from enjoyment. It is a haven from the white racist enjoyment that demanded dancing from Big Papa and his brother, and it is at the same time a haven from the enjoyment of the townspeople themselves. All enjoyment, whatever its stripe, much be checked at the door of Haven: this is the meaning of the words that grace the Oven and the significance of the town's name. Everyone who lives in the town must agree to live according to Big Papa's Law, to forsake the enjoyment of publicly transgressing it. Or they must at least acknowledge it, even if they decide to transgress it in some way. In the town of Haven, we can see a microcosm of the society of prohibition—how it creates stability and cohesiveness through its efforts to keep enjoyment at bay. It is the Oven and its words that represent this prohibition, which is why building it was the initial project of the town fathers. The main focus of *Paradise* is not this society of prohibition, however, but what results after Big Papa dies and after the town of Haven becomes the town of Ruby—when the prohibition against enjoyment begins to become an imperative to enjoy.

By 1949, Haven had lost its vitality, prompting the people of the town to move. Two of Big Papa's grandsons, Steward and Deacon Morgan, attempt to bring what the Oven embodies with them as they move the town farther "Out There," deeper into Oklahoma. They move the Oven brick by brick and place

it at the center of Ruby, the new town of the eight-rock families. However, something significant occurs in the transition from Haven to Ruby: the Prohibition loses its clarity, the word “Beware” is no longer visible on the Oven, so that it now reads “the Furrow of His Brow.” The change in the town’s name also tells us that things are different. Whereas “Haven” suggests a place free from enjoyment, “Ruby”—with its connotations of wealth and femininity—indicates the reverse, a place filled with enjoyment. The controversy that arises over the words on the Oven is the final stage of this transition. It is a struggle between those who would preserve the Prohibition and attempt to keep the town free of enjoyment (led by Steward and Deacon Morgan, the descendants of the original Father) and those who would eliminate it, replacing the Prohibition with an image with which they can identify (led by the new minister in town, Richard Misner).

The young people of Ruby want to make the Oven’s words more appropriate to the age, replacing the missing word “Beware” with the word “Be”—so that the Oven reads “Be the Furrow of His Brow”—in order to give it “new life.” Misner claims that “What’s at issue is clarifying the motto” (86). But even Misner’s way of putting it offends the town fathers, who see the change as representative of an easing of the Law and its Prohibition. As Reverend Pulliam incredulously replies, “Motto? Motto? We talking command! [. . .] ‘Beware the Furrow of His Brow.’ That’s what it says clear as daylight. That’s not a suggestion, that’s an order!” (86). This transition from “Beware” to “Be” and from “order” to “motto” (or “suggestion”) indicates a larger historical shift that the town leaders are making every effort to resist. Whereas the word “beware” suggests that God has the power and that humanity must obey, the word “be” suggests that one can identify oneself with God. In other words, the status of God changes from being the site of authority to being an image on the same level as the subject. In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek sees a parallel dynamic at work in the function of the father. He notes that “Today [. . .] it is the very symbolic function of the father which is increasingly undermined—that is, which is losing its performative efficiency; for that reason, a father is no longer perceived as one’s *Ego Ideal*, the (more or less failed, inadequate) bearer of symbolic authority, but as one’s *ideal ego*, imaginary competitor.”<sup>40</sup> Certainly, the youth of Ruby don’t envision themselves as competing with God, but they do feel as if, as they say, “We *are* the power” (87, Morrison’s emphasis). The word “beware” is prohibitory, while the word “be” is a positive imperative: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” prohibits enjoyment; “Be the Furrow of His Brow” commands it, which changes things fundamentally. Even though the younger generation does not win the argument, symbolic authority has nonetheless been undermined. This change in the function of symbolic authority—the transformation of the prohibition—fundamentally changes the relationship of the town to enjoyment. Once it is no

longer prohibited, the people of the town encounter enjoyment erupting throughout Ruby—and its appearances are in each case tied to the Convent and the women who live there.

From the standpoint of the society of prohibition, enjoyment is embodied in the external Other—those we ostracize from the social order. Hence, though we feel anxiety about it, we know where enjoyment is located; it has a context in which it exists. When we encounter an outbreak of enjoyment, we can't understand it, but we can interpret it, make clear its symbolic context. It seems to occur within a universal frame. However, in a society that commands, rather than prohibits, enjoyment, this context seems to evaporate. The imperative to enjoy has the effect of masking the presence of the universal, making it seem as if there is no longer a functioning universal. This is why interpretation is so difficult within the society of enjoyment. Enjoyment is no longer confined to an external position, but confronts us at every turn—within the social order rather than just outside it. In this way, the society of enjoyment produces paranoia: paranoia results from constant confrontations with the enjoying other and the belief that this other is enjoying in our stead. We receive an imperative to enjoy, but rather than feeling as if we are actually enjoying ourselves, we impute enjoyment to the other, a enjoyment that is “rightfully” ours. The problem is that this appearance of the other's enjoyment does not simply appear in its “proper” context, as external to the social order, at a distance. Instead, it appears directly in front of us, exposing our failure to enjoy and flaunting its success. Because of the seeming proximity of this enjoyment, it is impossible to locate it in a proper symbolic context. This impossibility shapes our response: we can't interpret the other's enjoyment, so we feel as if we must destroy it. This is precisely the dynamic at work in the attack on the Convent that opens *Paradise*.

#### GET THEE TO A NUNNERY

As we see in *Paradise*, the subject in the society of enjoyment constantly feels horrified by the prospect that the other is enjoying in its stead. The men of Ruby are in this sense exemplary subjects of this kind of society. From the beginning of the attack, the novel reveals that the enjoyment embodied in the women of the Convent and the Convent itself horrifies the men involved in the attack and serves as its motive. The women that live here, in the minds of the men attacking, have engaged in all sorts of sexual activity, performed abortions, and even seduced the men of the town with their magic. They have practiced diabolical forms of paganism. Thus, there are dirty secrets here, or so the men feel: “And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky” (3). In addition to discovering

the hidden “filth,” the men discover laziness and signs that the women haven’t worked hard. This further infuriates them, because work and enjoyment are strictly opposed. Absence of work implies excess of enjoyment. Work is a sacrifice of enjoyment for the sake of some present or future good: when I work, rather than enjoying myself, I defer this enjoyment.<sup>41</sup> The signs of the absence of work anger the men and fuel their attack, because they indicate that the women were not sacrificing their enjoyment while their attackers were. The men were living “proper” and “upright” lives in the town; these women were doing whatever they pleased. This is evident from the details that Morrison includes in the opening section: “Together they scan dusty mason jars and what is left of last year’s canning: tomatoes, green beans, peaches. Slack, they think. August just around the corner and these women have not even sorted, let alone washed, the jars” (5). Later on in the attack, the men discover that the women slept in hammocks rather than beds, which causes them to “exchange knowing looks” (7)—looks that know the ease of the hammock suggests excessive enjoyment. While the male attackers have been hard at work, the women at the Convent haven’t been working, but have been taking it easy, awash in enjoyment. The women are “Like children, always on the lookout for fun, devoted to it but always needing a break in order to have it. A lift, a hand, a five-dollar bill. Somebody to excuse or coddle them” (157).

The horror the men feel concerning this enjoyment, while present in the initial description of their attack in the novel’s first section, becomes all the more apparent in subsequent sections. The danger that the Convent women represent for Ruby is clear: “fun-obsessed adults were clear signs of an already advanced decay. Soon the whole country would be awash in toys, tone-deaf from raucous music and hollow laughter. But not here. Not in Ruby” (157). The enjoyment of the women threatens to swallow Ruby up, to take away the order that sustains the community. If the women are able to infect the community, they will destroy the prohibition against enjoyment and thus effectively destroy the bond that holds Ruby together. The Convent women refuse to sacrifice “fun” for the sake of the community, and this type of refusal is threatening because it is contagious. And if it spreads, people will cease to feel an attachment to the community.

It is precisely this lack of any sense of attachment—this enjoyment that occurs without any reference to the social order—that most disturbs the people of Ruby. We see the men collectively exclaiming, “Something’s going on out there, and I don’t like any of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what else” (276).<sup>42</sup> The women at the Convent horrify because they enjoy themselves and because this enjoyment gives the appearance of self-sufficiency. As the statement “No men” suggests, the townspeople from Ruby see that this enjoyment of the Convent women isn’t at all depen-

dent on them. They recognize that these women “don’t need men and they don’t need God” (276): the Convent women experience the self-sufficiency of feminine enjoyment. For Lacan, feminine enjoyment is “a supplementary jouissance, [. . .] a jouissance of the body that is [. . .] beyond the phallus.”<sup>43</sup> Feminine enjoyment, unlike the phallic version, doesn’t require the Other, which is why it has a special ability to spark violent feelings of both desire and outrage.<sup>44</sup> While the men recoil from this self-sufficiency, it also entraps their desire, as is evinced most explicitly by the affairs that two of the men (Deacon and K.D.) have with Convent women. The Convent women attract the desire of the men of Ruby because they haven’t sacrificed their enjoyment for the sake of the social order in the way that the men themselves have. But this refusal to give up enjoyment, this self-sufficiency of feminine enjoyment, is also the driving force behind the attack.

#### THE ETHICS OF “PLAYING THE SAP”

The people of Ruby can peacefully coexist with the Convent only as long as their relationship with the Convent remains at the level of desire. As long as the self-sufficient enjoyment serves only to incite their desire, the townspeople can get along with the existence of these women. Deacon can have an affair with Connie; K.D. can have an affair with Gigi, and the women of Ruby can go to the Convent whenever they are pregnant and would rather not be. These relationships remain at the level of desire and thus imply a distance from the Convent women’s enjoyment. But at the moment the townspeople feel as if they have become the tools of this enjoyment, vehicles for it, they recoil in anger. Deacon ends his affair with Connie after his wife Soane learns about it, but also after Connie bites his lip, which reveals that he is just a tool for her enjoyment. Connie herself recognizes that this is the reason Deacon is breaking off their relationship, because “who would chance [an affair] with a woman bent upon eating him like a meal?” (239). Once Connie shows Deacon that he is a means for her to enjoy, he breaks off the relationship. A similar thing happens at the wedding of K.D. and Arnette, the event that actually triggers the attack on the Convent.

Morrison’s depiction of the wedding and its aftermath marks the point of the most direct conflict between law and enjoyment in the novel. Marriage is the law’s way of containing enjoyment—both by limiting sexual enjoyment to legal monogamy and by imposing heterosexuality as the only licit sexual expression. In a legally sanctioned marriage ceremony, the law codifies enjoyment and thereby contains the danger that it represents to the social order. And in this particular case, K.D.’s marriage to Arnette indicates that he has sacrificed his enjoyment with Gigi; he has opted for a relationship that is legal

but which lacks all enjoyment. The appearance of the Convent women, however, represents a clear contrast to this expression of legality and suppression of enjoyment.

The wedding reception becomes the occasion, the vehicle, for the Convent women to enjoy themselves. They arrive with the car radio blasting and the loud horn of their Cadillac honking, even though “none of them was dressed for a wedding” and they look “like go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings” (156). Once there, the Convent women display their unrestrained enjoyment without any concern for an authority in the town that would prohibit it. In this way, the women make evident the sacrifice of enjoyment that the townspeople make and that they themselves have refused to make. Morrison describes their actions at length:

The Convent girls are dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. *They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies.*[. . .] Two small girls ride their bikes over; wide-eyes, they watch the dancing women. One of them, with amazing hair, asks can she borrow a bike. Then another. They ride the bikes down Central Avenue with no regard for what the breeze does to their long flowered skirts or how pumping pedals plumped their breasts. One coasts with her ankles on the handlebars. Another rides the handlebars with Brood on the seat behind her. One, in the world’s shortest pink shorts, is seated on a bench, arms wrapped around herself. She looks drunk. Are they all? (157–58, my emphasis)

This passage illustrates the “excessive” enjoyment of the women, but it also shows their self-sufficiency. What really enralls and angers the people of Ruby here is that the women don’t seem concerned with how the Other is seeing them; they seem concerned only with their own enjoyment, which is why they “look at no one.” In addition, this enjoyment occurs at a wedding in Ruby; the wedding becomes the occasion for the Convent women to enjoy themselves.<sup>45</sup> The entire town, in a sense, is here just a tool for their enjoyment. This is why the wedding is the last straw: it leads directly to the subsequent attack on the Convent. The enjoyment of the Convent women presents no lethal threat—and in fact it incites desire—as long as it remains at a safe distance. But when it comes too close and the townspeople become a vehicle for it, they recoil.

We can see a similar dynamic at work in the noir hero’s response to the femme fatale. At first, the femme fatale’s self-sufficient enjoyment entices the noir hero, capturing his desire. Even though the hero knows when he first meets the femme fatale that she is manipulative and dangerous, he nonetheless begins to desire her. Rather than deterring his desire, the femme fatale’s lies have the effect of enhancing it. However, this desire turns into outrage or

rejection at the moment it becomes apparent that the femme fatale is using the hero to obtain her enjoyment. The hero recognizes that he isn't the object of the femme fatale's desire, but just a means by which she obtains her enjoyment. This is most clearly evident in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Throughout the film, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) desires and even falls in love with Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor), despite—or because of—her multiple lies and her “evil” behavior. At the end of the film, however, Spade turns her over to the police, even as he expresses his love for her. He must turn her in, he lets her know, because he has become a tool for enjoyment. He repeatedly tells her, “I won't play the sap for you.” Spade resists “playing the sap” because he is horrified by this enjoyment that he would facilitate. As in the town of Ruby, Spade rejects the other's enjoyment at the moment he gains too close a proximity to it.

It is this terrifying proximity to enjoyment—the postmodern condition par excellence—that makes it so difficult to interpret. The very excessiveness of enjoyment seems to obliterate any symbolic context in which we might locate it. Throughout *Paradise*, Morrison makes evident how the failure of interpretation leads to the outbreak of violence that frames the novel. If the men could interpret, what would they see? They would see that the enjoyment of the other that they are attempting to wipe out in their attack on the Convent is really their own. In “playing the sap” for the other, not only do we facilitate the other's enjoyment, but this is also the way we ourselves enjoy: enjoyment doesn't respect the barrier between subject and other—or, more precisely, it always transcends this barrier. As Alenka Zupančič makes clear, “it is not simply the mode of enjoyment of the neighbour, of the other, that is strange to me. The heart of the problem is that I experience my own enjoyment (which emerges along with the enjoyment of the other, and is even indissociable from it) as strange and hostile.”<sup>46</sup> Enjoyment necessarily involves, as Lacan puts it in *Seminar VII*, “suffering for my neighbor.”<sup>47</sup>

Rather than just being a peculiar or perverse form of obtaining enjoyment, what Sam Spade calls “playing the sap” is *the* form of obtaining it. This is why we view enjoyment as evil, as something from which we retreat: it implies placing oneself in the position of the tool that the other uses to procure her/his enjoyment. And our retreat from this enjoyment is simply a way of retreating from our own. According to Lacan:

My neighbor possesses all the evil [read: enjoyment] Freud speaks about, but it is no different from the evil I retreat from in myself. To love him, to love him as myself, is necessarily to move toward some cruelty. His or mine?, you will object. But haven't I just explained to you that nothing indicates they are distinct? It seems rather that they are the same, on condition that those limits which oblige me to posit myself opposite the other as my fellow man are crossed.<sup>48</sup>

When the men from Ruby attack the Convent, this signals their refusal of their own enjoyment and their effort to put a definitive end to their own troubling enjoyment, which they are unable to eliminate in any other way.

In attacking the feminine *jouissance* of the Convent women, the men of Ruby fail to recognize the inevitably partial nature of enjoyment itself. If we can only obtain enjoyment as the enjoyment of the other, then our enjoyment is always destined to remain incomplete. We will never *have* it; instead, it will always *have* us—and part of it will always remain the other's. In this sense, one can understand why the men of Ruby refuse to recognize their own enjoyment in the Convent women: this refusal sustains the image of a complete enjoyment (even as it represents this enjoyment as unattainable). To accept the partiality of enjoyment is to free oneself from the authority of the symbolic Law and from the logic of prohibition and transgression. The society of commanded enjoyment offers us the opportunity to embrace the partiality of enjoyment at the same time that it demands we strive for an illusory total enjoyment. When we don't see our own enjoyment in that of the other, we necessarily succumb to this demand and miss this opportunity.

Morrison takes great pains to show that each of the men involved in the attack has targeted something in himself more than himself—his idiosyncratic way of obtaining enjoyment—for the violence to eliminate. K.D., for instance, hopes to wipe out his own humiliating pursuit of Gigi and her ultimate rejection of him. As the men attack the Convent, K.D. recalls to the other men the horror of Gigi, making clear that this is what motivates his participation: “The girl whose name he now scandalized he had stalked for years till she threw him out the door” (278). Morrison reveals that “he had loved her for years, an aching, humiliating, self-loathing love that drifted from pining to stealth” (149). This sense of humiliation is the enjoyment that K.D. wants nothing to do with. As with K.D., each of the other male attackers has their own enjoyment at stake in the act. Even more important, however, is the question of the entire community's relationship to enjoyment. The Convent women represent the enjoyment that threatens to envelop all of Ruby, to destroy the cohesive social order. One might argue, then, that the attack had a certain justification, that the men, with the best of intentions, were simply trying to preserve their way of life—or even to return Ruby to the purity that it once had. The problem with this line of thinking, as the sequel to the attack demonstrates, is that enjoyment is not as easy to wipe out as all that. Guns do not provide enough armament to eliminate it. And the effort to wipe it out, to return the social order back to its traditional mode of functioning, *de facto* perpetuates it, even increases its presence.<sup>49</sup>

The film *Pleasantville* (1998) provides a perfect illustration of the inevitable failure of attempts to wipe out enjoyment. In the film, two teenagers from the nineties are magically beamed into a television program from the

fifties that depicts a community in which the prohibition against enjoyment is functioning effectively. Needless to say, the contemporary teens, simply by acting like themselves, quickly introduce enjoyment into the community. The film depicts this through a noted innovation in visual effects: when characters begin to experience enjoyment, they suddenly appear in color, rather than their usual black and white.<sup>50</sup> As more and more characters begin to enjoy, the shots become increasingly colorized. There is, however, a predictable backlash to this outbreak of enjoyment, much like the one that animates *Paradise*. In *Pleasantville*, a group of the town fathers, determined to resist the infiltration of enjoyment into their community, attempt to ostracize the colorized characters. But in the attempt the town fathers themselves become colorized, as a result of the enjoyment obtained in their efforts to eradicate enjoyment. As the film makes clear visually, there is enjoyment in the very effort to get rid of it. The attack on the Convent in *Paradise* is doomed to failure for similar reasons: its aim is to eliminate the enjoyment that threatens the community, but the attack itself partakes of that very same enjoyment.

The attack also fails because it is impossible to destroy enjoyment, insofar as it is attached to the immortality of the death drive. The men who attack the Convent shoot and seem to kill the five women residing there; however, immediately after the event, there are no bodies, nor even the Cadillac that the women drove to the wedding. The absence of the Cadillac here is crucial: for the town, the Cadillac is integral to the way that the Convent women enjoy, because they drove it—with stereo blasting and horn honking—to the wedding of K.D. and Arnette, where they made their loudest show of enjoyment. It is also crucial that the women's bodies are missing. Morrison is not depicting an immortality of the soul, but of the enjoying body. Try as we might, we cannot rid ourselves of this enjoyment, which stems from the submission of the body to the constraints of the signifier. What forms in this process is the death drive—an undying insistence on repetition. Since this enjoyment is inescapable, the only question is how we decide to relate to it. While Morrison shows us the ramifications of one way—the attempt to reject it—she also points to another way.

Through an insistence on interpretation even at those times when interpretation seems impossible, we can recognize that this horrifying enjoyment we would reject is not simply the other's enjoyment, but also our own. The very thing that attracts us to the other is its relationship to enjoyment. Enjoyment itself, of course, cannot be made meaningful; it cannot be interpreted. In this sense, the characters' encounter with enjoyment in the novel is parallel with the reader's encounter with the violent event that opens the novel. Something in both encounters resists being made meaningful. But this does not sink the entire project of interpretation. Interpretation involves seeing the symbolic context within which enjoyment makes its appearance, seeing the

meaning that surrounds it. In doing so, we see that the universal does persist, despite its seeming abeyance. To insist upon meaning is not to do unwarranted violence to the particular or to elide meaning's inevitable failure but rather the only possible way to preserve the singularity of the particular. It is only through interpretation that we come to realize our failure of knowledge and thus the Real dimension of the other that constitutes its singularity. Without the attempt to interpret, we remain confident that we know all there is to know. We rest secure in our cynicism.

## Chapter Six

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# THE APPEAL OF CYNICISM

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### AN UNENLIGHTENED ENLIGHTENMENT

If the turn from prohibition to enjoyment puts up a barrier to interpretation, the role of cynicism in the society of enjoyment becomes clear: it allows the subject to overcome this lack, to feel secure in her/his knowledge of the Other. In contrast to the naïve subject of desire, the cynic has insight into every secret; there is no aspect of the Other that remains mysterious to the cynic. This insight into the secret of the Other provides the cynic with a sense of being privy to the Other's enjoyment; for the cynic, there is no inaccessible *objet petit a*. Above all, the cynic wants to avoid being naïve, being one of the duped, especially when it comes to the Other's enjoyment. In response to the imperative to enjoy, the cynic refuses to allow any site of potential enjoyment to remain unknown, and this refusal is precisely what makes cynicism such a popular attitude in the society of commanded enjoyment. The cynic pursues cynicism in an effort to heed the new social imperative to enjoy. Cynicism provides a sense of universal access, an access that refuses to acknowledge the possibility of distance or nonknowledge. However, this triumph over non-knowledge does not transform the subject or its situation. All of the cynic's knowledge does not help the cynic escape the determinations of the symbolic order: the cynic remains a perfectly obedient and docile subject. The cynical subject has insight into the secret of the Other, and yet this insight doesn't change anything for the subject. In this sense, cynicism represents a departure from the traditional enlightenment idea concerning the power of knowledge.

It is a fundamental tenet of enlightenment that the knowledge of a barrier or limit frees us from that barrier. If we know about the way that power works to subject us, we ipso facto gain power over that power. Hegel exemplifies this idea in his critique of the Kantian transcendental dialectic that appears in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Through the transcendental dialectic, Kant believes that he discovers the limits of reason, the difficulties that reason inevitably encounters when it tries to go beyond its proper sphere. In discovering these limits, Hegel asserts, Kant should see that he has, in fact, through reason, gone beyond the very limits. This is because, according to Hegel, the act of recognizing a limit gives one power over that limit. As he puts it, “the very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended. For a determinateness, a limit, is determined as a limitation only in opposition to its other in general, that is, in opposition to that which is *free from limitation*; the other of a limitation is precisely the *being beyond it*.”<sup>1</sup> One cannot recognize a limit and, at the same time, be bound by it, because the act of recognition itself implies that one has broken the hold that the limit had. The phenomenon of cynicism, however, calls this conception radically into question. Cynics recognize the functioning of ideology—they are not duped—and yet ideology still serves as a limit that they cannot transgress; ideology continues to control the behavior of cynics, despite this knowledge. For the cynical subject in the society of enjoyment, unlike for the subject in the society of prohibition, knowledge does not lead to freedom.

In this sense, cynicism seems to represent the limit of enlightenment. Faced with a cynical consciousness, enlightenment can continue to rehearse its critique, but the knowledge that it proffers works to no effect. This is the situation that Peter Sloterdijk describes in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*: “The discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality: It appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism. The traditional critique of ideology stands at a loss before this cynicism. It does not know what button to push in this cynically keen consciousness to get enlightenment going.”<sup>2</sup> If the consciousness that enlightenment would enlighten already has knowledge and this knowledge hasn’t resulted in a change of behavior, then enlightenment is strapped for options. According to Sloterdijk, today’s mass cynicism is the product of too much enlightenment—we know too much—and the wrong kind of enlightenment—we don’t know in the right way. Interestingly enough, Sloterdijk blames enlightenment itself for this contemporary aporia. He claims that traditional enlightenment produced cynicism because it set itself up against the body and tied itself to the project of mastery.<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment, in short, too often took the side of the hegemonic powers. Hence, Sloterdijk proposes that enlightenment must radically transform itself if it is to combat a cynical world: it must become an *embodied* enlightenment—an enlightenment of the body, not just the mind—not an activity of mastering, but “a letting happen and a noninter-

vention."<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk advances his radical revision of enlightenment critique precisely because this critique seems to have lost its fecundity when confronted with cynicism, to have lost its power over power. Is, however, a radical transformation of enlightenment the only possibility? Is there a way to conceive of traditional enlightenment and its critique of ideology as remaining operative in a cynical world? And finally, does Sloterdijk's solution mark a path out of contemporary cynicism (and the society of enjoyment) or does it testify to cynicism's predominance? These questions will open up an analysis of the symptomatic role that cynicism plays in the society of enjoyment.

In order to answer these questions, we must first examine more carefully the relationship between cynicism and knowledge. The cynic tells her/himself that she/he is not invested in the ruling ideology, that she/he sees through all of its strictures and manipulations. The symbolic order no longer represents, in the case of the cynic, a barrier to the Real; on the contrary, the cynic believes that she/he sees directly through the symbolic mediation of the Real into the Real itself.<sup>5</sup> The knowledge of cynicism, however, is not what Lacan calls "knowledge in the Real." This is because, in pulling away the veil of the symbolic fiction, we do not find ourselves with an unmediated access to the Real. Instead, we encounter a specular image that we take for the Real. We believe, in other words, that what we *see*, beyond the constraints of the symbolic fiction, is the Real, that it is not an image. While we are skeptical about the symbolic fiction, we are not at all suspicious about what we see; we are wholly taken in by the image.

The cynic knows very well that the symbolic fiction is just a fiction and also "knows" that the imaginary field beneath this symbolic fiction is a reservoir of truth. For the cynic, the status of the imaginary does not come into question. This represents a radical change in the status of belief—this insistence upon the authority of one's own eyes and the rejection of symbolic authority. In *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*, Renata Salecl explains this transition through a reference to Groucho Marx: "When Groucho Marx was caught in an obvious lie, his response was: 'Whom do you believe—my words or your eyes?' The belief in the big Other is the belief in words, even when they contradict one's own eyes. What we have today is therefore precisely a mistrust in mere words (that is, in the symbolic fiction). People want to see what is behind the fiction."<sup>6</sup> This turn away from belief in the symbolic fiction and toward the image beneath it reaches its apotheosis in the postmodern cynic.

#### A PROFITABLE REBELLION

In the process of disregarding and seeing through the symbolic fiction, the cynic, seduced by the image, fails to *see* the power that the symbolic fiction has

in structuring the experience of reality and the image itself. This is why one is better off putting faith in words rather than one's eyes: while symbolic fiction is a fiction—that is, it lies—it nonetheless has the power to produce the frame of meaning through which we experience the world. The image, on the other hand, lies doubly, insofar as it disguises the power of the symbolic fiction. As a result, those who disregard the symbolic fiction and trust only in their own eyes necessarily fail to see the structuring power of the symbolic fiction. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in *The Ticklish Subject*, “those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction and continue to believe their eyes are the ones who err most. What a cynic who ‘believes only his eyes’ misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality.”<sup>7</sup> In the act of seeing through the symbolic fiction and thereby failing to recognize its efficacy, the cynic does not escape its influence. In fact, this influence is all the more powerful for its having become wholly inconspicuous, which is precisely what befalls the subject in the society of enjoyment.

In response to the command to enjoy, contemporary cynicism is an effort to gain distance from the functioning of power, to resist the hold that power has over us. Hence, the cynic turns inward and displays an indifference to external authorities, with the aim of self-sufficient independence. Symbolic authority—which would force the subject into a particular symbolic identity, an identity not freely chosen by the subject herself—is the explicit enemy of cynicism. To acknowledge the power of symbolic authority over one's own subjectivity would be, in the eyes of the cynic, to acknowledge one's failure to enjoy fully, making such an acknowledgment unacceptable. In the effort to refuse the power of this authority, one must eschew all the trappings of conformity.<sup>8</sup> This is why the great Cynical philosopher Diogenes made a show of masturbating in public, a gesture that made clear to everyone that he had moved beyond the constraints of the symbolic law and that he would brook no barrier to his *jouissance*. By freely doing in public what others feared to do, Diogenes acted out his refusal to submit to the prohibition that others accepted. He attempted to demonstrate that the symbolic law had no absolute hold over him and that he had no investment in it. However, seeming to be beyond the symbolic law and actually being beyond it are two different—and, in fact, opposed—things, and this difference becomes especially important to recognize in the contemporary society of enjoyment. In the act of *making a show* of one's indifference to the public law (in the manner of Diogenes and today's cynical subject), one does not gain distance from that law, but unwittingly reveals one's investment in it. Such a show is done for the look of the symbolic authority. The cynic stages her/his act publicly in order that symbolic authority will see it. Because it is staged in this way, we know that the

cynic's act—such as the public masturbation of Diogenes—represents a case of acting-out, rather than an authentic act, an act that suspends the functioning of symbolic authority. Acting-out always occurs on a stage, while the authentic act and authentic enjoyment—the radical break from the constraints of symbolic authority—occur unstaged, without reference to the Other's look.<sup>9</sup> In the *History of Philosophy*, Hegel makes clear the cynic's investment in symbolic authority through his discussion of Plato's interactions with Diogenes:

In Plato's house [Diogenes] once walked on the beautiful carpets with muddy feet, saying, "I tread on the pride of Plato." "Yes, but with another pride," replied Plato, as pointedly. When Diogenes stood wet through with rain, and the bystanders pitied him, Plato said, "If you wish to compassionate him, just go away. His vanity is in showing himself off and exciting surprise; it is what made him act in this way, and the reason would not exist if he were left alone."<sup>10</sup>

Though Diogenes attempts to act in a way that demonstrates his self-sufficiency, his distance from every external authority, what he attains, however, is far from self-sufficiency. As Plato's ripostes demonstrate, everything that the cynic does to distance himself from symbolic authority plays directly into the hands of that authority.<sup>11</sup> Here we see how cynicism functions symptomatically in the society of enjoyment, providing the illusion of enjoyment beyond social constraints while leaving these constraints completely intact.

We don't have to look twenty-five hundred years in the past for an example of cynicism's hidden investment in symbolic authority: this investment is even more fully present in contemporary cynicism. It is especially clear in the cynicism of the antiauthority, discontented hacker working at a new internet company. The hacker is able to eschew all of the trappings of the traditional office labor: she/he can make her/his own hours, wear what she/he wants, listen to a walkman, and, in general, be her/his own boss. But nonetheless, this rejection of authority is wholly amenable to the functioning of the internet company. In fact, such a company thrives on it. It is not uncommon for internet companies to *fire* hackers when they lose their rebelliousness and become part of the corporate structure. Such companies want edgy product development that only a rebellious hacker can provide. The cynical worker works all the more effectively for the company—for the authority—in the guise of an opposition to structures of authority. Imagining her/himself as a rebel against tradition allows the hacker to become more creative, to spur the company on toward greater and greater profits. Contemporary cynicism at large works much like it does in the case of the hacker. The cynic rejects authority at the same time she/he devotes all of her/his energies to helping it along. The contemporary cynic's rebellion is,

in this way, not a brake upon the functioning of late capitalism, but its engine. The cynicism among subjects today thus indicates the extent to which the society of enjoyment leaves subjects bereft of the actual enjoyment that would break from the prevailing symbolic authority.

#### IDOLATRY TODAY

Naïveté becomes an unbearable position in the face of the command to enjoy because it suggests that one is not in on the secret of enjoyment. This is what makes cynicism so comforting today. Cynicism stems from the belief that one sees through the functioning of power, that one knows fully how the system works. The cynic sees her/himself as a completely enlightened subject—because she/he thinks that she/he has “seen it all”—which is why Sloterdijk claims that “cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*.”<sup>12</sup> The many images that the contemporary cynic sees provide this sense of enlightenment, this sense that there is nothing to be known. Because the image is the source of the cynic’s enlightenment, it does not receive the same scrutiny as symbolic authority. This is why cynicism fails to provide any relief for the claustrophobia of the contemporary subject: while it offers the illusion of distance from symbolic authority, it sustains the subject’s sense of proximity to the imaginary underside of that symbolic authority.

The cynic’s faith in images is correlative to her/his investment in fantasy—specifically, the fantasmatic underside of the symbolic law. The realm of fantasy is an imaginary realm, a realm which is, unlike the public side of symbolic authority, replete with enjoyment. Every symbolic law depends on this obscene underside that absorbs the *jouissance* implicit in the emergence of the law as such and allows the public law to maintain an appearance of neutrality. In the turn to a society of enjoyment, the true locus of authority shifts to this fantasmatic underside, which the cynic never calls into question. In fact, the cynic completely invests her/himself in this fantasmatic, obscene dimension of the law. As Žižek puts it:

A cynic mocks the public law from the position of its obscene underside which, consequently, he leaves intact. Insofar as the enjoyment that permeates this underside is structured in fantasies, one can also say that what the cynic leaves intact is the fantasy, the phantasmatic background of the public, written ideological text. Cynical distance and full reliance on fantasy are thus strictly codependent: the typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoid fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other.<sup>13</sup>

Because of their rejection of the public law, cynical subjects feel as if they have no investment in the big Other, as if they have distanced themselves from its power, but this is belied by their investment in the fantasmatic underside of that law.

Let us look at the example of racism to make this clear. The contemporary white cynic will readily admit that the American public ideology of a colorblind society serves to mask the continuing presence of racism. Despite claims that the society has become colorblind, the cynic recognizes that some whites still harbor prejudice toward African Americans and that this prejudice has an adverse effect on the life chances of African Americans (as evinced by the number of African American men in jail, the disparity in income between white and African American, etc.). This recognition, however, coexists in the thinking of the cynic with a seemingly contradictory idea—that African Americans have it easier than whites today, that society has entered an era of reverse discrimination. This is why so many whites feel a visceral objection to affirmative action: it provides even more privilege to a group that already has a privileged status, a privileged relationship to enjoyment. In the racist's view, the African American enjoys more because she/he gets more for less, has to work less for more benefits (as the policy of affirmative action seems to attest to). How can we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory attitudes? The cynic's ability to sustain both attitudes stems from the split between her/his relationship to public ideology and to the fantasmatic underside of power. She/he doubts the official proclamations of authority, which claim to have eradicated racism, but invests her/himself in the underside of that authority, which relies on a racist fear of the Other's enjoyment in order to function. In sustaining the investment in the underlying racist fantasy, the cynic finds support for her/his being in the big Other. But the cynic's suspicion of public ideology allows her/him to feel as if she/he is transgressing the norms of the big Other. Thus, the cynic is able to have it both ways, attaining the security that stems from obedience and the enjoyment that transgression produces, without having to risk actually losing the support of her/his identity within the big Other. The white cynic can both feel her/himself to be righteously antiracist in her/his ability to analyze the hidden racism in American society while at the same time feeling her/himself to be a victim of reverse discrimination. Suspicion of the public law and investment in its obscene underside offers such a subject the best of both worlds.

The cynic's investment in the fantasmatic underside of the law provides ideology with a strong hold over her/him. Whereas the subject who is invested in the public ideology can have this investment shattered by the enlightenment critique of ideology, the same is not true in the case of the cynical subject. It is doubly difficult to break the hold of ideology over the cynic because the cynic believes that she/he has already broken its hold, so that there is

nothing further to be known. In addition, the cynic, unlike the traditional naïve subject, derives not only identity from ideology, but also the enjoyment stemming from ideology's obscene underside. When we simply obey the law, we feel certain about ourselves and our place in the social order. But when we obey while feeling that we are not, we obtain enjoyment in the act of obedience. This constitutes the great power of cynicism as an ideological formation: it provides for us the best of both worlds—obedience and transgression.<sup>14</sup> Cynicism offers the subject a sense of radicality; the cynical subject feels as if she/he is heeding the imperative to enjoy. In this way, cynicism functions as a symptom of the society of enjoyment.

#### THE END OF NOT KNOWING

Wim Wenders's *The End of Violence* (1997) makes evident how cynicism emerges as a symptom of the society of enjoyment. The film focuses on a movie producer, Mike Max (Bill Pullman), who, at the beginning of the film, is the contemporary cynical subject in full flower. His life changes when he becomes an assassination target after Ray (Gabriel Byrne) sends him an email detailing a top-secret surveillance system that Ray is working on installing in Los Angeles in order to help fight crime, to help bring about "the end of violence." Ray, who sees the Foucaultian dimension of the program, wants to expose it to an outsider, and he chooses Mike (because they had hit it off at a conference some months before). After narrowly surviving the assassination attempt, Mike is rescued by a family of gardeners, who take him in and provide him shelter. The assassination attempt and life with this family have a profound effect on Mike, causing him to abandon his former life as big-time movie producer and its attendant cynicism. Mike's wife Paige (Andie MacDowell), on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction: from being disaffected with the inauthenticity of their life and ready to leave Mike at the beginning of the film, she takes over Mike's production company with even more zeal than Mike. At the end of the film, Mike seems to have freed himself from the trap of his former cynicism, just as Paige has fully warmed to it. Mike has actually acted, giving the information about Ray to Cat (Traci Lind), a stuntwoman whom he has befriended. Cat then tells Detective Doc Brock (Loren Dean), the detective who is investigating Mike's disappearance. Doc arranges a meeting with Ray, but just as the meeting begins, Ray is mysteriously shot, undoubtedly for his attempt to expose the surveillance program.

The film centers around the surveillance system that Ray is developing for the FBI. It offers the promise of cutting down on violence because it would allow nothing to go unseen. In seeing everything, it would eliminate the hiding places of violence, thereby bringing violence out of the darkness on which

it thrives. As Ray's boss tells him, trying to convince him of the project's merits, "If we could get this thing fully operational soon, it will be an awesome tool. Cut down on crime response time by 200 percent, accuracy, eyewitness evidence. It could mean the end of violence as we know it."<sup>15</sup> The system would "end" violence not through the mechanism of a symbolic prohibition—not by forbidding it—but by watching every possible site at which violence might erupt.<sup>16</sup> This represents a dramatic shift in the concept of law, a shift, within the law itself, from word to image. The chief vehicle for ridding the city of crime is no longer passing the right laws or encouraging obedience of those laws; it is instead the fact that the system would see everywhere, thereby eliminating every site of nonknowledge. This all-seeing surveillance system allows for no secret enjoyment, no *objet petit a*, that might exist beyond its reach. It is thus the ultimate tool of a cynical world.

This ability to see everything and everywhere is evident on an individual level as well, especially in the character of Mike Max. When we see Mike at the beginning of the film, he is sitting in a lawn chair by a pool, just outside his luxurious house in the hills overlooking Los Angeles. This setting suggests that Mike's wealth has brought him distance from the population of the city below, that he has purchased distance from the crowd. But as the scene unfolds, we see that this distance in no way affects Mike's ability to connect with the outside world: he has complete access. Though Mike is sitting by the pool, he has a laptop computer in front of him, two phones by his side, and he is wearing headphones. During the scene, he is talking with Claire, his assistant, via teleconference, and on three occasions, telephone calls interrupt their conversation. Whenever a call interrupts them, Mike minimizes Claire's face on his computer screen and turns his attention to the caller. Mike is wholly "plugged in" to the Other in this scene. Despite his distance from "real" people, Mike remains thoroughly invested in the big Other through the medium of technology. Technology keeps him constantly in touch with the image of the other, and the image completely absorbs his attention. In this way, Wenders makes it clear that though Mike may have purchased himself distance from the crowds of Los Angeles, he has utterly failed in his attempt to purchase distance from the big Other as such. Mike's investment in the image *is* his investment in the big Other. However, because Mike is invested in the big Other through the image, he fails to recognize this investment. His cynical position allows him to feel distanced and yet remain engaged with the Other at the same time.

#### CYNICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Mike begins *The End of Violence* as a cynical Hollywood producer, manipulating those around him and exploiting violence in his films in order to generate

profit. He knows the power that his films have to create paranoia, and yet he makes them anyway. As he tells us: "When I was a kid, movies scared the shit out of me. So then when I grew up, I went into the movie business. Turned what you would call a basic fear of strangers into a multi-million dollar enterprise. After all, paranoia is our number one export. Everybody needs an enemy." A good cynic, Mike knows very well what he is doing but continues, nonetheless, to do it. Throughout the film, however, Mike moves away from this cynicism, having grasped its limits. Paige, on the other hand, begins the film dissatisfied. Eager for "life . . . real life," she plans to leave Mike and go to Guatemala, but Mike's disappearance interrupts these plans, leaving her in charge of his company. In the course of the film, Paige, despite her initial reluctance, assumes the role Mike is playing at the beginning of the film: she becomes the cynical Hollywood producer that he was. What this apparent reversal of roles conceals, however, is the similarity between the two from the beginning of the film to the end.

Both Paige and Mike see through public ideology and distance themselves from its prescripts. This becomes apparent in Mike when, upon hearing from his lawyer that Cat could sue over her injury in a stunt on the film he is making, he takes flowers to her in the hospital. Cat immediately recognizes the cynicism behind the gesture, telling Mike, right when he hands her the flowers, "I wasn't going to sue anyway." Mike does the "appropriate" thing—bringing flowers to someone injured—but he doesn't do it because he is invested in the act, nor does he try to keep up the appearance of propriety. Once Cat assures him that she won't sue, Mike quickly leaves, his cynical mission accomplished. It seems as if it is precisely this kind of cynicism that Paige is reacting to when she threatens to leave Mike. We might understand her statement, "I have a yearning for real life," as a yearning for a world beyond the cynical one, for an authentic world. However, Paige's disaffection, her desire for the "authenticity" of Guatemala, does not prevent her from taking up Mike's position after his disappearance.

Though she initially refuses to have anything to do with Mike's company, when Paige does agree to take it over, we see her in exactly the same position that Mike occupied at the beginning of the film. She is sitting on the back lawn, talking with Claire through a teleconference, while at the same time talking on the telephone. The *mise-en-scène* of the earlier scene is almost precisely duplicated—indicating the similarity between Paige and Mike. In addition, Paige evinces even more ruthlessness than Mike in operating the company. After taking control of the company, she immediately shuts down a film that is shooting, *The Seeds of Violence*, in order to free up cash for the business. Shutting down the film midway through the shooting thwarts Cat's chance at becoming an actress, since Mike had given her a role in this film after seeing her in the hospital. Seeing Cat's disappointment, Paige responds in almost

exactly the same cynical manner that Mike employed with her earlier in the film. She comforts Cat, telling her that she'll get another break. Paige shows sympathy for Cat's disappointment, even though she was the vehicle for that disappointment. This ability to have one's cake and eat it too is the cynical ability par excellence.

When we see what becomes of Paige, we have one indication that her initial disaffection is itself invested in the cynical world from which it retreats. This becomes even more apparent, however, when Mike takes up Paige's disaffection and himself retreats from cynicism into an "authentic" experience. Rather than going to Guatemala as Paige intended, Mike, after his kidnapping and attempted assassination, lives with a family of Mexican American gardeners. Within the life of this family, Mike feels as if he has discovered something real; here there appears to be genuine belief in the Other, not cynicism. This distance between the cynical world that Mike used to occupy and the "authentic" world of the gardeners is evident in the difference in the mise-en-scène of the two worlds. Mike and Paige's house is full of empty space: the property includes a large lawn and a pool, but few trees amidst the expanse of grass. The interior of the large house is equally vacant, with high ceilings, wide rooms, and a minimalist décor. All of this space is there for just two people, Mike and Paige. The gardeners' house, in contrast, is much smaller, though it holds an extended family. The house has a small backyard—where we see the family eating around a picnic table—with little empty space. The inside of the house has so little room that Mike, a guest in the house, must sleep on the floor next to a fish tank. Unlike Mike's former world of cynical distance, the world that this house embodies seems to be one of intimacy and authenticity. It appears to be a world prior to the fall into cynicism.

We must remember, however, that we see this world from the perspective of Mike. And all Mike does is *see* this world. Because of the language barrier—the gardeners primarily speak Spanish—Mike has only a limited symbolic contact with them.<sup>17</sup> His contact occurs predominantly through seeing them, and what Mike sees in them is an image with which to identify. They represent that which the cynical subject—Mike—has lost and now hopes to regain. As with Paige's apotheosis of Guatemala, Mike's belief that the Mexican American gardeners have not yet fallen from an original authenticity partakes of a racist fantasy. This fantasy sees the Other as existing prior to the fall, still in full possession of enjoyment.<sup>18</sup> Mike wants to regain this world because he wants to escape the cynicism of his world. When we see him at the gardeners' house, Mike sits down to dinner, and the grandfather offers a prayer, a gesture that would be wholly out of place in the cynical world that Mike used to occupy. This religious devotion, the familial intimacy, and the kindness that the family displays all substantiate the image of their world as being part of a prior, pre-cynical era. Many members of the extended family work together, and the

entire family seems to come together for meals. Rather than being torn apart by modernity, this family has sustained its “authentic roots.” It is this that Mike sees and that draws him to the image of the family. Wenders offers a hint that this view of the family specifically belongs to Mike: when we first see the family as a whole—eating at a table in the backyard—Mike is looking at them through a window in the garage, where he is cleaning himself up.

In relying upon the image that he has of the gardeners rather than on any symbolic interaction with them, Mike, though he thinks he has abandoned his former cynicism, displays the cynic’s absolute faith in the image and eschewing of the symbol. Like the cynic, Mike trusts what he sees, but what he sees in the image of the gardeners is his own ideal ego. The idealization of the gardeners shows us that Mike remains within the very world that he thought he was leaving—that is, a world trusting in the image. Rather than abandoning cynicism through the course of the film, Mike demonstrates how the retreat from cynicism to authenticity remains within the orbit of cynicism. Opting out—leaving the cynical world behind for its authentic counterpart—is *the* cynical gesture, insofar as it betrays a trust in the image and a distrust of the symbolic order. The subject who opts out of the cynical world does so in order to find a world that doesn’t deceive at all, a world in which the image reveals everything. This is what Paige was looking for when she talked of seeking “real life” in Guatemala. This world where everything is revealed is itself nothing but the cynical ideal, the ideal of those who believe in the image and its revelatory power. It is part of the achievement of *The End of Violence* that it illustrates the cynical dimension of anticynicism.

At the end of the film, Mike appears to have broken completely from the prevailing cynicism. He stands on the edge of a pier, looking out over the Pacific Ocean, contemplating the changes that he has undergone. His concluding voiceover narration sums up his transformation:

Funny, just when you think you’ve got it all figured, in a heartbeat it all changes again. The thing is, in all those years when I was waiting for that sudden attack, I became the enemy. And when the enemy I’d expected finally came, they set me free. Strange. Now, when I look over the ocean, I don’t expect nuclear submarines or alien attackers anymore. I can see China now, and I hope they can see us.

As this statement makes clear, the cynicism and paranoia that were so much a part of Mike’s existence have now given way to hope. Whereas before he cultivated fear of the dangerous other, now he hopes to embrace this other. However, Mike’s transformation leaves much intact. Despite its seeming break from cynicism, Mike’s concluding statement sustains the cynic’s faith in the power of the image as that which can eliminate distance. As he says, “I can see China now, and I hope they can see us.” The image or seeing, in this vision

of things, can produce a bond with the other, a way out of the spiraling effects of cynical distance. If we can see China, or so this thinking goes, we need not fear the desire of China, because the image will reveal that desire to us.

Though the ability to see each other seems to be an opening to the other, it is the image and its proximity that has triggered the flight to cynical distance in the first place. In this sense, Mike's final "break" from cynicism only testifies to its power over the contemporary subject, its presence even in alternatives to it. Even anticynicism retains cynicism's faith in our ability to see the truth rather than approach it through the mediation of the symbol. Wenders underlines this point in the final shot of the film, as the camera pulls back to an extremely long shot of Mike on the Santa Monica Pier. While Mike narrates his newly discovered hope, government agents are preparing to kill Mathilda (Marisol Padilla Sánchez) because of her knowledge of the surveillance system. Mike talks to Mathilda's daughter but doesn't notice the immanent demise of the mother happening a few feet away from him. This failure to see the most important event happening testifies to Mike's continued blindness at the moment he lauds his own ability to "see China." Mike's anticynicism, like earlier cynicism, remains blind to its own inability to see all. Thus, we see here that the logic of cynicism prevails to such an extent in the society of enjoyment that it informs even the effort to break away from it. To abandon the logic of cynicism in this society would be to avow openly one's lack, one's lack of knowledge about enjoyment, and such an avowal represents the ultimate humiliation today.

#### THE EYES DON'T HAVE IT

What the cynic's—and even the anticynic's!—trust in the truth of the image fails to grasp is that the image cannot reveal all.<sup>19</sup> Every look comes up against a limit, which is the limit of seeing itself. When I look at an image, I can't see my own desire—the way in which my desire distorts what I see. This distortion stains every image I look at, acting as a limit to what the image reveals. Every image suffers from this limitation. Because my desire informs how the image appears, the image doesn't reveal everything, despite the illusion that it does. The desire of the subject looking creates a blind spot in the image, a point at which the object representing my desire in the image—what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*—would be. This object doesn't appear, and the fact that it doesn't stains the image. In the image, this point, the point at which the distortion that my desire creates would become visible, is obscured. It is in the image, "at the level of scopic desire," as Lacan puts it, "that the object *a* is most masked."<sup>20</sup> The image masks the *objet petit a* because it creates an impression of seamlessness, of full revelation, and the *objet petit a* only appears as a gap in the field of representation, as a lost or missing object. This is why a look that

promises to see everything—like the surveillance system in *The End of Violence*—is ultimately so unsatisfying. In seeing everything, the surveillance system never actually captures the distortion created by the desire involved in this seeing. The image is distorted because its seemingly complete revelation actually takes this desire into account through this distortion. In short, the image doesn't just exist; it is seen.

The failure of the image's full revelation becomes readily apparent in the most memorable scene of *The End of Violence*. After having dropped out of society for four weeks, Mike wants to check his email account in order to access the file that Ray has given him; hence, Mike and the gardeners go to a computer store that will enable Mike to do this. The police, of course, are monitoring Mike's email account, and they arrive at the computer store just minutes after he checks it. However, Mike and his new friends are able to walk right past the police as they leave the store, get into their truck, and drive away. Even though the police see all—they notice the instant that Mike checks his account—Mike can nonetheless walk past them completely undetected. Why? The police are looking for Mike Max, the white upper-class Hollywood producer, when they enter the store. They are not looking for a working-class Mexican American gardener. Like the purloined letter in Poe's story, Mike hides himself by not hiding, by openly appearing in the image as an unimportant aspect of it. The police see a group of Mexican American gardeners; they do not see Mike Max. This is because their cynical belief in the power of the look and the image to reveal everything in a neutral way trips them up. In thinking that they will see all, they fail to consider what they can't see—namely, their own desire. They want to see an upper-class white guy, and this desire shapes what appears in the image. The cynic sees everything except the way that desire distorts the picture. As a result, the cynic always misses the most important thing—what she/he is looking for. As a lower-class gardener, Mike becomes completely invisible, made invisible through the distortion of the image by the desire of the police. In the mind of the police, the gardeners fit perfectly within the picture that they expect to see here. Thus, they tell Mike's friends to hurry to their truck, and one police officer even ushers Mike through the door, saying to him, "Okay, amigo, this way."

The limitations of surveillance also become apparent in another related film, *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998).<sup>21</sup> When the NSA (National Security Agency) tries to apprehend Robert Dean (Will Smith) because he possesses information about a government-sponsored assassination, they use their system of total surveillance in order to locate him. For the first half of the film, despite his attempts to hide, he fails to evade the NSA's surveillance. Dean begins to avoid detection successfully only when he discards his nice clothes and adopts the look of the lower class. Even though he remains under surveillance—the surveillance system is still able to see him—as a lower class African American man, he is invisible to the eyes of the NSA. Dean adroitly

identifies himself with what is wholly visible—and yet also invisible. The NSA expects to see lower-class African Americans on the streets of Washington, which means that they don't *see* them. Thinking that their surveillance allows them to see everything, the NSA operatives forget that their desire places a limit upon this would-be complete revelation. Desire, obscured by the image, makes itself felt in the ability of Dean to render himself invisible through the act of readily exposing himself in the image. As long as the NSA operatives remain confined to the level of the image, they will not be able to see what they desire. The object of desire cannot be reduced to the image. It is what does not fit within the full revelation of the image. As Lacan points out in his *Seminar X*, the *objet petit a* "is not visible in what constitutes, for man, the image of his desire."<sup>22</sup> And the more that we try to gain proximity to this object, the more it appears as image, which is to say, the more it doesn't appear. The cynical attempt at full revelation through the image thus misses its target—and it misses all the more insofar as it attempts to reveal all.<sup>23</sup>

The scene at the computer store is the pivotal scene in *The End of Violence* because it emphatically demonstrates the limits of the revelatory power of the image. In providing us with everything, the image deprives us of seeing the most important thing—our own desire. This, and not loss of touch with "reality," constitutes the danger of contemporary cynicism. The command to enjoy is at once a command to see everywhere and everything. We see everything—and thus become cynical—and yet we don't really see anything of importance. This leads us to believe, as good cynics, that there is nothing of importance, that there is no object of desire. This is why the contemporary subject remains fundamentally nonplussed by whatever she/he encounters. No encounter, for the cynic, ever involves the Real; that is, something that might take the subject by surprise and disrupt her/his symbolic system.

Cynicism closes down the space that desire must have in order to breathe, creating a yearning for distance. And yet, this yearning for distance itself partakes of the same investment in the image and the cynicism that it is reacting against. Cynicism, in effect, seems to be our lot. But this would be to conclude too hastily. It remains possible to move beyond cynicism by focusing on what is missing in the image and what remains unknown by the cynic—the *objet petit a*. This type of focus requires paying attention to the way that images point to their own incompleteness. It requires that we accept that we haven't seen it all. Such a position would represent an abandonment of the prevailing cynicism and would mark the emergence of an engaged subjectivity. When cynicism predominates, however, it becomes almost impossible to engage oneself with the larger social order. If one already knows all of the secrets harbored in the Other, there is little incentive to become an active subject in society. In this way, cynicism leads inevitably to the apathy and refusal of political engagement that also characterize the society of enjoyment.

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## *Chapter Seven*

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# THE POLITICS OF APATHY

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### THE REVOLT AGAINST REVOLT

The turn to a society of enjoyment is a mixed bag in terms of political activity. On the one hand, subjects in this society are much less willing to accept the pronouncements of authority figures on face value, and questioning becomes a fundamental fact of life. However, this questioning does not often manifest itself in political activity. One of the most counterintuitive features of the society of enjoyment is its paucity of radical political activity. The turn away from prohibition would seem to open the possibility for political engagement that prohibition had stifled. However, when we look closer at the political effects of prohibition, it becomes apparent that the sacrifice of enjoyment that it demands has the inadvertent side effect of politicization. That is, a society structured around prohibition produces dissatisfied subjects, even if these subjects agree to accept this dissatisfaction as the price for social living. Despite the fact that it most often remains politically unrealized, this dissatisfaction has an inherent radicality to it; dissatisfaction carries the seeds of political dissent and of a desire to change the structure of the social order. Most subjects, of course, do not act on this desire, and many never become conscious of it. In these cases, the prohibition of enjoyment works effectively. Nonetheless, the society of prohibition, in its fundamental structure (of enforced dissatisfaction), creates the inherent possibility of—and an incentive to—political action. If subjects remain apathetic in this society, they at least have political engagement as a tangible possibility that they

have avoided. In short, the dissatisfaction resulting from prohibition creates an incipiently political subject.

The emergence of the society of enjoyment marks a clear contrast. In this society, subjects become increasingly incapable of experiencing dissatisfaction as constitutive for social existence. Clearly, we continue to experience dissatisfaction today, but we tend to see this dissatisfaction as the result of a mistake, something that might be remedied, rather than as that which constitutes us as subjects. What is absent, then, is a more general sense of dissatisfaction. This is significant because dissatisfaction is the engine behind desire for something else, something more than the existing social order has to offer. Desire, in other words, energizes radical political activity, insofar as it cannot find satisfaction in the status quo. Traditionally, desire is what we receive in exchange for our sacrifice of *jouissance* on entering the symbolic order. Though we don't have the Thing (the source of our enjoyment), at least we're not satisfied with the sacrifice of it. As the product of this sacrifice, desire is essentially hysterical, continually questioning the symbolic order, questioning why things are the way symbolic authority says they are. Because it consists of a constant questioning of the master and of mastery, desire has an incipient radicality. It is the threat of revolutionary change, a threat lying dormant within society. This radicality disappears, however, when the dissatisfaction of desire becomes the self-satisfaction of imaginary enjoyment—the mode of subjectivity in the society of enjoyment. Immersed in imaginary enjoyment, subjects become satisfied with their situation and with the social order at large, regardless of the degree to which they discover any enjoyment in the Real—an enjoyment that would represent a challenge to the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his career as a social critic, the primary target of Christopher Lasch's critique has been the social costs of imaginary enjoyment. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, his most well-known work, Lasch points out the contemporary predominance of the imaginary order and its effect on social relations. His final book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, moves in a new direction, examining the widespread apathy that works hand-in-hand with this turn to the imaginary. In this work, Lasch is not concerned with the disappearance of radical political activity per se but with the disappearance of political engagement among the privileged classes. Though the elites have never been the bastions of radicality, their retreat from politics, as Lasch accounts for it, echoes the same retreat among lower- and middle-class subjects whose political activity would potentially be of a more radical stripe. Both the elites and the rest of society become apathetic for similar reasons, and Lasch's book chronicles the triumph of this apathy over politics, a triumph symptomatic of the transformation from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. In a society of enjoyment, no one wants to leave the realm of imaginary, private enjoyment and enter into political contestation.

Lasch sees this growing apathy as the fundamental threat to democratic society today. As he puts it, “Democracy in our time is more likely to die of indifference than of intolerance.”<sup>2</sup> Though social critics on the Left tend to focus on instances of intolerance as the primary danger, Lasch contends that intolerance—hate speech, hate crimes, and so on—is not nearly as widespread in contemporary society as apathy. Apathy—or a resistance to political engagement—infects all subjects all the time in the society of enjoyment. In *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch describes the turn away from politics not just in the realms we ordinarily think of as political but in everyday activity as well. For instance, he claims that our very ability to converse—what he calls an “essentially political art”—disappears in the midst of contemporary apathy. Our lack of interest in political questions renders us boring and uninspired conversationalists. Without any political engagement, we have nothing to talk about except “shoptalk or personal gossip.” Though this decline in our ability to converse troubles Lasch, his primary focus is on the withdrawal of society’s privileged classes from social concerns and duties.

According to Lasch, the elites no longer feel any connection or obligation to the larger social order. This is—though Lasch doesn’t put it this way—a direct ramification of the turn away from prohibition. The prohibition of enjoyment has the effect of turning subjects toward the social order where they seek recognition as recompense for their “lost” enjoyment. Without an explicit prohibition, however, subjects do not look to the social order for this recompense. Instead, they retreat further and further into their private enjoyment, hoping to secure that enjoyment from the encroaching Other. Lasch details this transformation in the activity of the elites. He says:

Instead of supporting public services, the new elites put their money into the improvement of their own self-enclosed enclaves. They gladly pay for private and suburban schools, private police, and private systems of garbage collection; but they have managed to relieve themselves, to a remarkable extent, of the obligation to contribute to the national treasury. Their acknowledgment of civic obligations does not extend beyond their own immediate neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the imperative to enjoy, the elites focus their energies not on building the social order as a whole but on the “improvement of their own self-enclosed enclaves.” Such enclaves are repositories of private enjoyment, enjoyment stolen away from the Other. When private enjoyment is one’s chief focus in this way, one has no inducement to political engagement. Private provides a sense of imaginary completeness, while political activity and interaction with the big Other constantly reminds one of one’s lack. This is why the retreat into privacy and apathy are so appealing in the society of enjoyment: to be apolitical is to be free of reminders that one is subjected to lack; that is, that one is not fully enjoying.

While Lasch laments the absence of contemporary political engagement on the part of the elites, the effect of this lacuna is not as far-reaching as the parallel absence among the lower classes. If the elites abstain from politics and civic activity, the class structure of society still remains the same. But when the lower classes become politically apathetic, society loses the possibility of substantive transformation. In the society of enjoyment, the compulsion to enjoy entrances even the lower classes with the lure of imaginary enjoyment, thereby dulling the possibilities for radical political activity. As Lasch sees in the case of the elites, subjects have few incentives to leave their private enclaves of enjoyment for political activity, even if that activity might promise a better alternative. In the midst of this retreat from politics, it seems that our only alternative is looking back on past radical political activity with nostalgia.

#### THE POLITICS OF THE APOLITICAL

From the standpoint of the society of commanded enjoyment, we can look back longingly at the radicalism that was once palpable in the society of prohibition. More than any other contemporary novelist, E. L. Doctorow attends to this widespread loss of political activity and responds with novels that register and attempt to account for it. He produces novels of nostalgia for a forsaken radicality. These novels reveal a past alive with engaged political struggle and challenges to the hegemony of American capitalism. In fact, Fredric Jameson claims,

E. L. Doctorow is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition: no one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own current political dilemmas in the present.<sup>4</sup>

For Jameson, Doctorow illuminates the political vacuum of the present by showing the radical possibilities of the past. Doctorow not only depicts the radical political activity of the past, but he shows this radicality as it evanesces, as we see especially in *Ragtime* and *The Book of Daniel*.

In both of these novels, Doctorow presents radicalism as a viable political position, but also as a political position that people are abandoning. The former novel shows this transformation primarily through the character of Tateh, who begins the novel as an ardent socialist and ends it as a Hollywood filmmaker providing manipulation for the masses. *The Book of Daniel* reveals even more dramatically the shift from political activity to apathy. It depicts the authentic political commitment of the Isaacsons (the novel's standins for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg) in the 1940s and 1950s, and then contrasts this

commitment with the political activity of the 1960s. Unlike the Isaacsons, the radicals from the 1960s in the novel focus not on working for socialism, or even for social justice, but on producing cataclysmic images. As Artie Sternlicht, the chief representative of this position, puts it, "We're gonna overthrow the United States with images."<sup>5</sup> Sternlicht believes himself to be far more revolutionary than the Isaacsons. But Sternlicht's radicality, as the above statement suggests, exists solely on the level of the image. It is an imaginary revolution (in both senses of the word) that he furthers. He is concerned foremost with his own image as a radical rather than with a genuine radical politics. His investment in the image—like that of contemporary subjects in the society of enjoyment—militates against the transformative political activity practiced by the Isaacsons.

Not only does Doctorow chronicle the turn from the committed radical politics of the Isaacsons to the imaginary radicality of figures such as Artie Sternlicht, but in addition, he concludes the novel in Disneyland, where Daniel, the narrator and son of the Isaacsons, meets Selig Mindish, whose confession sealed the fate of Daniel's parents. Disneyland provides the perfect setting for the novel's conclusion because it represents the direction in which radical political activity has devolved. In order to stress this, Doctorow emphasizes the imaginary enjoyment that Disneyland provides. In his narration, Daniel notes that Disneyland gives subjects a sense of completion on a wholly imaginary level—without any actual completion. He says, "What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock, that insists at the same time on the recipient's rich psychic relation to his country's history and language and literature."<sup>6</sup> That is, Disneyland provides an image of engagement in lieu of an actual engagement with the larger social order.

Though *Ragtime* and *Book of Daniel* depict the disappearance of radical politics, they do not explicitly probe the reasons for it. But according to Jameson, the reasons for this demise are nonetheless evident. He claims, "the proposition that the depoliticization of the worker's movement is attributable to the media or culture generally [. . .] is [. . .], in my opinion, something like the elegiac backdrop, if not the meaning, of *Ragtime*, and perhaps of Doctorow's work in general."<sup>7</sup> Here, Jameson attributes to Doctorow the contemporary version of Marxism's traditional "false consciousness" thesis: the American working class lost its radical potential with the emergence and hegemony of the culture industry. In *Ragtime* and *Book of Daniel*, certainly, there is little to suggest otherwise. But the case is altogether different with another of Doctorow's novels, *World's Fair*. This novel reveals the link between the turn away from politics and the transformation from prohibition to enjoyment. Because it emphasizes this link, *World's Fair* occupies *the* pivotal position within Doctorow's larger novelistic project.

If Doctorow's novelistic project is in fact a political one, the claim for the centrality of *World's Fair* would appear to be entirely spurious. By any measure, it seems to be one of his least political novels. It tells the story of the maturation of Edgar Altschuler, a boy growing up in New York in the 1930s. The novel culminates with two trips that Edgar makes to the 1939 World's Fair, the object of his desire throughout the novel. Gone are the radical figures and the political engagement that are central to Doctorow's project in novels such as *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, and *Loon Lake*. *World's Fair* even seems to be an exception to conservative reviewer Carol Iannone's charge that Doctorow's novels have "the ideological attitudes of the Left, attitudes that pervade and, finally, compromise everything he has written."<sup>8</sup> In fact, Carol Harter and James Thompson claim, with good cause, that "only the most determined social critic will wrench this novel into political statement."<sup>9</sup> *World's Fair* seems to abandon the political concerns of Doctorow's earlier novels for what is alternately seen as an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* or as a new portrait of the artist as a young man.<sup>10</sup> *World's Fair* is, in other words, an exception in Doctorow's oeuvre, a piece that doesn't seem to fit in. But it is this status as exception that holds the key to the novel's importance.

Though it shares a general sense of nostalgia with the rest of Doctorow's work, it is nostalgic in a far different way. As with the other major novels, this novel is about loss—the loss of the father's music store, the loss of the family apartment, Edgar's loss of sexual innocence, and so on. But in contrast to the more political novels, we do not see in *World's Fair* an indication of a lost radical past, a radicality unrealizable today, but instead a lost past of entrepreneurial capitalism (perhaps the clearest example: Edgar's fond recollection of Joe the "swarthy steadfast" Sweet Potato Man, who doesn't stand a chance, we know, against the "motorized corporations" Edgar sees him competing against).<sup>11</sup> *World's Fair*, in other words, apparently belies Fredric Jameson's fundamental thesis about Doctorow as the "epic poet" of a vanished radicality. If the majority of Doctorow's other fiction is an extended lament about the "disappearance of the American radical past," then *World's Fair*, with its account of a boy's journey into maturity and knowledge, is Doctorow's one attempt to explain why this radical tradition has disappeared. As such, the novel reveals to us the importance of augmenting the purely political reading of Doctorow's fiction with psychoanalysis, because it is psychoanalysis which allows us to see that it is, in fact, precisely the apolitical dimension of the novel which permits Doctorow to solve the thoroughly political mystery of the "disappearance of the American radical past." The key to the mystery lies not in larger political questions, but in the shift that the individual subject undergoes with the emergence of the society of enjoyment.

*World's Fair*, to put it another way, through its rather apolitical account of Edgar Altschuler, offers an insight—found nowhere else in Doctorow's

novels—into the connection between the loss of a radical tradition and the transformation of subjectivity apropos a shift in the structure of society, a shift in emphasis from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy. We see this transformation first-hand in the individual change that Edgar undergoes during the novel. It is as if Edgar represents American radicalism both before and after, and through him we glimpse the source of its demise. In *World's Fair*, we see a young boy—always on the other side of knowledge, always on the outside looking in—come into knowledge at the 1939 World's Fair. At the end of the novel, Edgar occupies a wholly new position: he acquires knowledge and thus penetrates the enigmatic mystery of adulthood. It is in this transformation that we can find the reason for the disappearance of American radicalism and for the contemporary emergence of a generalized political apathy.

#### CARNAL KNOWLEDGE

At the end of the novel, Edgar, who has always felt the humiliation of not knowing, acquires a knowledge of the sexual mysteries of life. This coming into knowledge altogether changes Edgar, finally allowing him the satisfaction that has heretofore eluded him. After gaining sexual knowledge, Edgar escapes the chronic dissatisfaction of his childhood, the dissatisfaction of being on the outside of knowledge. He leaves the chronic dissatisfaction of desire for the self-satisfaction of his own imaginary enjoyment. Edgar's acquisition of the knowledge he had always longed for is correlative to his entry into an imaginary self-satisfaction. And in this way, Edgar's transformation provides a parallel for that of the American radical past—Tate's in *Ragtime*, for instance—and accounts for its "pastness."<sup>12</sup>

Maturity—and the knowledge that accompanies it—is Edgar's goal throughout *World's Fair*. Edgar desperately wants to become a knowing adult, because, from the beginning of the novel until he attends the World's Fair, Edgar constantly experiences the humiliation of being a child. This first becomes evident when Edgar turns four years old, at his birthday party. He recognizes the underside to the celebration:

And we all had sit at the table with ridiculous pointed paper hats, and paper plates and noisemakers and popping balloons and pretend to a joyful delirium. In fact a birthday party was a satire on children directed by their mothers, who hovered about, distributing Dixie cups and glasses of milk while cooing in appreciation for the aesthetics of the event, the way each child was dressed for it and so on; and who set us upon one another in games of the most acute competition, so that we either cried in humiliation or punched each other to inflict pain. (35–36)

At the birthday party, the child plays out a part assigned by the parent and plays that part for a parental look. It is this look, as Edgar well understands, which humiliates. The look sees and enjoys a lack of knowledge in the children. This is why Edgar refuses to change out of his swimming suit on the beach while holding a towel over himself. He knows that this common practice makes a mockery of children: "I was not persuaded. I saw other children changing this way and I knew their shame when they saw me watching" (61). This is the humiliation of being exposed to a gaze which looks on with amused contempt. As Edgar puts it, "To be undressed was to seem to be a child, a degrading state" (61). Such a state is "degrading" because in it Edgar is thought not to know.

The look that looks on the children celebrating at the birthday party or changing clothes on the beach is a look that sees in its subject a lack of knowledge. Children at a birthday party are "cute" because of their innocent enjoyment; children can change clothes in public because of their sexual innocence. In both cases, the look looks upon someone who is *not* supposed to know. In other words, it desupposes them of knowledge. As such, the intersubjective relationship here is precisely the opposite of what occurs in the transference. The transference produces a feeling of love because it involves a "subject supposed to know." The idea that the other really knows something that we do not produces a feeling of love. To suppose someone to know, in short, is to love them, and, conversely, to desuppose someone of knowledge is to hate them. The look of the mothers at their innocent children is thus not a loving look, but one which enjoys at the expense of the children's "innocence," as Edgar senses when he characterizes the birthday party as a "satire." All of Edgar's sense of the humiliation accompanying childhood stems from the lack of knowledge that childhood seems to imply. He also realizes that adults, rather than rectifying this lack of knowledge, often do whatever they can to perpetuate it.

Despite the extreme dissatisfaction that it creates in Edgar, being desupposed of knowledge—being left in the dark about the nature of things—does have its benefits. Not least of which is that it has the effect of producing desire. Thus, it is important that Edgar's parents desuppose Edgar of knowledge primarily when it concerns sex and death. Whenever sex or death comes up, they immediately dissimulate. Even though Edgar is the first to discover that his grandmother has died, his father refuses to discuss it forthrightly with him. The refusal to grant Edgar any knowledge about death is also evident when his parents resort to subterfuge in order to get rid of their dog Pinky (who must be put to sleep as a result of Edgar's allergic reaction to him), an act which leaves Edgar convinced of "the adult's crass disregard for the feelings of children" (84). Because his parents keep him always on the outside of a knowledge of death, Edgar's desire to know about it burgeons. This same dynamic is also at work in his relationship to sexual knowledge.

Earlier, when Pinky has puppies, Edgar is confused. He confesses, "I had not quite worked out the concept of procreation. It was not a matter in which anyone in my family thought I needed instruction" (81). Prohibited from knowing about sex, Edgar develops a seemingly insatiable desire to know. Sex remains a mystery to him, and as a mystery, it sustains him as a desiring subject. As Edgar puts it:

I secretly grieved for the dark mysterious things my parents did in the privacy of their relationship. I didn't know quite what these things were, but I knew they were shameful, requiring darkness. They were never referred to or acknowledged in the light of day. This aspect of my parents' life lay like a shadow in my mind. My mother and father, rulers of the universe, were taken by something over which they had no control. How problematical that was, how unsettling. (78)

Even though the idea of a strange force controlling his parents troubles Edgar, it also intrigues him. He wants to know, to discover the secret of the Other. This desire, like all desire, leads Edgar to inquiry and searching, to all kinds of efforts to unlock the mystery that confronts him. Earlier, an equally revelatory example of this occurs. Shopping with his mother, Edgar insistently inquires about a box she is purchasing; finally, she responds: "Oh stop it, they're sanitary napkins. Are you satisfied?" (43). Edgar, of course, is not, because this description doesn't reveal anything to him. It's only function is to silence him—"I knew from her tone that I had used up my allotment of questions and so pursued the matter no further" (43)—and to sustain his lack of knowledge. This scene does, however, make perfectly clear Edgar's status as a desiring subject. Like the subject in the society of prohibition, until the end of the novel Edgar experiences his subjectivity as dissatisfying. This dissatisfaction produces a subject with the potential for existential and political engagement in the world.

#### EDGAR CONTRA OEDIPUS

In order to understand this scene fully, we must look to one of the fundamental texts of psychoanalysis. We can see a clear parallel to the behavior of Edgar and his mother in the relation between Oedipus and Jocasta. Once opened to the possibility that he *might* be the murderer of his father and the bedmate of his mother, Oedipus insists—and it is this insistence that brings about his demise—on knowing the truth. According to Lacan in his *Ethics* seminar, "Sophocles represents him as driven to bring about his own ruin through his obstinacy in wanting to solve an enigma, to know the truth."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Oedipus exhibits desire. Jocasta, like Edgar's mother Rose, can't

do enough to discourage Oedipus from this path toward truth. She says to Oedipus: "Have no more fear of sleeping with your mother: How many men, in dreams, have lain with their mothers! No reasonable man is troubled by such things."<sup>14</sup> Both Jocasta and Rose, against the insistence of their sons' desire, take refuge in the reality principle—"don't ask so many questions"—because they know where the insistence on truth leads, and are not all that eager to proceed in that direction.

Despite his mother's resistance, Edgar, like Oedipus, does eventually come to sexual knowledge. He attends the World's Fair with his friend Meg, and at the end of the day, they return to the show in which Meg's mother Norma is performing. She plays a part in the underwater drama of "Oscar the Amorous Octopus," an act that consists of her (and other women) being chased around underwater by an "octopus" who rips off their clothing. Edgar, who sneaks in to witness this, recognizes that something "important" is happening. He understands that the octopus is a man in disguise (who nonetheless becomes a "monster" in Edgar's description) and that he is being introduced to sexual knowledge.<sup>15</sup> As Michael Robertson puts it, "the peep show [. . .] gives Edgar a glimpse into his own anxiously awaited future as a sexually mature man."<sup>16</sup> Like Oedipus, Edgar gets the feeling that knowledge—especially this kind—isn't exactly happiness: "I again saw her body in its underwater ballet. I didn't want to think about it. I felt queasy thinking about it, the picture of it produced the faintest illness from somewhere under my stomach, something between nausea and an ache" (270). We might imagine that Oedipus endures something like this feeling "between nausea and an ache" as he discovers the truth he seeks. Knowledge, however, has far different ramifications for Oedipus and Edgar: Oedipus ends up blinded, exiled, thoroughly alienated; Edgar wins a free trip to the World's Fair.

Whereas Oedipus, by blinding himself, sustains himself in the truth even though it means the acceptance of a fundamental dissatisfaction, Edgar finds a way to avoid the deadlock of desire. His method is masturbatory: "I found now if I held myself the nauseating ache was bearable" (270). Edgar retreats from the symbolic world of desire—with its requisite unhappiness—into the realm of the imaginary, with its satisfaction that spares him his nausea. This satisfaction, however, is the indication that Edgar has "given ground relative to his desire"—refusing the dissatisfaction of desire for satisfaction of self-stimulation. Unlike Oedipus, Edgar believes he can have both truth and satisfaction, that truth can be seamlessly integrated into one's existence:

I knew everything now, the careful secret, so carelessly vouchsafed. After all, I had not intended this, it had come to me without my bidding, without any planning or calculation on my part, presented, in fact, as an accident of the adventure. It was not my fault. I had worried before, all the time in this enormous effort to catch up to life, to find it, to feel it, comprehend it; but

all I had to do was be in it and it would instruct me and give me everything I needed. As I fell asleep the fireworks went off over and over again like me pounding my own chest and sending my voice to the heavens that I was here. (270–71)

What Edgar fails to realize is that, as he has become integrated into the world, he has sacrificed the insistence on truth that so characterized his childhood. The final “I was here” indicates that this is the moment of Edgar’s ideological interpellation: he has now taken up the subject position assigned to him within the symbolic order, taken up a coherent symbolic identity and abandoned the questions that were the sign of his former resistance. Robertson points out that “the World’s Fair becomes for Edgar a stimulus to his growth to maturity, enabling him to resolve the issues of autonomy, ethnicity and sexuality that are at the core of Doctorow’s novel.”<sup>17</sup> This resolution, however, far from marking Edgar’s triumph, indicates his defeat; it is a sign of his smooth—and satisfied—integration into the ideological order of the society of enjoyment.

When Edgar gives up his questions in exchange for imaginary, masturbatory satisfaction, he becomes the quintessential subject of the society of enjoyment. The fundamental experience of this subject is imaginary enjoyment rather than the dissatisfaction of desire. *World’s Fair* thus answers the great political question that all of Doctorow’s work confronts—What accounts for the loss of the radical past in America?—by showing the sacrifice of desire that makes up the pathological narcissist, a subject incapable of radicality. Edgar’s “maturation” does not exist in isolation but as part of a larger historical shift. He is a part of the increasing power of the imaginary, which offers the tantalizing prospect of uninterrupted private enjoyment. This “increasing power” not only works to shatter the symbolic bond of the community, breaking the social world into smaller and smaller pockets of enjoyment, but it also eliminates the dissatisfaction of the society of prohibition which made revolt possible. What *World’s Fair* tells us is not that popular culture has duped the working class and thus spelled the obsolescence of radicalism, but that radicalism died when the society—and each of us—chose privacy and its enjoyment over the chronic dissatisfaction of the political activity.

When Edgar returns to the World’s Fair with his family, “Oscar the Amorous Octopus” has been torn down. So instead of taking his brother Donald there, Edgar decides to ride the bumper cars with Donald. The bumper cars are, in effect, the sequel to the octopus show. Edgar’s description of the bumper cars reveals what kind of world the retreat from desire has wrought:

So we rode a Dodgem electric car with rubber bumpers, in a great mad crackling horde of similarly equipped drivers, all murderously intent. We bumped them and they bumped us, and we laughed hysterically. Donald let me drive,

his arm over my shoulders, as we spun about crashing and banging into people and being bashed in return, everyone's head threatening to fly off. Donald yelled over the din: "*This* is the Futurama! (286, Doctorow's emphasis)

Donald recognizes that the future is a world of isolated imaginary satisfaction, where any encounter with the other has the character of a collision. Edgar's choice of satisfaction over persisting in dissatisfaction—his decision for isolation—was not one, as Doctorow reveals in Donald's exclamation, made alone. The self-satisfaction of imaginary isolation shows itself to be not all that isolated, to be part of a larger historical transformation. Slavoj Žižek explains that what we see here is a "shift towards a 'pathological Narcissus' to whom the Other (desiring subject) as such appears as a violent intruder: whatever he or she does (if he or she smokes, laughs too loudly or not loudly enough, casts a covetous glance at me . . .), amounts to a disturbance of my precarious imaginary balance."<sup>18</sup> This is the world that Doctorow envisions on the last pages of *World's Fair*, and he reveals, through Edgar's transformation, precisely how such a world originates. In this world, politics rarely makes an appearance, and when it does, it appears in a wholly new form. The politics of the subject in the society of enjoyment consists primarily of one sentiment: leave me alone to my private enjoyment.

#### IMAGINARY REPUBLICANS

The fate of the Republicans in the elections of 1994 and 1998 was clearly tied to this contemporary political imperative. In 1994, the "Contract for America" that propelled the "Republican Revolution" of that year centered around the idea of cutting back on government's intrusions into the private sector. This primarily took the form of cutting taxes, minimizing regulations, and downsizing spending programs. Republicans swept into control of Congress based largely on the popularity of this agenda, which placed a premium on, to put it in the vernacular of talk radio, "getting government off our backs." This agenda found such a receptive audience because it spoke to subjects isolated in the imaginary and it promised them that nothing would disturb their enjoyment. The state's intrusions into our lives—what the Republicans vowed to curtail—remind us of our castration, that we don't have the unmediated relationship to our enjoyment that we might imagine we have. A vote in 1994 for the Republicans was a vote to eliminate this unpleasant reminder.

In 1998, however, the fortunes of the Republicans transformed dramatically. Armed with Clinton's incipient impeachment trial and other favorable political factors, they nonetheless lost seats in Congress. Rather than indicating a change in the national mood (as one might, in the first instance, imag-

ine), this startling turnaround suggests that things remained just as they were in 1994. Voters turned on Republicans, the erstwhile defenders of private enjoyment, precisely because they now seemed to represent a threat to that enjoyment. Republican support of impeachment proceedings against the president indicated a transformation of their position vis-à-vis private enjoyment. In the act of rallying for impeachment, Republicans aligned themselves with the forces of government, *using taxpayer's money* to prosecute the president for his private activity. This establishes them as a threat to private enjoyment and Clinton as a defender of it—a radical reversal of the 1994 dynamic. Even the president, so the subject of imaginary enjoyment sees it, has a right to enjoy himself in private without facing investigation and prosecution. In attacking the president, the Republicans attacked this right and put themselves in the position of threatening it—thereby alienating the same voters that led them to their 1994 victory.

This politics of safeguarding private enjoyment seemed to undergo a dramatic shift in the aftermath of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. But the very way that George W. Bush characterized the attack and the American military response to it evinced continuity with this kind of politics. According to Bush, the attack threatened “the American way of life”—which is to say, the undisturbed safety of our private enjoyment—and this became the justification for the war that followed. Neither Bush nor any other American political figure discussed the war in *political* terms (as a struggle against Islamic fascism, against fundamentalism, etc.), except those of protecting American *jouissance*. In the society of commanded enjoyment, the politics of private enjoyment (and safeguarding it) becomes politics as such.

The influence of imaginary enjoyment on politics extends beyond just the election-day choices of voters and the political decisions of elected leaders. Even more importantly, it changes our relationship to all types of political activity. The field of politics and political action seems like foreign territory to most contemporary subjects, and in this way the society of enjoyment tends to produce a generalized apathy about political questions. I'm apathetic about politics because I can't conceive of political questions as in any way related to my private life—and a private life is the only one that I feel I have. Even when someone manages to avoid the lure of apathy today, the ramifications of the imaginary dimensions of our contemporary situation determine the nature of the political action we embark on, which means that we tend not to take up those political questions that would engage us with the social order as a whole. Instead, political action itself has taken on an increasingly imaginary character, becoming the vehicle for advancing one's own imaginary enjoyment. Thus, when political questions do manage to penetrate the state of generalized apathy, they are usually questions that deal with potential threats to this enjoyment.

We can see evidence for this in the new brand of political action emerging on American campuses in the late 1990s. Student political action has, of course, a vibrant history, though the current action is remarkable for its divergence from this history. Whereas student rebellions in the 1960s focused on the injustice of the Vietnam War or civil rights or the very structure of the university, the recent rebirth of student action has a new focus: the right to enjoy, or, more specifically, the right to drink. On campuses across the country, students have assembled to protest administration efforts to legislate and police student drinking. In one prominent instance, students were faced with a new university policy banning alcohol on a certain part of campus before football games—in effect, an effort to eliminate the practice of “tailgating.” In response to this policy, on May 1, 1998, three thousand Michigan State University students participated in a well-orchestrated uprising, an uprising with but one demand: restore our right to tailgate. Though this is the largest of this new brand of political action, it is merely one instance in a national trend, a trend toward a politics focusing not on altering the social order but on facilitating access to imaginary enjoyment. One might say that we are witnessing a perversion of the old feminist slogan “the personal is the political”; today, we have come to the point where “the political is the personal.” That is, the only political issue worth taking up is one in which my personal, private enjoyment is at stake. The trend toward political action over the right to drink—or whatever “personal” issue—is important insofar as it illustrates so clearly political consequences of the new command to enjoy.

#### POLITICIANS AND THEIR CONSTITUTIVE LIES

Despite the fact that their turn to political action stems only from a perceived threat to their imaginary enjoyment, the Michigan State students are at least able to conceive themselves as political beings and enter into a political arena (however isolated that arena might be). To most people, the very words “politics” and “politician” are the equivalent of obscenities, and conceiving of oneself in political terms is anathema. This increasingly popular attitude indicates the ease with which one can conceive oneself as detached from the political sphere, as an apolitical being.<sup>19</sup> We avoid politics because we think we can—and because we see it as both an alien and an alienating process. But the attempt to avoid alienation is really just an attempt to avoid the social order: any emergence of the subject in the social order is necessarily alienating, a process in which the subject gains a symbolic identity at the price of his or her being. According to Lacan’s formulation in *Seminar XI*, “when the subject appears somewhere as meaning [i.e., as a symbolic identity], he is manifested elsewhere as ‘fading,’ as disappearance.”<sup>20</sup> It is this experience of alienation that

the word “politics” evokes today, and, in this sense, animus toward “politics” or “politicians” is implicitly animus toward the very idea of a social order. To involve oneself in politics would be to tacitly accept the necessity of one’s alienation—a prospect the contemporary subject would like to avoid at all costs, precisely because this alienation makes evident the failure of one’s private, imaginary enjoyment.<sup>21</sup> A sense of alienation indicates that the imaginary realm is symbolically mediated, and “politics,” insofar as it is alienating, constantly reminds us of this mediation.

On one level, it is easy to see mass enmity toward politicians in populist terms, as the healthy expression of hatred on behalf of those ruled toward those who rule them. And perhaps, even as recently as twenty years ago, this was the case. Today, however, such a position is no longer tenable. Today, we hate politicians not because they are the representatives of the ruling class, but because they compromise—or, to put it more clearly, because they lie. The lie of the politician is not, as we often see it, an indication of moral failure, but an act that inheres in the very idea of social relations. In order to interact with each other socially, we must agree to keep up appearances; we must, in short, both accept and proffer widespread deceit. Social existence demands, for instance, that we inquire politely after the health of people we don’t really care about, that we refrain from telling colleagues what we really think of their work, and that we listen to friends with an attentive expression even when we are bored to tears. The continued existence of the social bond depends on such deceptions, and without them, the bond would shatter. In fact, the social bond is itself deceit par excellence. The social bond exists only because we collectively believe that it does, and yet it exists with the pretense of being substantive. This lie at the heart of the social bond is the fundamental constitutive lie, the basis for all of the polite, social lies that follow from it.

Politicians must engage in this kind of lying all the time—speaking so as not to offend the Other—or else they would never get elected to any office. The politician’s lie as such is not a manipulative lie, but a constitutive one, an indication that she/he respects—and is trying to answer—the desire of the Other.<sup>22</sup> Though we might fantasize about a politician who actually tells the truth, such a phenomenon is nonetheless structurally impossible: once someone is in the position of running for office, she/he is necessarily wholly invested in the desire of the Other, so that even telling the truth from this position would be a form of the constitutive lie. Even the film *Bulworth* (Warren Beatty, 1998), which is the embodiment of the fantasy of a truth-telling politician, only depicts Senator Bulworth (Warren Beatty) telling the truth when he knows that he’s going to die, that is, when he has no interest in the upcoming election. When this certainty of imminent death is lifted, Bulworth once again becomes a normal politician and takes up the constitutive lie, which demonstrates the necessary connection between the politician and the

lie. What makes this even clearer, however, is that when Bulworth does actually tell the truth, the truth functions like a lie. That is, Bulworth's truth-telling has the effect of ingratiating him to the Other, which is precisely the effect that the politician's lie is supposed to have. In this sense, *Bulworth* demonstrates not only that politicians don't tell the truth, but also that, on the basis of their structural position, they *cannot* do so. The lie is not something that politicians can avoid; even when they are honest (as is the case with Senator Bulworth), the paradoxical effect of this honesty is that they deceive us all the more. No matter how ethical he or she is, the politician cannot escape the lie.

To refuse to accept the constitutive lie and to despise politicians for it is to disavow the power of the Other, insofar as the constitutive lie explicitly acknowledges the Other's hold over us. But this disavowal, like all disavowals, doesn't make that power go away. Historically, subjects have taken up these lies as a part of their social duty. Today, however, they occasion resentment in subjects, because in being forced to lie, we feel explicitly the demands of the Other—and we feel that we are betraying our private, imaginary enjoyment and thus betraying the imperative to enjoy. Which is not to say that we are experiencing an outbreak of mass truth-telling among contemporary subjects. Enmity for the constitutive, necessary lie is not enmity for all types of deceit, just for the deceit demanded by the social order. Many types of nonconstitutive lies proliferate today and don't occasion the same kind of hostility as the politician's lie. Fabricating a background on a resume, cheating on an exam, making up sources for a research project—none of these lies are forced on us by the Other, and hence they do not make apparent the Other's hold over us. When we lie in this way, we are, in a sense, being “true” to ourselves, insofar as we are advancing our own private interests, our private enjoyment. In contrast, the politician's lie represents a threat to this enjoyment, as it forcefully reminds us of our own castration—what we are unaccustomed to feeling and against which we recoil. When we recoil from the politician's constitutive lie and disavow it, we enact a disavowal of castration, and this disavowal becomes almost *de rigueur* in the society of commanded enjoyment.

This recoil from the constitutive lie is simply the manifestation of hostility toward the social order and its constitutive hold over us.<sup>23</sup> Such hostility develops because we perceive the social order as a continued threat to our ability to sustain our private enjoyment, not because we are actually revolting against symbolic authority. What we fail to see—and what psychoanalysis takes pains to point out—is that no matter how private we feel this enjoyment to be, it is always located within the symbolic order. The social order is not the enemy of this imaginary enjoyment—nor is it threatened by it. What we imagine as our radicality is actually that which locates us firmly under the sway of symbolic authority. Our experience as subjects today is dramatically

misleading: it prompts us to feel, almost inevitably, as if we are radical beings. The society of commanded enjoyment does offer us the opportunity to realize this feeling of radicality in action, though few of us actually do. Instead, we remain content with our isolated, private enjoyment and the *image* of radicality. But the isolation of private enjoyment and its seeming radicality are never as isolated or as radical as all that. Recognizing this is the incipience of a politics with more at stake than my private enjoyment, because politics as such can only begin when we grasp just how radical we aren't. The command to enjoy does open up this political possibility. However, we don't engage in radical political activity as long as we remain confident that we are already radical. Instead, we retreat into apathy, and as we do, the public world erodes.

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## Chapter Eight

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# A MISSING PUBLIC WORLD

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### STAYING HOME

The idea of a public world, a neutral territory free from private interests, has lost its viability because, swept up in the promises of the society of enjoyment, we no longer want to pay the price for entering into this world. Unwilling to pay its price, unwilling to accept a requisite sacrifice of enjoyment, we recoil from the public world and confine ourselves to our private lives. This refusal to enter into the public world animates Robert Putnam's bestseller *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In this work, Putnam chronicles the massive retreat from public involvement that has occurred in recent years in the United States. According to Putnam, this retreat represents a fundamental threat to American society because it threatens to eliminate the bonds that create social coherence and allow the society to function.

Since the late 1960s, social engagement and participation have plummeted. Subjects have withdrawn in large numbers from all activities that involve entering into a public space. This includes not only civic organizations and political parties, but even—as the title of Putnam's book suggests—bowling leagues. Rather than involve themselves in public activities, subjects spend much more time in the isolation of their private worlds, most often watching television, surfing the web, or playing video games during their leisure time. This turn to privacy produces a widespread sense of disconnection, a sense of disconnection that is on of rise today. As Putnam notes:

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into an ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.<sup>1</sup>

We now exist largely in private worlds and rarely depart from them to encounter the public. The public world thus becomes a foreign and dangerous territory for us.

Giving up our private enjoyment—even temporarily—has come to seem too high a price to pay, especially when we can't be sure that the Other is willing to make a similar sacrifice. We can see an example of this refusal to enter into the public world in the world of detective fiction, a genre that focuses on the interaction between public and private. In the recent Inspector Wexford novels of Ruth Rendell, the absence of public contact has become a recurring motif, a motif completely absent in the earlier novels of this series, written in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Kissing the Gunner's Daughter*, for instance, Inspector Wexford, Rendell's philosopher-detective, notes how the absence of public interaction means that very few people have verifiable alibis anymore. As he says, "something rather strange has happened to alibis in recent years. It's getting progressively more difficult to establish hard and fast ones. That works against villains, of course, but it also works for them. It's got something to do with people leading more isolated lives."<sup>2</sup> People interact with others, especially strangers, so rarely, that they can provide no public record of where they have been. And in a later novel, *Road Rage*, Wexford continues his observations on the contemporary turn to privacy: "People stayed at home in front of the television, or if they went out, went in cars. They even drank at home and pub after pub was closed."<sup>3</sup> There are, in short, increasingly fewer reasons to leave the security of one's home. I drink at home because I can remain there without being confronted with any requirements concerning the sacrifice of my private enjoyment. At home, I am able to enjoy without interruption.<sup>4</sup> To go out, to involve oneself with the public world, is to break this spell. In other words, in the society of enjoyment, subjects isolate themselves at home in order to avoid any disruption of their private, imaginary enjoyment.

The explosion of interest in and traffic on the internet appears to represent a new effort to restore the public world in a new form, to create what the partisans of the internet call a "virtual community." While online, the subject can chat with strangers, engage politically, and even join sustained discussion groups. In short, one can participate in a public world that seems to have everything save actual physical interaction. But despite all these public-oriented characteristics, the internet does not produce a public world; as Cass Sunstein argues in *Republic.com*, it merely increases the range of the subject's

private world. The internet provides the subject with a community that reflects the self. According to Sunstein, “New technologies, emphatically including the Internet, are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, rather than fostering a restoration of the public world, the internet provides another imaginary escape from that world, a place where the subject can avoid the big Other and interact with a series of alter egos. Because it is an imaginary space, whatever community one finds on the internet tends to lack the key characteristic of an actual community—its otherness. This is why Sunstein claims that “new technologies reduce the ‘friction’ of ordinary life and permit people, with increasing ease, to devise a communications universe of their choosing.”<sup>6</sup> This “friction” that the internet works to eliminate is, to put it in Lacanian terms, the friction of the Real. On the internet we miss the Real dimension of the other—that part of the other that resists our mode of symbolization. In this sense, the increasing predominance of the internet and its privatized version of the public world represents a further retreat from the public world as such.

The abandonment of the public world also manifests itself in the way that people actually do involve themselves in society. When people do participate in civic activities today, the mode of participation is most often completely consonant with the predominance of private worlds. According to Putnam, membership in organizations has held steady, but the form of this membership has dramatically transformed from active participation to financial support. Rather than interact with members of the organizations to which they belong, people send money. Sending money allows one to exert influence and advance one’s interests without leaving the security of the private world. Volunteerism today also follows this same pattern. Putnam does notice a resurgence of volunteerism in the 1990s, but even this trend bears the marks of the private world’s predominance. Contemporary subjects most often volunteer in ways that involve a few individuals rather than the larger community. Even when we do become engaged subjects, we do so in ways that don’t necessarily require entrance into the public world.

Despite Putnam’s ability to recognize the contemporary abandonment of the public world, his very characterization of this public world betrays the extent to which it has disappeared. He sees the public world as central to a society that has a sense of “generalized reciprocity,” in contrast to a “distrustful society.” Clearly, “reciprocity” sounds like a better recipe for society than “distrust,” but the term nonetheless suggests an attitude foreign to the public world as such. Concern for reciprocity remains concern for one’s own private advantage, which is not a public concern. If subjects agree to enter the public world because it promises reciprocity, then they already view it from the perspective of their private world. From the point of view of the public world, the

question of reciprocity would never arise because this world appears as neutral turf—a level playing field. But because Putnam begins from the perspective of a universalized privacy, the public world acquires the character of reciprocal sacrifice. That is to say, in formulating the benefits of the public world in terms of the reciprocity it offers, Putnam ipso facto takes the private world as his assumed starting point. In this way, he inadvertently testifies to the power that privacy has over us today. Not only are we reluctant to enter into the public world, but, even more importantly, we see this world only through the lens of our privacy, which has the effect of increasing its foreignness.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with this insistence on privacy and private enjoyment is that it effectively blocks the path to actual enjoyment. Our retreat from the public world represents an attempt to insulate ourselves from the threatening enjoyment of the other—the other in its Real dimension. But in the act of retreating from the other's enjoyment, we also retreat from our own. As we have seen in the case of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, our own enjoyment is nothing but this enjoyment of the other. Hence, when subjects in the society of enjoyment attempt to isolate themselves in their private worlds in order to safeguard their own enjoyment, they protect themselves from their own enjoyment as well as the other's. Once again, we see here how the symptoms of the society of enjoyment evince the profound absence of enjoyment that characterizes this society.

#### MEMBERS ONLY

If contemporary American society lacks a public world—or, rather, if its public world has been completely overrun by private expressions and interests—historically, the public world was a world (at least in idea, if not in practice) of equality. That is, in the society of prohibition everyone who entered this public world agreed to submit to the rigid domination of its conventions, and this mutual submission to the law of the public world fostered an equality of public persons, despite private differences. Most importantly, as Jürgen Habermas points out, in the public world “laws of the market were suspended,” which made the public world a site of respite from the power of capital.<sup>8</sup> The public world, in its very conception, was a mode of resistance to the expansion of capitalism into all aspects of the social order.

Obviously, the idea of a public world where the “laws of the market” might be suspended is difficult to imagine today, given the current ubiquitousness of the market and its laws. In the society of enjoyment, the market—as the extension of the command to enjoy—infiltrates everywhere, as attested to by the proliferation of advertising, which prompts Habermas to lament that even “the public sphere” has taken on “advertising functions.”

The existence of private advertising in public space provides an overt indication that private interests have completely overrun the public world. The signs of this invasion proliferate throughout late capitalist society. To witness it, we need only look at the nearest *public* bus, which one cannot ride—or even watch it driving down the road—without being bombarded by the advertisements that adorn it both inside and out.<sup>10</sup> But the proliferation of advertising in every public space is only the most visible manifestation of the privatization of the public world. As is well known, many public functions are becoming increasingly relegated to private interests. In just the last few years, we have witnessed the birth of private prisons, public vouchers for private schools, corporate sponsorship of public high school sports teams, the inundation of public schools with corporate advertising, and express lanes on public highways that one must pay for the privilege of driving in (just to name a few of the more “publicized” privatizations). As they infiltrate the public domain, private interests do not submit to the public demand for submission to its conventions, because these private interests obey only the higher law of the market. They bring the inequality of the market with them as they invade the public world.<sup>11</sup> This proliferation of private interests in the public world has the effect of destroying the public world as an inhabitable, neutral space, staining the public world with the obscene enjoyment of privacy. The society of enjoyment is a private society.

In one sense, the obscene dimension of the public world is nothing new. Despite claims for its neutrality and openness, even in the society of prohibition the public world has never actually been free of the power relations that predominate private interactions. Instead, it has perpetuated inequality in the guise of neutrality, in the guise of “bracketing” private inequality. As Nancy Fraser puts it, “insofar as the bracketing of social inequalities [. . .] means proceeding as if they do not exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates.”<sup>12</sup> The neutrality of the public world, rather than fostering equality, simply masks inequality. In addition, Fraser notes that we assume the public world “is or can be a space of zero-degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos as to accommodate with perfect neutrality and equal ease interventions expressive of any and every cultural ethos. But this assumption is counterfactual, and not for reasons that are merely accidental.”<sup>13</sup> There is, as Fraser claims here, no neutrality that is free of the stain of private inequality or private enjoyment. To pretend that the public world is a neutral ground when it isn’t is to perpetuate—and solidify—the inequality rampant in the social order.

If the public world can never rid itself of privacy’s stain, it would appear that we are better off without it.<sup>14</sup> At least, when we have eliminated the illusion of neutrality that the public world perpetuates, we will see social relationships as

they really are; we will see inequality in its undisguised form. The disappearance of the public world would thus seem to be something to celebrate, the stripping away of an ideological fiction. Better to face the inequality that exists than to put our heads in the sand and believe that it doesn't. Such a celebration, however, would be premature. While it is undoubtedly the case that the neutrality of the public world is—and has been—fictional, it is nonetheless also the case that this neutrality has been, to use Jacques-Alain Miller's phrase, an "effective fiction." Though this neutrality is only fictional, the fiction does have effects. That is, the public world, because it assumes that a neutral ground does exist, has the effect of actually bringing this neutral ground, to some extent, into existence.

Think, for instance, of the American judicial system. We all know perfectly well that jurors, despite explicit instructions from the judge, are not able to put aside their personal prejudices in a case and evaluate the evidence on its own terms. As a result, the jury trial has perpetuated—and continues to perpetuate—all sorts of injustices, most obviously, in the history of American jurisprudence, in cases where the racism of white jurors has led them to see an African American defendant as guilty a priori. Jurors cannot become neutral subjects, and the fiction that they can allows injustice, in many instances, to persist. However, even though this fiction often fails to produce justice, it does give the jury trial its illusion of justice. Here we see the value of an effective fiction. Though it is impossible for jurors to put aside their prejudices in actuality, if they believe that they can—or if they believe that this is what the judge expects them to do—this fiction can nonetheless change the way that they respond to the case (even if it doesn't in every instance). Political activists can also point to this ideal when challenging verdicts that clearly deviate from it. In this way, the idea of neutrality has the ability to alter the way we act, even if, in practice, neutrality does not exist.<sup>15</sup> Precisely the same thing is at work in the case of the public world. Even though the public world is not free of private interests, when we act as if it is we are actually working to rid it of this obscene stain. The key to political struggle is the embrace of the effective fiction, insisting on the "truth" of this fiction. In the society of enjoyment, however, the fiction of the public world and its neutrality has lost much of its efficacy. We now accept its privatization as an inevitable truth.

The ramifications of this acceptance are significant. The privatization—and thus destruction—of the public world forces everyone to live in their own private world without reprieve—that is, without the reprieve from enjoyment that the public world provides. In *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec points out that the contemporary retreat into privacy "entail[s] the destruction of the *civitas* itself, of increasingly larger portions of our public space. We no longer attempt to safeguard the empty 'private' space [. . .] but to dwell within this space *exclusively*."<sup>16</sup> The problem is that the destruction of the public world doesn't represent a liberation into privacy; rather, privacy itself becomes publicized. As

Copjec puts it, “from the moment the choice of private enjoyment *over* community is made, one’s privacy ceases to be something one supposes as veiled from prying eyes [. . .] and becomes instead something one visibly endures.”<sup>17</sup> As the public world disappears, we lose the distance between public and private that allowed the public world to be a respite from the private one. Though the public world bars us from our enjoyment, at the same time it protects us from it as well, offers us relief from its pressure. When the private becomes public and the public loses its autonomy, we begin to suffocate. The real horror is not, as so many contend today, our failure to protect privacy, but, on the contrary, our failure to protect the public from a private assault.

The increasing refusal to enter the public world has devastating effects—namely, breaking down our ability to believe in such a world. The public world is not a substantial world but exists only insofar as subjects believe in its existence—or, insofar as they believe that someone, the big Other, believes in it. If I see others refusing to enter into this world, remaining in a private world, I surmise that the big Other no longer believes in the fiction of a neutral public world. And when I can no longer believe that the big Other believes, I myself stop believing—and everyone stops believing in a similar way. In this way, the breakdown of the public world gives rise to an incessant paranoia: without the prohibition of enjoyment that the public world demands, I am constantly confronted with the other’s enjoyment and must, at the same time, constantly fear that the other might steal my enjoyment. Even though the public world is just an illusion, it nonetheless has the effect of keeping the threat of enjoyment at bay.

If the public world has always had only an illusory existence, has always been more theoretical than actual, the idea has also persisted that a cataclysmic event, a horrible disaster, would cause a fully realized public world to emerge. Disaster, in short, begets a true public.<sup>18</sup> Even Ronald Reagan, just after emphasizing the rift in the world with his “Evil Empire” speech, expressed a wish for an alien invasion of the earth, in order that the United States and the Soviet Union would heal the division between them and unite as members of a global community.<sup>19</sup> In traditional disaster films, we see the fantasy of a public world fully realized again and again. It almost seems as if these films exist not for the sake of depicting the disaster, but in order to provide a vehicle for illustrating the realization of this public world. Almost without fail, in the disaster film the disaster produces a bond among people regardless of what in their private lives would keep them apart. Barriers between rich and poor, between white and black, between young and old, between popular and unpopular, all seem to disappear in the face of the disaster. The disaster—and the public world it brings to light—even has the ability to diminish the importance of private quarrels: former enemies can interact on a neutral turf. No matter how far away we have been from realizing the ideal of a neutral

public world, the disaster film has consistently shown us this ideal, as if to provide reassurance that the ideal itself continues to exist and inform our everyday interactions. It is precisely this ideal that the society of enjoyment militates against.

#### DISASTROUS COMMUNITY BUILDING

The traditional disaster film affirms the idea of a neutral public world that characterizes the society of prohibition. Mark Robson's *Earthquake*, made in 1974, provides a compelling instance of this quality in the disaster film, precisely because it appears, at first, to be revealing how the disaster results in the degradation of the public world. At the end of the film, the earthquake has completely destroyed the city of Los Angeles—rendering it almost uninhabitable—and has killed many of the film's main characters. There seems to be no space left for a public world, and few left to exist in it. In the final line of the film, one of the survivors says to another, "This used to be a helluva town." The use of the past tense here indicates that the city, as a public space that ties people together, has died in the earthquake. In addition, the film depicts a mild-mannered grocery manager, Jody (Marjoe Gortner), being transformed into a psychotic killer as a result of the earthquake. As a member of the National Guard, the disaster presses Jody into service, and when he is leading a patrol arresting looters, he guns down three men who mocked him earlier in the film and tries to rape one of the women arrested for looting. Because of the presence of Jody and the overall development of the narrative, *Earthquake* seems to break from the traditional disaster film and its depiction of a revitalized public world resulting from the disaster. Despite these contraindications, however, the film remains firmly within the tradition.

The primary manner in which *Earthquake* depicts the existence of a public world is very traditional for the genre: it introduces us to a variety of characters whose disparate private lives become intertwined during the disaster and its aftermath. Connections emerge among Miles Quade (Richard Roundtree), a motorcycle stuntman, Denise Marshall (Geneviève Bujold), an actress, Lew Slade (George Kennedy), a police officer, Stuart Graff (Charlton Heston), an engineer, and many others. By establishing these kinds of connections, the film brings to light an implicit public bond that holds them all together. Even more importantly, however, it also depicts characters who renounce their own private enjoyment for the sake of the public. For instance, Miles Quade, suffering from the private disappointment of a failed motorcycle stunt, risks his life to help a stranger, Denise Marshall, and her son, and goes out of his way to take them to safety. In addition, Lew Slade, who also suffered a private disappointment (being suspended from the police force),

risks his life to save people trapped in a collapsed building. The film's main character, Stuart Graff, illustrates this turn to the public to an even greater extent. Throughout the film, we have seen him dissatisfied with his marriage to his drunken and nagging wife Remy (Ava Gardner). Just prior to the earthquake, he even initiates an affair with Denise Marshall and plans to leave Remy for her. That is, he plans to opt for his private enjoyment over his public obligation, an obligation that the film depicts as painfully unattractive. At the conclusion of *Earthquake*, however, as Stuart is rescuing people from underneath a collapsed building, he is faced with a choice: Denise looks back at him, already safe outside, as Remy yells for help, trapped in a rushing current of water below. Stuart chooses to dive into the water for Remy, to remain faithful to his public obligation, abandoning Denise (and the promise of a life of enjoyment, a life without Remy). This decision costs Stuart not only his enjoyment, but also his life. By highlighting his willingness to give his life for the sake of an obligation, rather than choosing the path of enjoyment, the film reveals his investment in his duty to the public world. Stuart's risking of his life and his willingness to sacrifice himself sustain the public world as an inhabitable place.

The traditional disaster film, such as *Earthquake*, is able to depict a viable public world because it resurrects the figure of paternal authority, the symbolic Father. Stuart is just such a figure, despite the temptation toward enjoyment that he endures. Earlier in the film, we see Stuart inherit the role of the father from his father-in-law, Sam Royce (Lorne Greene), and we see the importance of this role. Stuart works for the engineering company that Sam runs, and when the earthquake strikes, Sam and his staff are stuck atop a skyscraper without a means to get down. They try to climb down, but there is a two-story gap in the stairs, a gap that sends two people falling to their deaths. This gap, just like the gap in the social order itself, allows us to see the function of the father in full flower. Undeterred by the gap, Sam uses a fire hose and an office chair to lower his staff down to safety (where Stuart is waiting to help). The father here fills in the gap, which is, as Lacan insists, his function. Sam's efforts at saving the members of his staff end up costing him his life, but this sacrifice sustains the public world, covering over the gap that would threaten it. After this point in the film, Stuart takes over the role of the father from his father-in-law, and he then begins to place the public good over his own private enjoyment. *Earthquake* sustains the public world, but it can only do so by erecting figures of strong paternal authority, willing to sacrifice their private enjoyment in the name of public obligation. In this sense, the film is a work of nostalgia, harkening back to the society of prohibition and its traditional paternal authority.

Even though it was made in 1997, Mick Jackson's *Volcano* contains all of the elements of the typical disaster film of the 1970s, like *Earthquake*. It

begins by focusing on several different individuals whose disparate lives will be, we can assume, linked by the incipient disaster. We see, for instance, geologist Dr. Amy Barnes (Anne Heche), chief of emergency management Mike Roark (Tommy Lee Jones), and Dr. Jaye Calder (Jacqueline Kim), along with several minor characters. As the disaster strikes, the lives of these characters become intertwined: the disaster makes evident a public world that unites not just the main characters, but all the people of Los Angeles. The disaster even has the effect of healing racial strife. During the fight against the spreading lava, a white police officer who had earlier harassed an African American man orders the fire chief to send fire trucks to the (previously neglected) African American neighborhood. Immediately prior to this, the victim of the officer's harassment assisted the police in their effort to build a dam against the lava flow. Both of these developments illustrate the effect of the volcano on inter-subjective relations. Even the gap between the most virulent racist and the most outspoken critic of racism cannot resist, it seems, the healing power of the disaster. The disaster inaugurates this kind of interracial healing precisely because it makes evident the bond that exists within the social order, the public world that unites everyone. This public world can only exist today, in the society of enjoyment, through the aid of a disaster that thrusts everyone out of their private worlds.

Despite being foregrounded in the film, interracial healing is but the beginning of the indication of the public world in *Volcano*. The villain of the film, Norman Calder (John Corbett), is villainous because of his insistence that the public is unimportant, that one has no responsibility to it. Throughout the film, he tries to convince his wife, Dr. Jaye Calder, to leave the hospital (where she is treating the victims of the volcano), because she should be looking out for her private interests, not patients who have no connection to her. He pleads, "These people are strangers, Jaye. Are you going to die for them? . . . Answer me!" Busy attending to these "strangers," Jaye never looks up but simply says, "I am answering you." Here, Jaye explicitly rejects her husband's demand that she turn away from a public obligation and retreat into the security of her private world. Jaye's rejection is later mirrored by the film itself. In order to divert the lava flow away from the hospital and toward the ocean, Mike, the chief of emergency management in the city, has a new building knocked down to create a dam—a skyscraper that Norman Calder has just built. This private building—and the advocate of privacy who built it—must be knocked down for the sake of the public welfare.

By depicting this sacrifice of privacy as the only possible means for saving the public world, *Volcano* makes clear where its sympathies lie. After the disaster has been thwarted, the film shows this neutral public world in full flower. Ed Fox (Keith David), a police officer, picks up a stranded boy, Kevin (Marcell Thedford), and takes him to look for his mother. Fox says to the boy,

“Let’s go find your mom. What does she look like?” Kevin starts to answer—“She looks like . . .”—but as he looks out among the throng of people, everyone looks the same, because they are completely covered by ash. Kevin concludes, “Look at their faces. They all look the same.” The ash creates a kind of metaphorical manifestation of the public world, where all private differences evaporate, because it renders all the markers of difference—even race or gender—indistinct. This metaphorical public world doesn’t last long—a rain ensues that washes the ash away, allowing everyone to return to their private identities—but nonetheless the neutrality and equality of the public world did, however momentarily, manifest itself. The appearance of the public world here is the culmination of the film; in fact, we might even risk the hypothesis that all of the destruction in the film prior to this scene only existed insofar as it was necessary to bring about a fully realized public world. The public world is, in this sense, the constant motif of the disaster film and its *raison d’être*. The traditional disaster film longs nostalgically for the social bond that characterized the society of prohibition—as the presence of the strong paternal authorities, Stuart Graff and Mike Roark, in *Earthquake* and *Volcano* makes clear—and it thus indicates the extent to which this bond no longer exists in the society of enjoyment.

#### HOBBS TODAY

In addition to witnessing the continuation of the traditional disaster film with *Volcano*, the late 1990s also saw the birth of a new kind of disaster film, a disaster film apropos of the universalized privacy one finds in the society of enjoyment rather than a work of nostalgia for an earlier epoch. At first glance, however, *The Trigger Effect* (David Koepp, 1996) seems to be just another entry in the genre. Like *Earthquake* and *Volcano*, *Trigger Effect* explores the ramifications of a cataclysmic event on the social order and on the interrelations between the people caught in the aftermath of the event. One difference, however, becomes evident very quickly. In the case of *Trigger Effect*, rather than a natural disaster, it is an area-wide power outage that occasions the primary disruption of everyday life in the film. Thus, *Trigger Effect* seems to signal a change in the very conception of disaster: “natural” disaster is no longer something that stems only from nature; now, technology itself is capable of producing a disaster that is indistinguishable from the “natural” variety. This reconception of the natural disaster is, however, but the beginning of the change that *Trigger Effect* brings to the genre. In both *Earthquake* and *Volcano*, disaster disrupts social life but also brings out what lies dormant in social life: an underlying sense of a public world, of people united together toward a common goal. In the face of disaster, as we have seen, people discover the

bonds that are “really” there in the society—the public world—and also manage to form new bonds—to realize the public world in a way that was hitherto only fantasized. In *Trigger Effect*, no such connections emerge; instead, we discover a Hobbesian world—a terrifying world where, in the absence of a strong central authority, everyone seems to be at war with everyone else.

*Trigger Effect* depicts the effects of the power outage through its focus on the lives of a young suburban couple, Matthew (Kyle MacLachlan) and Annie (Elizabeth Shue). This narrow focus provides an indication of a turn to the private world, away from the public one. Unlike traditional disaster films, which typically focus on many groups of characters, *Trigger Effect* deals only with an isolated couple, their young child, and those with whom they interact. The film takes pains not to provide shots of the city as a whole or of other neighborhoods, outside of Matthew and Annie’s small subdivision. This has the effect of making it seem as if no world exists beyond their private one, which is precisely the effect that the breakdown of the public world has on us. Through the sense of isolation developed in the *mise-en-scène* of *Trigger Effect*, we experience the privatized nature of the society of enjoyment.

Soon after the power outage, Matthew arms himself with a shotgun and resorts to stealing to “protect” his family. As Annie begins to feel alienated from Matthew because of these changes in his character, her desire for Joe (Dermot Mulroney), a family friend, starts to become apparent. After a neighbor shoots and kills a young boy who had broken into Matthew and Annie’s house, they decide to leave town with Joe and their infant daughter Sarah. On the road, however, they find only increased hostility: a man holds them up when they stop to see if an abandoned car has any gas left in it. This man shoots Joe, and then leaves in their car, forcing Matthew to go to a nearby house to try to procure a car. In the climactic scene of the film, Matthew and the owner of the car face each other with guns drawn, at which point Matthew puts down his gun, asking the other man to trust him. The man then agrees to drive Joe to the hospital. The film then ends with a concluding shot of Matthew and Annie back at their home, with power restored, creating the sense that everything now is as it was prior to the outage.

The power outage—the fundamental event of the film—occasions a “time,” as Hobbes puts it, when “men live without a common *Power* to keep them all in awe.”<sup>20</sup> In the traditional disaster film, the disaster makes the bonds between people more evident; here, it causes them to disintegrate. After the power outage, all the rules that govern social interaction start to break down: a law-abiding citizen steals from a pharmacy, suburbanites kill to defend their property, and an encounter on the highway comes to resemble a shootout from an old Western. The lawlessness that ensues after the power outage appears to suggest that beneath the thin veneer of civilization lurks widespread aggression and brutality, waiting for an opportunity to emerge

when social controls are relaxed or collapse. Seen in this light, the film would be a conservative plea—much like Hobbes's own in *Leviathan*—for the maintenance of strict social authority. Without a strong authority to check aggression, the film seems to suggest, we will fall back into a state of nature, a war of all against all. Such an understanding of *Trigger Effect*, however, necessarily elides what happens prior to the power outage.

From the opening frame, this film shows us a world where every public encounter between people feels like a collision, a world without a symbolic bond or a public sphere to mediate human interaction. The fact that this kind of world is present even before the power outage suggests that the power outage itself doesn't change anything; at most, it makes explicit what was implicit in the prior interactions. The power outage actually functions as a fetish, allowing viewers simultaneously to acknowledge and to disavow the reality of the film's world. This is why the key to *Trigger Effect* lies in its first ten minutes—the time prior to the power outage—in which we experience the raw, violent encounters that characterize contemporary experience.

The world of those first ten minutes is a world almost completely devoid of a symbolic bond capable of facilitating intersubjective contact. It depicts life in a large city, where we would expect to see public interaction and other indications of a symbolic bond.<sup>21</sup> The city has traditionally been the public space in which such a symbolic bond might be realized. Once thoroughly privatized and stripped of its publicness, however, the city becomes a war zone, a place in which various private interests conflict. As such, the city in *Trigger Effect* no longer facilitates the formation of a public; instead, it has become the site at which private interests violently collide with each other. This privatization of the public world makes public interaction impossible and social encounters unbearable.

“Symbolic exchange,” according to Lacan, “is what links human beings to each other.”<sup>22</sup> The public world is a manifestation of the symbolic bond, providing a ground through which intersubjective contact is possible. Without the mediation of the public world, every intersubjective encounter is necessarily violent—an experience of two private worlds with no common ground colliding with each other. This is what we see at work again and again in *Trigger Effect*. In the film, subjects do not acknowledge the existence of a public world, and hence they have no means other than collision of interacting with the other. A world predominated by privacy and bereft of publicness—the world depicted in *Trigger Effect*—is a world that “consists not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.”<sup>23</sup> In this world, people live in “continual fear,” a fear that makes their lives “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” in Hobbes's famous terms.<sup>24</sup> This world is not a “natural” world lurking beneath civilization, but the very nature of “civilization” itself when enjoyment becomes a social duty.

## FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHT TO ENJOY

Without even the ideal of a neutral public world in the society of enjoyment, all interactions verge on being violent collisions between disparate private worlds. *Trigger Effect* begins with wolves devouring a carcass just on the outskirts of the city—a clear prelude to the human behavior that will follow.<sup>25</sup> The next scene, which occurs outside a movie theater, reveals the exact nature of human interaction in this world. Here we witness the first encounter between two people in the film, and this encounter takes the form of a literal collision. We see a sharply dressed German man (Edhem Barker) walking with his head down—a posture indicative of his immersion in a private world, despite the fact that he is walking in a public place. A teenager (Tyronne Tann) trips in front of him, spilling his Coke all over the man. This seemingly innocent accident has great significance, because it shows that intersubjective contact is not running smoothly. After the accident, the friction present is exacerbated by the language barrier between the two individuals. The teenager apologizes, but the German man responds in German, which the teenager interprets as hostility. The language barrier works here as an obvious metaphor for the lack of symbolic mediation between the two. They literally have no words that they can say to smooth over the violence of their interaction. The teenager answers back with increasing agitation, “I don’t understand what you’re saying, man.” They continue walking away from each other, both frustrated by the rudeness of the other, both seeing the other only as a threat to their own private enjoyment. Before the collision, each of them was walking with his head down, immersed in his own private world. From the perspective of this private world, every person one encounters is not just another person, but a lethal threat to the private enjoyment that this world offers.

In the absence of a public world in the society of enjoyment, I feel as if everyone else has access to a secret enjoyment that I lack. I am surrounded by images of enjoyment without experiencing enjoyment myself. In this situation, it seems as if the other is not lacking, not subject to castration. Thus, if I fail to experience enjoyment myself—if I experience a sense of lack—I inevitably feel like I am, to borrow the terms of chapter 5, “playing the sap” and allowing the other to enjoy at my expense. In this way, the encounter with the other necessarily becomes a proving ground where the subject can assert her/his noncastration. This becomes especially evident in the film’s male characters.<sup>26</sup> All of them feel compelled to prove that no one has gotten the better of them, that no one has stolen their enjoyment or obtained enjoyment at their expense. To allow one’s enjoyment to be taken offers evidence that one is not a “real man” capable of sustaining and defending his enjoyment. The first indication of this dynamic occurs just after the spilling of the Coke in the film’s opening sequence. The collisions don’t end with the spilling of the

Coke. Obsessed with trying to wipe off his stained shirt and coat, the German man runs into the shoulder of a young woman walking in the other direction. He then collides with another woman who is walking with her boyfriend. The boyfriend immediately steps up to defend *his* woman, in order to leave no doubts about the sanctity of his enjoyment. He says to the German man, "Hey, hey, you don't say 'excuse me.'" And even though the man has walked away, the boyfriend continues to belabor the event, obviously feeling as if he hasn't defended himself fully enough. He tells his girlfriend, "Did you see that? I can't believe what he did *to me*. [. . .] I can't believe what he just did *to me*." Even though seemingly nothing happened to the boyfriend himself, he is obsessed about the wrong done to him. In simply walking away, the other man deprived the boyfriend of an opportunity to display his noncastration, which is why he talks about how the man has wronged him, not his girlfriend. For the subject in the society of enjoyment, such an opportunity is precious because displaying one's noncastration "proves" that one really enjoys completely, like the anal father himself.

Inside the movie theater (where the couple from the previous incident has entered), Matthew and Annie are sitting and watching a movie. In the row behind them, a man begins complaining loudly to his friend about someone cutting in front of him in the snack line. The act of talking in a movie theater exemplifies the turn to a society of enjoyment, insofar as it displays one's private enjoyment at the same time that it intrudes upon everyone else's. It evinces the absence of the public world in the clearest terms. The talking clearly has an effect upon Matthew's enjoyment. He whispers to Annie, "They have to talk about this right now? It can't wait?" After the talking continues for a bit longer, Matthew feels that he must assert himself. Rather than just say something to the men, however, Matthew tells Annie, "I got to say something." The fact that he tells Annie he has to say something before he does it suggests the importance the event has acquired in his mind.<sup>27</sup> The decision to turn around and say something acquires a wildly inflated importance because, for Matthew, it is a test of his relationship to castration. In his mind, the chattering men are publicly revealing his castration insofar as he simply allows them to interrupt his—and, more importantly, *his* wife's—viewing of the movie (that is, their enjoyment) without reproving them. He feels that he must step up and assert the prerogatives of his own enjoyment. Annie even pushes him in this direction, saying "you should" after he professes his intent to confront the men behind them. Matthew, however, falters, and it falls to Annie to turn to the men and compel them to be quiet. First, she simply gives them a look, and after this fails, she says, "shhhh," to which one of the men responds, "Hey, fuck you. You want to fucking shut the fuck up bitch. You better turn your narrow ass around and watch the mother fucking movie." This is precisely the response that Matthew feared and the reason why he hesitated to confront the men himself.

In this exchange, we see once again the violence of an encounter without a public world, but, in addition, we also see the stakes involved in every such encounter. Every encounter is an opportunity for subjects to prove that they have “it”—that they really hold the secret of enjoyment.

Matthew has no retort to the verbal assault on Annie—and thereby fails to prove himself in this encounter. Hence, he must retreat from the other in order to avoid simply wallowing in his humiliation. He asks Annie, “Do you want to move? Come on, let’s move.” Moving into different seats seems to put an end to the problem. They watch the rest of the movie without incident, but outside the theater, Matthew sees the men and feels it necessary to subtly direct Annie away from them. And in the parking garage, he continues to obsess about the encounter. Annie, however, wants to let it drop, because she realizes the light it casts upon Matthew, revealing his castration. Their exchange illustrates the importance of Matthew’s lack of action for both of them:

MATTHEW: You think I should have said something?

ANNIE: What?

MATTHEW: Should I go back in there? They’re probably gone by now.

ANNIE: You know, I’m almost certain we’re on [parking level] three.

Matthew can’t stop thinking about the incident because it showed him so clearly what he didn’t have, which is precisely why Annie doesn’t want to think of it at all. The proliferation of enjoyment within the social order has transformed the most insignificant encounter into a proving ground where one attempts to establish oneself as an enjoying subject, as noncastrated.

The fact that the characters in *Trigger Effect* and subjects in the society of enjoyment feel compelled to *display* their noncastration indicates that their private worlds and private enjoyment is not as private as they imagine. If the subject truly eschews the public world for a private one, then she/he would have no desire to make a show of her/his ability to enjoy. The widespread displays of private enjoyment in the society of enjoyment testify to the failure of the contemporary retreat into privacy. We abandon the public world, and yet we continue to demand that the big Other acknowledge us as enjoying subjects. Here the fundamental contradiction of the society of enjoyment becomes apparent: in this society, subjects depend on the public world that they reject to supply the recognition that they demand. The society of enjoyment strips us of the protections that the public world provides while leaving us still dependent on it as the source for recognition.

Many of the encounters that populate *Trigger Effect* have the added element of racism to feed the tensions that stem from the absence of a public world. Because the men seated behind them in the theater are African Amer-

ican and because Matthew and Annie are white, it is clear—though it never becomes explicit in the film—that Matthew feels even more pressure to assert his noncastration than if the men were white. Matthew feels this pressure because, as his actions clearly show, when he sees the two men, he sees their enjoyment. The tremendous importance that Matthew attributes to this encounter suggests that he assumes the two men have a privileged relationship to enjoyment. Because he is confronting African American men, Matthew undoubtedly figures that he is at an enjoyment disadvantage. Within the prevailing white fantasy, the African American male occupies the position of someone who has not succumbed to the sacrifice of enjoyment, who has an unmediated access to sexual enjoyment. This sexualization of the African American is, of course, the apogee of white racism, as it allows the white to conceive of himself as “above” this sexuality and at the same time to enjoy it through the fantasy. Nonetheless, this fantasy clearly informs Matthew’s encounter in the theater, causing an increased trepidation on his part, as he fears that his own lack of enjoyment, his own castration, will become obvious. The underlying racial dynamic thus has the effect of raising the stakes in the struggle for enjoyment that underlies every interaction within the society of enjoyment. But racism only exacerbates the prevailing sense that the other is enjoying in our stead.

This feeling vis-à-vis the other, created by the predominance of privacy, manifests itself in all the security devices present in the film and in the society of enjoyment. Security—securing one’s private enjoyment—becomes the predominate way of interacting with the public. When Matthew and Annie come home from the movie theater and pull in their driveway, we see right away an effect of their home security system—a spotlight, triggered by the motion of their car, lights the front of the home. After they walk inside, the house alarm begins to beep until Matthew disengages it. Home security here is an indication that everything outside represents a danger to the harmony of the private world within the walls of the house. It is a sign that the house is closed off to the public world. The widespread proliferation of security systems today indicates most forcefully our entrance into the society of enjoyment. In the act of installing a security system, I proclaim an insistence upon my private enjoyment to the exclusion of all else. In doing so, I establish the other as a threat to that enjoyment; I put the other, a priori, into the position of the criminal. That is, the mere existence of the security system attests to the fact that I view the other as a threatening other, as someone out to steal what is rightfully mine.<sup>28</sup> There is something immediately slanderous to the other in the mere existence of an alarm. This becomes most clearly evident in the recent phenomenon in car alarms of the “talking alarm.” This type of alarm admonishes anyone who strays too close to the car, proclaiming (in so many words), “Please step away from the car—you

have come too close.” Security systems, as the talking car alarm demonstrates, establish a firm barrier around my private enjoyment.

The problem with this barrier is not just that it has a deleterious effect on the public world, though this is certainly the case. The main problem is that the security system fails completely at its central task—the protection of private enjoyment. Because it establishes the other as a threatening other, the security system can produce a threat where none had heretofore existed. For instance, when I hear the talking car alarm, which assumes that I represent a threat to the car, I may decide to actually become that threat and to damage the car—even if, prior to hearing the alarm, I had no such intention—since I am already assumed to be a threat anyway. If I am assumed guilty, I may figure that I might as well actually *be* guilty, which means that rather than protecting the car, the talking alarm has actually endangered it further. But even this is not the most significant problem. The primary error behind security systems is the idea—an idea which informs all of them—that enjoyment can be protected. To protect my things so that only I can enjoy them is to thwart my enjoyment of them because the act of protection necessarily protects these things from me as well as from the other. There must be a fragility to our enjoyment. The precariousness of our relation to what we enjoy is the source of our enjoyment; we enjoy the precariousness itself. To enjoy is to forget about preserving and conserving, and hence the security system—which has as its essential function preserving and conserving—represents a barrier to any enjoyment. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar VII*, “what is meant by defending one’s goods is one and the same thing as forbidding oneself from enjoying them.”<sup>29</sup> The more I try to protect my things in order to enjoy them, the less I am able to actually enjoy them. Hence, security systems represent a double loss: they have the effect of destroying the public world, *and* they don’t, despite their promises, do anything to protect private enjoyment. Thus, the proliferation of security systems attests to the lack of actual enjoyment in the society that commands it. We have protected our enjoyment so successfully that we have entirely lost it.

In addition to its emphasis on home security, *Trigger Effect* also depicts the insistence on privacy in other ways. Later on in the film, when the neighbors hold a conference concerning how they should respond to the power outage, some present lament their decision, before the outage, not to gate their street. Another proposes that they now park a car at the end of their street to act as a gate during the outage, but, of course, no one is all that eager to volunteer a car for this duty. They want to establish a “gated community.” The driving force behind the idea of a gated community is that everyone else is out to steal one’s private enjoyment, and hence, we need a gate in order to protect ours. When this is the predominant psychic disposition, one has no public world and no community. The very idea of a “gated community” is an oxy-

moronic attempt to reconcile the desire for a symbolic community with demand for privacy. It fails, however, to reconcile public and private in actuality. Precisely because the community only exists behind a gate, it fails to become a community, which is necessarily public and open. We see firsthand evidence of this failure in the attempt of the neighbors to get together and map out a strategy for dealing with the power outage. The public meeting quickly descends into a verbal war between competing factions, prompting Annie to walk out in frustration. A “gated community” necessarily produces this frustration because of its attempt to form a miniature public world at the same time that it sets itself up in antithesis to the public world.

#### CHOOSING BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

The private world is the world of the ego. In the society of enjoyment, the ego, like one’s house, is a fortress to be defended and enhanced, if possible. But the more desperately the ego tries to defend and promote itself, the more it feels itself under attack. The more security devices we install in our house, the more unsafe and threatened we feel. This is the inescapable logic of the ego. It is always looking to defend or expand its territory and realizes that every other ego it encounters is trying to do the same. As Teresa Brennan puts it, “the ego fears that the other will do to it as it does to the other.”<sup>30</sup> No matter how much space there is, it isn’t enough, because the very existence of the other threatens the security of the ego. For the ego, no space is public or shared. This is why the characters in the film, acting as almost pure ego, feel that they must zealously guard the private space they occupy. This leads Matthew, despite his avowed opposition to guns, to purchase a shotgun as the outage begins to linger on. It also leads to Matthew and Annie’s neighbor shooting a young man who had tried to steal from Matthew and Annie. But most importantly, it leads to the flight of Joe, Matthew, Annie, and their daughter Sarah from the city. The city means spatial restrictions and inevitable interaction with others, which is why they flee.<sup>31</sup> They flee seeking more space—a space where there are fewer people. This movement toward open space is characteristic of the ego, as Lacan points out. He says, “already in the *Lebensraum* (‘living space’) in which human competition is becoming keener, an observer of our species from outer space would conclude we possess needs to escape with very odd results.”<sup>32</sup> The ego, however, can never escape far enough and always remains trapped within its own walls. The great barrier in the society of enjoyment is not the absence of additional space but the very walls of the subject’s own ego—its own security system. One only enjoys by breaking down this security and the profound sense of insecurity it fosters. The ending of *Trigger Effect* points toward this possibility for the subject in the society of enjoyment.

Though *Trigger Effect* illustrates the suffocating privacy and absence of a public world symptomatic of the society of enjoyment, it does also suggest that this society produces the possibility of a new kind of public bond. Unlike the traditional disaster film that envisions a public world that the mediation of a paternal figure authorizes, the conclusion of *Trigger Effect* depicts a public bond established without such a figure. Here, the public bond has its foundation in the lack that subjects share rather than the symbolic authority that one subject has. After Matthew, Annie, Joe, and Sarah have fled the city and after Joe has been shot, Matthew walks back to the nearest house, in which Raymond (Richard T. Jones), one of the men from the confrontation at the movie theater, happens to reside. Raymond refuses to let Matthew borrow his car to take Joe to the hospital, so Matthew breaks in and takes Raymond's car keys, holding Raymond off at gunpoint. However, Raymond also has a gun, and they end up facing each other in a standoff, each pointing his gun at the other. Matthew breaks the stalemate by laying his gun down, giving up his instrument of private enjoyment. This gesture makes possible a bond between the two men:

MATTHEW: I'm taking your car. I'm going to bring it back.

RAYMOND: Why the fuck should I trust you?

MATTHEW [laying down his gun]: Because I'm going to trust you.

Raymond allows Matthew to walk out to the car, and then, moments later, he comes out himself, with his daughter, and offers to drive Matthew. The bond they form here occurs not through the mediation of a paternal authority but through the recognition of a shared absence, a shared failure: they both realize that no one has "it."

It is only when Matthew gives up his own self-protection—completely ceding himself to the enjoyment of the other—that this recognition and this connection between the two can occur. So long as Matthew feels as if he must guard against becoming the object of the other's enjoyment he cannot engage the other nonviolently. Here, we can see clearly the ramifications of the difference between *Trigger Effect* and similar films such as *Earthquake* and *Volcano*. The latter films manage to sustain a sense of a public world, but they do so only through the presence of the Law of the Father, embodied, respectively, by Stuart Graff (Charlton Heston) and Mike Roark (Tommy Lee Jones)—both figures of extreme paternal authority. The strong presence of these characters is, in each case, the glue that holds the public together. In this sense, both *Earthquake* and *Volcano* are films of nostalgia, calling for a return to the symbolic Father and his Law. *Trigger Effect* is a fundamentally different kind of film. It refuses this nostalgia and opens itself to the possibility of a public world without the Father's mediation. The film suggests the possibility of

forming a symbolic bond around a lack, rather than around the authority of the Father. The difficulty with such a bond is that it would lack the clear limits and delineated borders that the Father's authority provides. It would be a bond, in other words, that no authority authorized—thus its tenuousness. This is the kind of public world that only becomes possible with the turn away from prohibition and its emphasis on paternal authority.

*Trigger Effect*, then, is a plea for the disconnection of car alarms, home security devices, and all the things that insulate us from encounters with the other. Even though we erect these defenses in response to the threats of a world increasingly dominated by privacy, what we fail to see is the way our response creates the world it is responding to. We look out from behind barricades and see a world in which there is no public bond, all the while failing to recognize that it is our barricades that destroy it. Most subjects in the society of enjoyment do not take the path that Matthew takes at the end of *Trigger Effect*. His gesture of abandoning security and opening himself to the other's enjoyment involves a sacrifice of the ego and its imaginary enjoyment that few are able to make.

In the society of enjoyment, the absence of the idea of a neutral public world leaves us trapped within the shell of the ego, intent on safeguarding our private enjoyment. We become isolated monads, without even windows allowing us access to the larger world.<sup>33</sup> From the perspective of this isolation, it seems almost inevitable that we should view the other with suspicion and even hostility. Thus, just as the society of enjoyment deprives us of a public world, it also leads to widespread incivility and aggressiveness. The idea of a public world provides support for civil interaction, offering a neutral ground for this interaction. In its absence, civility increasingly ceases to be a viable mode of interaction. For subjects invested in a society of commanded enjoyment, an ethos of zealously defending and asserting one's private enjoyment becomes the prevalent "moral" philosophy.

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## Chapter Nine

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# EXPLOSIONS OF INCIVILITY, AGGRESSIVENESS, AND VIOLENCE

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### ENJOYABLE NEIGHBORS

Social interactions in the society of enjoyment necessarily involve an encounter with the other's private enjoyment. Whereas within the society of prohibition subjects hid their enjoyment, fearful of violating the prohibition and enduring some form of censure, today the situation has become completely reversed: subjects feel guilty not for exposing their enjoyment publicly, but for failing to do so. To fail to enjoy publicly is to ostracize oneself, to miss out on what everyone else is accessing. As a result, we are continually confronted with the image of the enjoying other—a confrontation that produces the incivility and aggressiveness symptomatic of the society of enjoyment. Surrounded by these images of enjoyment, the subject experiences the contradiction of being enjoined to enjoy itself while feeling its own lack of enjoyment in contrast with the other.<sup>1</sup> This is why the image of the enjoying other triggers the reactions of incivility and aggressiveness, which are symptomatic in the society of enjoyment. As Lacan says in *Seminar XI*, "Such is true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *objet a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction."<sup>2</sup> In the wake of the command to enjoy, the subject often experiences this "true envy." If the other appears to have the *objet petit a*, the secret of

enjoyment that rightfully belongs to the subject—and if the other publicly parades this *objet petit a*—then the subject feels no duty to civility.

The absence of civility in the society of enjoyment indicates the extent to which the subject in this society remains lacking. That is to say, the contemporary subject becomes uncivil because she/he continues to be haunted by her/his own lack of enjoyment. If we were really enjoying ourselves today, we would not develop aggressiveness in response to the other's enjoyment and believe that this enjoyment is rightfully ours. Instead, content with our own enjoyment, we would adopt an attitude of indifference toward that of the other. When I am really enjoying, I do not envy the enjoyment of the other, as the uncivil and aggressive subject in the society of enjoyment does. Incivility and aggressiveness are symptomatic of the society of enjoyment because its subjects are constitutively unable to enjoy themselves and yet constantly feel as if enjoyment is their right.

Many social commentators have recently tackled the subject of rising incivility and aggressiveness, but none has linked this phenomenon to the disappearance of prohibition as directly as popular cultural critic Stephen Carter. Carter, best known for *The Culture of Disbelief*, sees incivility as the product of our refusal of individual sacrifice for the sake of the society as a whole—that is, to translate it into our terms, as the result of a turn away from the prohibition of enjoyment. In his treatise *Civility*, he claims, “Civility is possible only if members of a community bind themselves to obey a set of rules of behavior not because the law requires it but because they understand the virtue of sacrificing their own desires—their own freedom to choose—for the good of the larger community of which they are a part.”<sup>3</sup> As subjects refuse this sacrifice—or the social order no longer explicitly demands it—civility increasingly transforms into incivility. We become reluctant to set aside our own enjoyment and instead insist on it. This affects the way that we drive, walk, shop, talk, and generally interact with other subjects.

The experience of driving tends inherently to produce a sense of isolation. As Gary Cross points out, when they became widely available, cars added to a process of privatization. He notes, “the car culture produced a plethora of new privatized pleasures, enjoyed by millions.”<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of the car, others exist in another world, a world wholly apart from oneself.<sup>5</sup> Carter notes the vast difference between traveling by train (the primary mode of transportation in the later nineteenth century) and traveling by car. On the train, one must accommodate oneself to fellow passengers, and, even more importantly, one experiences others as fellow passengers in the first place. Everyone exists, albeit temporarily, in the same social world. The culture of the car represents a radical contrast. The car isolates the driver from others: others are competing drivers rather than fellow passengers. With the emergence of the society of enjoyment, this attitude has intensified—moving

beyond the sense of antagonism produced by the isolation of the car itself. In the form of drivers tailgating, playing loud radios, talking on cell phones, and driving recklessly, we confront the enjoying other.

Carter rightly sees this encounter with enjoyment manifesting itself most conspicuously in the noise level of contemporary American society. We live amid blaring radios, ringing cell phones, and screaming car alarms. As he points out, "The sound, the noise, the sheer unrelenting *loudness* of our world combine to make civility difficult to achieve. The challenge of contemporary life is not so much that we are busy as that we are blasted around the clock with the sounds of our society: raucous music, insistent telephones, cynical newscasts, angry traffic" (287, Carter's emphasis). All of these noises testify to the presence of enjoyment—a refusal of constraint. Much more than what we see, what we hear indicates enjoyment. While we can close our eyes to sights, we cannot close our ears to sounds. The noise of the cell phone has the ability to break into any public space, and this intrusion indicates a site of private enjoyment. The person talking in a public place on a cell phone is not only engaging in a private conversation in public, but she/he is also displaying this private moment by speaking loudly enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. This noise indicates not simply private enjoyment gone awry, but the public staging of this private enjoyment. Private enjoyment itself does not necessarily incite aggressiveness, but the public staging of it—which is the contemporary practice—often does. The open, public display of private enjoyment forces others to become aware of their failure to enjoy, and this is the fundamental dynamic of the incivility that characterizes the society of enjoyment.

#### SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Though the decline of the prohibition of enjoyment—and the corresponding refusal to sacrifice private enjoyment—that produces incivility is the primary target of *Civility*, the book inadvertently testifies to the predominance of the society of enjoyment through its underlying investment in the object of its critique. Despite his diatribe against the widespread insistence on private enjoyment, Carter betrays his own investment in private enjoyment through the personal revelations that he makes during the course of his argument, especially his insistence on keeping his children beyond the reach of public education. The prevalence of sex education in public schools, he argues, gives him the right to remove his children from that domain and its endorsement of immoral behavior. He says, "the fact that some young people might feel that birth control information or condom distribution in the schools signals state approval of sexual activity seems not sufficiently weighty for the public schools

to decide not to do it. (Which is another reason my wife and I would rather not, thank you, send the state our children to educate)” (290). This parenthetical sentence represents the one point in his work that Carter’s tone becomes uncivil and even indignant. Such a moment of incivility is indicative of the crucial position that the relationship between the state and the family occupies within Carter’s discussion of civility. When it comes to the state usurping the rights of the family, he takes a position firmly on the side of the family, arguing that the family has a structural priority relative to the state. On this point, Carter is very much in keeping with the predominate attitude in the contemporary society of enjoyment—and with that society’s tendency toward incivility.<sup>6</sup>

One’s attitude toward the state and its authority has a direct bearing on one’s relationship to civility, even if this link is not immediately apparent. Insisting on the rights of the family over the authority of the state places Carter in the camp of the destroyers of civility, despite an entire book devoted to fighting this position. In every other area, he advocates sacrifice of private enjoyment for the public good, but he refuses to extend this idea of sacrifice to the family’s relationship with the state. This is not simply a minor failing within Carter’s overall argument. Because the state is the fundamental site of the prohibition of enjoyment, this blind spot actually undermines the entire call for renewed civility. If civility is disappearing in the society of enjoyment, one of the most significant indications of its disappearance is widespread hostility to the state—a hostility that Carter fully shares. Hence, reestablishing civility represents a far more difficult project than Carter lets on. The current climate of incivility is symptomatic of the society of enjoyment as a whole, and thus we cannot fight a battle against it in isolation. That said, it should not be surprising that the call for civility runs aground over the question of the state’s authority over private lives. The state demands the sacrifice of particularity for the sake of its universality—or it demands that subjects recognize their particularity through its universality—and this universality provides the basis for civility within the social order. But in the society of enjoyment, the state becomes anathema precisely because of this demand for sacrifice. Subjects increasingly view the state and its universality solely as an impediment to private enjoyment, which leads them to reject the state’s authority and value their own particular interests—or family—above the state.

Valuing the particularity of the family over the universality of the state is natural enough. We experience the family more immediately and earlier than we experience the state. However, this type of valuation represents a failure to see the constitutive role that the state plays in the family and in the individual. The state provides the universality that supports all particular identity, which is why the state has priority relative to the family. As Hegel points out in the *Philosophy of Right*, the state is not the result of particular families coming together;

instead, it is the basis for the very emergence of the family. He says, “the state as such is not so much the result as the beginning. It is within the state that the family is first developed into civil society, and it is the Idea of the state itself which disrupts itself into these two moments.”<sup>7</sup> That is, the family results from the self-division of the state; the state does not result from the accumulation of families. Without the state as a background, the family would have nothing to ensure its integrity and security. The family exists as a family because the state recognizes both it and other families—and grounds their interrelations. Consequently, for Hegel, “There is nothing that must not be given up for the sake of [the state], whereby one’s particular interest is protected and furthered.”<sup>8</sup> As the basis for the identity of the family, the state has the right to demand anything of the family—including placing its children in a public education with which they have moral objections. This authority of the state—its ability to require sacrifice—provides the underpinning of civility. Hence, in rejecting this prerogative of the state, Carter derails the argument for civility at its most crucial point. When it comes to the relationship between subjects and the state, *Civility* becomes a fundamentally uncivil treatise, thereby ironically testifying to the fundamental incivility of the society of commanded enjoyment.<sup>9</sup>

What drives contemporary incivility is the sense that everyone the subject encounters is a potential thief of her/his enjoyment. This is true of the state as well. Rather than see the state as the guarantor of mutual sacrifice—and thus as a force for the prohibition of enjoyment—subjects increasingly view it as a repository of enjoyment. While no period in history has been free of feelings of hostility toward the state, these feelings become exacerbated in the society of enjoyment because the state seems not only to embody the greatest threat to our enjoyment but also to be a source of enjoyment. Thus, contemporary subjects tend to see the state as competitor for enjoyment. In giving money or control to the state, one is not performing a socially necessary sacrifice; instead, one is allowing the state to enjoy in one’s stead. When the state represents just another site of private enjoyment, our attitude toward it tends to be one of hostility.

This is especially evident in the path that George W. Bush took in promoting his 2001 tax cut. Bush did not simply say that the federal government should return some money to citizens now that it had a budget surplus. Instead, he took up a far more radical position. When campaigning for the tax cut, Bush told cheering crowds that he would tell the federal government, “It’s not your money,” thereby implying that the state had no fundamental right to require the payment of taxes.<sup>10</sup> With this refrain, he affirmed the prevailing view of the state in the society of enjoyment. In “taking” our tax dollars, the state robs us of our potential enjoyment—all the things we might buy—in order to spend “our” money on its own senseless enjoyment (in the form of, for instance, wasteful government programs).

Figured as a thief of enjoyment, the state merely fits into the most common role of the other in the society of enjoyment. In every encounter with the other, I encounter someone or something that seems ready to enjoy at my expense and in my stead.<sup>11</sup> Every interaction is a struggle for enjoyment. Hence, I must take precautions when entering into the social world, guarding myself against the threat that the other represents. This of course militates against civility because civility depends on not viewing the other as fundamentally threatening and on the presumption that both the subject and the other have sacrificed their enjoyment. In the society of enjoyment, civility even becomes dangerous. If I act civilly, I risk allowing the other to take my enjoyment from me and expose my lack. However, this is but the beginning of the problem. If viewing the other as a potential thief of my enjoyment has the effect of creating less civil encounters, it also has the more ominous effect of producing subjects prone to aggressiveness and violence, and we can see this tendency throughout the society of commanded enjoyment.

#### SUMMER OF STOLEN ENJOYMENT

The logic of stolen enjoyment finds a notable expression in Spike Lee's underrated *Summer of Sam* (1999), a film that explicates the relationship between the sense of stolen enjoyment and the build-up of aggressiveness that results from the subject's experience of the command to enjoy. *Summer of Sam* makes evident the symptomatic role that aggressiveness plays within our contemporary society of enjoyment. At first glance, such a claim might seem strange, given the historical nature of the film (and the way in which the film presents itself as a story of a past epoch). The film appears to be concerned with a society that has disappeared, not with the contemporary society of enjoyment. Lee grounds the film in the specific historical moment—the year 1977—that he hopes to capture: we see this through the film's emphasis on disco dancing, the constant visual references to the 1977 New York Yankees (including numerous shots of Reggie Jackson), and, most importantly, the soundtrack that distinctly connotes the late 1970s. All of these historical markers underline the film's remove from the present. Lee opts for this degree of historical specificity, however, not in order to emphasize that the experiences of the film no longer concern us, but in order to show that they do.

Like the great historical novels of the early nineteenth century, *Summer of Sam* explores the past as a way of making sense of the present. By rooting his film in 1977, Lee reveals the society of enjoyment in its incipience. We do not see the experiences of this time as those involved in them did; rather, we see these experiences as an earlier form of our own. This is why Lee stresses the logic of stolen enjoyment at almost every turn in the film. The film offers the

past as the prehistory of the present—as the prehistory of the society of enjoyment. By portraying the past in this way, Lee creates an art in the manner of the historical novelists (such as Scott, Balzac, and Tolstoy) whose achievement Georg Lukács chronicles in *The Historical Novel*. According to Lukács, “the writer would allow those tendencies which were alive and active in the past and which in historical reality have led up to the present (but whose later significance contemporaries naturally could not see) to emerge with that emphasis which they possess in objective, historical terms for the product of this past, namely, the present.”<sup>12</sup> Both Lee and the historical novelist look to the past not in order to capture the details of an actual past experience but in order to illustrate the prehistory of present experience. In *Summer of Sam*, this prehistory makes evident the link between the sense of stolen enjoyment and the development of aggressiveness.

The film details life in a predominantly Italian New York City neighborhood in the summer of 1977, during the Son of Sam’s killing spree. The killings and the investigation into them take place on the film’s periphery, but the central focus is on Vinny (John Leguizamo) and Dionna (Mira Sorvino), a young married couple; Ritchie (Adrien Brody), Vinny’s friend and a former resident of the neighborhood who has returned with the dress and manner of a British punk; and a group of neighborhood men, led by Joe T. (Michael Rispoli), who are determined to apprehend the Son of Sam themselves. As the Son of Sam killings continue over the course of the 1977 summer, Vinny’s relationship with Dionna becomes increasingly strained, Ritchie’s presence in the neighborhood becomes more problematic, and the men become more paranoid about the sanctity of their neighborhood. All the story lines of the film converge when Dionna leaves Vinny after hearing of his many infidelities. The trauma of her departure pushes Vinny to the neighborhood men, who convince him that Ritchie is the Son of Sam and that he must help them apprehend Ritchie. Then, just as the police arrest David Berkowitz, the real Son of Sam, Vinny lures Ritchie into an ambush of the neighborhood men, who almost beat him to death. This outburst of violence is the culminating event of the film. It is the denouement of each story line, and the point toward which all of the building aggressiveness in each story has been leading.

The most obvious (though perhaps least important) instance of aggressiveness and violence in the film involves David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam. Though the film begins after he has initiated his killing spree, we see that the initial engine for Berkowitz’s outbreak of violence is the incessant barking of a neighbor’s dog. The barking drives Berkowitz to madness, and he responds by throwing furniture around his apartment and repeatedly screaming for the dog to shut up. Because it continually harasses Berkowitz and confronts him with his own failure to enjoy, the dog’s barking functions for him as the interminable enjoyment of the other—an enjoyment that seems to exist in the

external world and yet remains inescapable. Even when Berkowitz kills the dog, its enjoyment continues to haunt him, and we see that this enjoyment eventually compels Berkowitz toward violence. After its death, the dog appears to him in his apartment and begins to speak, saying to Berkowitz, "I want you to go out and kill . . . kill . . . kill . . . kill." Berkowitz engages in his killing spree because he believes that it represents the only way that he can obey the commandment that the Other (as manifested in the neighbor's dog) has given him. He even proclaims, "I don't want to kill anymore, no sir, no more, but I must honor thy father" (the authority he sees embodied in the figure of the dog). Despite its seemingly transgressive nature, what leads Berkowitz to the killing spree is his attempt to obey the Other's command.

*Summer of Sam* makes clear that the violence in and surrounding the Son of Sam murders stems from the command to enjoy. Images of enjoyment dominate the film, and these images force subjects to become aware of the enjoyment they're missing, as we see in the case of Berkowitz. He describes his life as a life deprived of the enjoyment that others have: "Papa Sam keeps me locked in the attic too. I can't get out. I look out the attic window and watch the world go by. I feel like an outsider. I am on a different wavelength than everybody else." Everyone else is enjoying except Berkowitz, leaving him isolated with his own sense of lack. But violence holds out the promise of accessing this elusive enjoyment of the other. The act of killing—especially killing lovers having sex in the backseats of cars (the Son of Sam's prime target)—both eliminates the other's enjoyment and provides an enjoyment of its own. But no matter how often he kills, Berkowitz cannot escape the imperative to kill more—and thus the sense that he himself remains bereft of enjoyment. Through the figure of Berkowitz, Lee demonstrates the hopelessness implicit in the turn to aggressiveness and violence. One never escapes nor arrives at the other's enjoyment. This is the contradiction from which the aggressive subject in the society of enjoyment cannot escape.

This feeling of being on the outside of enjoyment looking in is in no way confined to the film's titular character. One could say that the other characters in the film experience the horror of the enjoying other even more than Berkowitz, as we see in the case of Vinny, the film's central character. Vinny feels torn between his investment in the idea of a pure wife and the enjoyment he derives from perverse sexual practices. To solve this contradiction, he constructs a double life, having a series of sexual liaisons with other women while maintaining a passionless sex life with Dionna. These liaisons bring Vinny tremendous guilt, but they also represent his attempt to access the enjoyment of the other that his proper married life lacks. In fact, Vinny's sense that the other has stolen the secret of his enjoyment drives him inexorably to affair after affair. When the two strands of Vinny's life come together—he and Dionna end up at a sex club one night when they are out

together—his life falls apart.<sup>13</sup> Even though Dionna only remains at the club in an effort to please Vinny, the image of her enjoying herself with another man traumatizes him.

While driving home from the sex club, Vinny accuses Dionna of enjoying too much—enjoying sex with the other men and women at the sex club more than sex with him. To Vinny's mind, Dionna's enjoyment has come at his expense. But Dionna meets Vinny's accusation with the revelation that she knows of his past infidelities. Knowing that the image of her enjoying herself with another man enrages Vinny, she describes just such an image in order to avenge herself for Vinny's betrayals. She jumps out of the car and says to Vinny, "I'm going to wait here until some soul brother comes along in his big black Cadillac. And you know, and I know, that he's got a big black dick, too.[. . .] You want to watch while I suck a big black dick in the back of a big black Cadillac?" Here, Dionna taunts Vinny with the image of what is for him the ultimate transgressive enjoyment—his wife sucking "a big black dick." At this point, confronted with this image, Vinny feels his failure to enjoy most intensely, and hence he responds with aggressiveness. He says, "Don't make me have to hurt you," and he appears ready to erupt with violence. As we saw with *Trigger Effect* in the previous chapter, we see in *Summer of Sam* that for the white man the image of the sexualized black man represents the apogee of male enjoyment. This is thus one of many instances in which the command to enjoy has the effect of exacerbating racist feelings precisely because racism is itself structured around the idea that one's enjoyment has been illegitimately taken by the other. This burst of aggressiveness doesn't end up turning directly into violence on Vinny's part, but it does eventually play a role in the climactic violent outburst that concludes the film. Rather than erupting in violence toward Dionna, Vinny allows himself to be used by the neighborhood men in their assault on Ritchie and his excessive enjoyment.

The neighborhood men assault Ritchie because he tops their list of "suspects" in the Son of Sam killings. Of course, they place Ritchie at the top of this list simply because his behavior makes him an anomaly in the neighborhood, not because of any actual link between Ritchie and the killings. What makes Ritchie a "freak" in the eyes of the neighborhood men—and thus what makes him the most obvious candidate for the Son of Sam—is the extent to which he seems to be enjoying himself in a way that they cannot. To them, Ritchie's punk-style dress and haircut suggest a perverse enjoyment that threatens their own. They even take offense at Ritchie's voice and his feigned British accent for its hint of an alien enjoyment. When they learn that he performs at a male strip club and in porn films, this merely confirms their estimation of him. As an ensemble, they list to Vinny exactly what repulses them about Ritchie: "killer, fag, pimp, punk rocker, queer, pervert, homo, degenerate, whatever the fuck it is." All of the indications of Ritchie's difference are,

to the men of the neighborhood, also indications of his enjoyment, that is, of his refusal to accept the restrictions that they have accepted. The image of Ritchie enjoying himself looms constantly before them and only his destruction appears to promise relief. Through the relationship of the neighborhood men to Ritchie, *Summer of Sam* reveals precisely how the image of the enjoying other leads subjects to violence in the society of enjoyment.

The threatening nature of Ritchie's enjoyment becomes evident as the men begin their search for Ritchie. Two of the men enter the punk bar CBGB where Ritchie's band performs. They don't find Ritchie there, but they do encounter ear-splitting punk rock, a screaming audience, and hundreds of people dressed in punk attire. In short, they encounter precisely the kind of perverse enjoyment that they detest in Ritchie. As the men walk through the bar, we see them recoil from and guard themselves against this enjoyment: one puts his handkerchief over his nose and mouth, while the other puts his hands over his ears. Wandering through CBGB, they experience the other's enjoyment as a lethal abyss that threatens to engulf them. The aggressiveness and violence that they later direct toward Ritchie is an attempt to relieve themselves of this danger. Like Berkowitz, they experience the horror of the enjoying other, and this forces them to become aware of their own failure to enjoy. In this situation, violence becomes the only remedy because it promises to wipe out the other's enjoyment and simultaneously provide enjoyment as one performs it. With the help of Vinny, who lures him out of his apartment and into the street, they jump an unsuspecting Ritchie. For the men of the neighborhood, Ritchie's status as the Son of Sam allows them to unleash an assault without any concern about repercussions: they finally feel free to enjoy. This is what the outbreak of violence provides in the society of enjoyment and why violence in this epoch seems like such an attractive avenue.

Lee shoots the final confrontation between the neighborhood men and Ritchie with the music of The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again" in the background. As always in Spike Lee's films, the choice of music plays a crucial role in the scene. In her discussion of Lee's earlier film *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Victoria Johnson points out that Lee uses music "as interactive with and an essential component of visual representation and thematic, political concerns."<sup>14</sup> The underlying political valence of the music is just as apparent in *Summer of Sam*. In opting for "Won't Get Fooled Again," Lee indicates the central place that the logic of stolen enjoyment plays in this act of violence and in the violence of *Summer of Sam* as a whole. In this context, The Who's song expresses the rage that stems from having long been duped out of one's rightful enjoyment, and it also expresses the desire to access the enjoyment that we have been missing as members of the "hypnotized." Lee uses the song to suggest the belief that we can right our relationship to enjoyment: whereas before we have allowed the other to steal our enjoyment, now we are seizing it for

ourselves.<sup>15</sup> As the song plays during a sequence near the end of the film, we see the neighborhood men pummeling Ritchie—kicking and beating him repeatedly. The music and the image both indicate the enjoyment they derive from attempting to reclaim what they believe Ritchie has stolen from them. They turn toward this extreme violence because it seems to offer a path through which they might themselves find the enjoyment that they see in Ritchie. This turn makes them representative figures in the contemporary landscape. This kind of aggressiveness and violence constantly threaten to erupt in the society of enjoyment. The pressure to enjoy, combined with the pervasive images of enjoyment that bombard contemporary subjects, lead us to outbursts such as the one that concludes *Summer of Sam*. Violence appears to offer the elusive enjoyment that the other has taken from us.

#### OUTBREAKS OF AGGRESSIVENESS

If Spike Lee illustrates the prehistory of contemporary aggressiveness and violence, school shootings represent the full development of these phenomena. The latter half of the 1990s witnessed a spate of school shootings, incidents in which students came to school with guns intent on shooting as many fellow students as they could. The most well-known (and most deadly) of these took place at Columbine High School in Colorado, where two students (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, members of a group calling themselves the “Trench Coat Mafia”) killed twelve classmates and a teacher. Exiled as “freaks” and “losers” at Columbine High School, Harris and Klebold experienced their castration—their enjoyment deficit—on a daily basis and, like Berkowitz in *Summer of Sam*, responded with violence.

In a society that commands enjoyment, every relationship with the other produces a fear of the potential theft of one’s enjoyment or the sense that the other has already stolen one’s enjoyment. It is this attitude that brings aggressiveness to the pitch that we find in the hallways of Columbine. The prevailing command to enjoy creates a life-and-death struggle to enjoy. Those who come out on the losing end of the struggle to enjoy often respond with aggressiveness toward those who seem to have made off with their enjoyment. An enjoyment deficit prompts the subject to see the enjoyment of the other as a stolen enjoyment that must be reappropriated. The targets of the Columbine shooters are instructive in this regard. Not only did the shooters target popular students and athletes, but they also singled out minority students. This combination seems to defy a political analysis of the shooting. If we see it as a pseudo-revolutionary activity conducted against the powerful in the school, this explains why the shooters shot the popular students but not why they shot the minority students. Such an interpretation must downplay

the importance of the minority student targets. If we see it as a neo-fascist activity conducted against the marginalized, this explains why the shooters shot the minority students but not why they shot the popular students. Like the first interpretation, this one must also downplay one group targeted by the shooters—in this case, the popular students. Both lines of interpretation run into significant stumbling blocks: the variety of targets seems to detract from their power to signify. But there is something that unifies all the targets at Columbine. What both popular and minority students seem to share, at least in the eyes of white outsiders (like the Trench Coat Mafia), is a privileged relationship to enjoyment. Both groups seem to be enjoying themselves—and even enjoying themselves at the expense of the members of the Trench Coat Mafia. The shooting is a response to this stolen enjoyment, an attempt to wrench it back from the other.<sup>16</sup>

The public reactions to the Columbine shooting completely missed this *jouissance* factor at the heart of the event. The post-Columbine outcry sought to identify the source of the aggressiveness and violence that manifested itself in this and so many other school shootings. Two primary reactions developed along party lines: liberals linked the violence to the widespread availability of guns, and conservatives linked it to moral decay in the culture.<sup>17</sup> In the former camp, Rosie O'Donnell began openly campaigning on her talk show for a ban on handguns, even going so far as to openly berate guest Tom Selleck, on her May 19, 1999 show, for his ties to the National Rifle Association. In the latter camp, Dan Quayle attacked liberal groups promoting a cult of self-esteem in education that weakened school discipline. Both of these reactions, despite their obvious differences, do have something in common: they share a fundamental belief that the violence has arisen in the absence of (paternal) authority. As a result, they advocate extending the law—either through passing new gun-control legislation, on the one hand, or through providing a more rigid upbringing in the home, on the other—because they are premised on the conviction that violence emerges only when the law is absent.<sup>18</sup> Without the law, according to this view, people feel free to do as they please, and doing what they please often includes shooting other people without any pangs of conscience.

It has, in fact, become a truism among conservatives to link the contemporary rise in aggressiveness and violence in contemporary society to the absence of prohibition and the decline of authority. The fight against aggressiveness is often couched in terms of parents and societal authority figures once again reasserting definite rules and laying down a strict prohibition. According to this logic, the sorry state of contemporary authority has produced subjects who don't know that they must accept limitations and who refuse to compromise their own enjoyment for the sake of societal restrictions. We are experiencing so many outbreaks of aggressiveness, according to this

view, because parents have not taught their children the word “no!”—or they haven’t been there to teach them this. If we want to avoid incidents like the mass killings at Columbine High School, we must have parents who are more present in the lives of their children. This position represents the prevailing conservative response not only to increases in aggressiveness and violence, but also to the society of enjoyment as a whole. And it has its basis in the widespread view that authority is our only possible salvation.

Columbine-style aggressiveness and violence, however, is not performed in defiance of authority (or in the absence of it) but in obedience to it. Symbolic authority in the society of enjoyment commands enjoyment, and thus when subjects react violently against the supposed theft of their enjoyment, they obey this imperative. School shootings are not the result of authority’s absence but its presence—its presence in the form of the imperative to enjoy. The problem lies in an excess of obedience—and an excess of authority—rather than a lack of it. In fact, Lacan even goes so far as to suggest that “social conformity” itself has a “tendency to induce aggressiveness in the subject.”<sup>19</sup> By grasping that aggressiveness is grounded in widespread obedience rather than transgression, we can respond to the conservative calls for increased prohibition by laying bare their fundamental error. If the contemporary epidemic of obedience has gone largely unnoticed, this only indicates the extent to which it has successfully disguised itself as transgression.

There is a temptation today to view outbreaks of aggressiveness as subversive activity, as a challenge to the forces of power. Hence, certain Leftists, during the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, hailed Slobodan Milosevic as a bastion of resistance to the hegemonic onslaught of global capital, thereby overlooking the nationalist and racist dimension of this “rebellion.” Similarly, some also embraced the two Columbine shooters as subversives, fighting against the power of the social order as it manifests itself in the high school caste system.<sup>20</sup> Such interpretations of contemporary aggressiveness and its attendant violence succumb to the thinking of the perpetrators—that is, to their belief in the transgressive nature of their activity—failing to see that they remain wholly within the orbit of authority. Rather than putting the symbolic identity of the subjects at risk—and thus moving beyond the confines of symbolic authority—these actions reaffirm that identity—and thus reaffirm that authority as well.<sup>21</sup>

Incivility and aggressiveness seem to us as if they are fundamentally anti-social behaviors. When we experience outbursts of incivility or aggressiveness, we feel as if the social fabric is in the process of collapsing, as if we are descending into anarchy. But the contemporary uncivil or aggressive subject evinces, in most cases, an allegiance to the fundamental commandment of the society of enjoyment—the command to enjoy. We must reinterpret the incivility we encounter in light of this prevailing commandment. Subjects have

become increasingly uncivil not because they have divested themselves from authority figures and social rules but because they have invested themselves most enthusiastically.

Whatever the underlying causes behind them, incivility and aggressiveness seem to have an unambiguous—which is to say, unambiguously negative—status. Of all the symptoms that characterize the society of commanded enjoyment, incivility and aggressiveness are clearly those that receive the most universal criticism. It is not only cultural critics that decry contemporary outbreaks of aggressiveness, but almost everyone living in this society. Whereas one might potentially see something appealing or liberatory in the transformation of paternal authority, the rise of the image, the shrinking of distance, or even the retreat into privacy, the same could not be said of incivility and aggressiveness. These symptoms seem to have no positive valence, and we cannot easily imagine someone who might celebrate their emergence.

Nonetheless, incivility and aggressiveness do have another side to them, a side that has remained largely unexplored. These symptoms are indicative of a subjective disposition within the society of enjoyment willing to challenge the dictates of symbolic authority. In this sense, contemporary incivility and aggressiveness hold out the possibility for producing radicalized subjects, subjects unwilling to accept injustice or a lack of freedom simply because symbolic power authorizes it. This dimension of subjectivity in the society of enjoyment manifests itself, for instance, in the protests that have met the recent meetings of the World Bank. Such protests stem from an ability to be uncivil and a refusal to accept enforced dissatisfaction that the turn to the society of enjoyment informs. The problem is, however, that we too often direct our incivility toward the wrong targets, not toward the figures of symbolic authority but toward the victims of it. The contemporary tendency toward incivility has the ability to assist us in contesting and freeing ourselves from symbolic authority, but only when we first recognize the extent of our allegiance to this authority today in the society of commanded enjoyment. Too often incivility is nothing more than the contemporary expression of complete docility.

## Conclusion

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# FROM IMAGINARY ENJOYMENT TO ITS REAL COUNTERPART

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### THE FAILURE OF FULL ENJOYMENT

The society of enjoyment is a society that appears to be breaking apart, to be losing its cohesion. Its symptoms (disconnection, incivility, etc.) seem to indicate that, with the turn away from prohibition and toward enjoyment, the social bond is imperiled. Widespread hostility to authority and unrestrained enjoyment appear to threaten the very continued existence of the social world as such. We seem to be reaching the dangerous point that Freud warns about in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, a point at which our primary hostility threatens to overrun the social order. According to Freud, "In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts."<sup>1</sup> As if in response to the threat of social disintegration that Freud envisions here, there have arisen numerous calls for a return to an emphasis on prohibition and away from enjoyment. In order to save the social order, according to this line of thought, we must reestablish a prohibition that will protect us from the horrible enjoyment proliferating everywhere today. Without such a return, society will not survive; civilization will descend into anarchy. This logic informs, for instance, the recent popularity of school uniforms. Without

uniforms, there has been no barrier to stop students from parading through school halls while flaunting their private enjoyment—by wearing revealing clothing, gang colors, expensive jewelry, and the like. As the proponents of school uniforms see it, this flaunting of private enjoyment produces rivalry between students, aggressivity, envy, a generalized sense of indulgence, and a contempt for any authority that would place limits on enjoyment. Hence, school uniforms would serve to restore prohibition and the idea that authority must be obeyed. They would, in short, reestablish the school as an enjoyment-free zone.

The problem with the school uniform movement, as well as all of the other calls for a return to prohibition, is that, as the previous chapters have sought to demonstrate, widespread disobedience is not the problem. The problem with the society of commanded enjoyment—what constitutes its danger for us—is not the enjoyment that it unleashes, but the barrier that it proves to enjoyment. Rather than being beset by disobedience and transgressive enjoyment, our society has become replete with obedience, with subjects who are wholly committed to sustaining their symbolic identity, their status within the prevailing social order. This obedience predominates precisely because it successfully disguises itself as its opposite—as rebellion, radicality, and difference. The most difficult obstacle to overcome today is the sense that one is radical or subversive, precisely because this sensibility is so pervasive, even among—or especially among—the most conservative subjects. In fact, convincing subjects that they are radical has become the primary function of ideology today. If I believe that I am already radical while I am following the dictates of the social order, I am not likely to challenge those dictates. Already in the nineteenth century Marx and Engels saw that life under capitalism tended to offer subjects a sense of their own freedom (i.e., their own radicality and distance from the big Other) combined with an increase in actual unfreedom. They say, “in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are to a greater extent governed by material forces.”<sup>2</sup> The situation that Marx and Engels describe here has grown exponentially today. Existing in the isolation of her/his imaginary enclave, the contemporary subject tends to feel certain of her/his freedom and distance from the social order. Phenomenologically, today’s subject is a radical and independent subject, but this experience of radicality is *the* fundamental manifestation of contemporary ideology.<sup>3</sup> It is in this way that global capitalism—the hegemonic power of our time—secures its domination throughout the world.

Ironically, despite all of the claims of radicality being made today, very few call into question the functioning of global capitalism. We can see an illuminating example of the tacit acceptance of global capitalism in the docu-

mentary *Trekkies* (1999), which chronicles the fanatical devotion that *Star Trek* has inspired. The film shows the extreme lengths to which people go out of love for *Star Trek* and all that it represents. One woman wears her Star Fleet uniform to work every day; a dentist transforms his office into a simulation of the *Enterprise*; and a man considers having his ears surgically altered in order to resemble those of Mr. Spock. According to these fans and the many others interviewed, there is something special about the *Star Trek* universe that inspires this kind of devotion. When pressed for details, they mention its fairness, its equality, its diversity, its tolerance, and its ethic of nonviolence. However, not a single fan depicted in the film, out of hundreds that are interviewed, mentions the fact that the *Star Trek* economy is a wholly socialist one, that this universe is so far from our prevailing capitalist one that its subjects don't even have money. Trekkies find themselves drawn to *Star Trek's* radicality—or so they claim—and yet, they completely miss the aspect of the show that most challenges our contemporary existence—its blatant rejection of capitalism as the *sine qua non* of modern life. Though *Star Trek* doesn't hide its rejection of capitalism, Trekkies don't see it because global capitalism has become a fundamental horizon of our thought.

Though we are skeptical about the functioning of almost everything else, we trust fully in the staying power of global capitalism. The alternatives, which once seemed to be just around the corner, have become unimaginable today. The universe of global capitalism is, or so we think, here to stay, and we best not do anything to risk our status within it. Hence, we pledge our allegiance to it, and we put our trust in it. This is the fundamental mode of contemporary obedience to authority. Only by coming to understand this obedience to the dictates of global capitalism *as obedience* can we hope to break out of it. Global capitalism seems an unsurpassable horizon simply because we have not properly recognized our own investment in sustaining it. We see it as unsurpassable because we don't want to lose it—and the imaginary satisfaction that it provides.

The society of enjoyment works to convince subjects that they exist outside this society, in independent isolation. It thus becomes increasingly difficult to grasp oneself within the universal. One feels and lives like an outsider. But this in no way hampers the functioning of the universal. It works through us all the more effectively insofar as we fail to recognize it. In the society of enjoyment, the most difficult task becomes recognizing our own role as an integral part of this society—what keeps it going. The great temptation today lies in proclamations of one's radicality, expressions of a refusal to conform to the social order. But any subversive *display* today plays in the prevailing demand for enjoyment. The key to transcending the society of enjoyment—and the global capitalism with which it works hand-in-hand—lies in reconciling ourselves to this society, in grasping our fundamental investment in it.

When we recognize ourselves as the subjects of the society of enjoyment and the subjects of global capitalism rather than as subjects existing in marginality or in isolation, we take a leap beyond this society. The limits of the society of enjoyment are daunting limits precisely because we cannot recognize them as such. In recognizing these limits—in recognizing the extent of our obedience—we find a way out of this obedience. As Hegel puts it in the *Encyclopedic Logic*, “No one knows, or even feels, that anything is a limit or defect, until he is at the same time above and beyond it.”<sup>4</sup> The act of recognition is, at the same time, the act of transcendence. To recognize one’s failure to enjoy is already to begin to enjoy.

#### THE POSSIBILITIES OF PARTIAL ENJOYMENT

Just as the society of commanded enjoyment makes it increasingly difficult to recognize the limits that it places on our enjoyment, it also opens up the possibility of embracing enjoyment in a way that was impossible in the society of prohibition. Under the constraints of prohibition, symbolic authority did not encourage subjects to seek enjoyment but to flee from it. One could not openly embrace one’s enjoyment without running afoul of the social Law. Today, however, when the Law actively encourages such an embrace, things become somewhat different. There are now possibilities for enjoyment that were formerly unthinkable. In the society of enjoyment, enjoyment emerges for the first time as a practical possibility.

The primary barrier to such an embrace of enjoyment is the image of an ultimate or complete form of enjoyment. Both the society of prohibition and the society of enjoyment utilize this image—the former to illustrate what the subject must sacrifice and the latter to illustrate what the subject must pursue. In each case, the image of an ultimate enjoyment functions as a lure that seduces the subject into investing itself in the social Law. As long as subjects remain in thrall to the image of an enjoyment not haunted by any lack, they cannot escape from the subjection that makes enjoyment impossible. Complete enjoyment, as an impossible ideal, confines subjects within the constraints of the Law that poses it as an ideal. It is this ideal itself that must be rejected—and it is the turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy that offers us the possibility of rejecting it.

Today, after enjoyment has become a social duty, the embrace of partial enjoyment—rather than the pursuit of an illusory total enjoyment—emerges as a unique political possibility. Partial enjoyment is uncertain and insecure. One never knows whether one has it or not, and at the moment one seems to secure it, this form of enjoyment slips away. It is, first and foremost, the enjoyment of the other—an enjoyment that the subject can never wholly possess for

itself. But partial enjoyment has a political content to it precisely because of its connection to the other. The subject of partial enjoyment is a subject committed not only to its own enjoyment, but also to the enjoyment of the other. Such a subject recognizes that one cannot differentiate between the two; one cannot choose enjoyment for oneself while refusing the enjoyment of the other. To embrace the partiality of one's own enjoyment is at the same time to embrace the enjoyment of the other.

Each of the symptoms that the previous chapters have explored represents a form of retreat from the partiality of enjoyment. In chapter 2, we saw how the anal father commands us to enjoy ourselves fully, without any lack. Chapter 3 showed the increasing power of the image and the illusion of total enjoyment that it provides. Chapter 4 revealed the contemporary elimination of distance as a strategy for filling in all the gaps in our enjoyment. Chapter 5 linked the failure of interpretation to the reluctance to accept the enjoyment of the Other. In chapter 6, we saw the cynic's refusal to allow for any pocket of unknown enjoyment. Chapter 7 explored the apathy that results from a monolithic concern with total enjoyment. Chapter 8 detailed the retreat into private enjoyment and its effect on the public world. And in chapter 9, we saw how incivility and aggressivity result from the contemporary subject's commitment to an enjoyment without any lack. The ideal of total enjoyment represents the fundamental barrier that the subject in the society of enjoyment must navigate.

This ideal haunts the contemporary subject because partial enjoyment is such a precarious endeavor, whereas total enjoyment holds out the promise of a sense of security and wholeness. The subject of partial enjoyment remains constantly aware of her/his own tortured relationship to this enjoyment. Such a subject does not feel secure in the possession of this enjoyment. Partial enjoyment involves enjoying one's lack—what one doesn't have, not what one does have. In fact, the enjoyment possesses the subject; the subject does not possess the enjoyment. Partial enjoyment thus involves the subject's acceptance that it cannot escape some originary damage that constitutes it as a subject. To be a subject is to be incomplete and lacking, but one can, through taking up the very partiality of enjoyment, come to view this incompleteness as originary rather than as a state of loss.

The advantage of partial enjoyment lies in its connection to the Real. Unlike total enjoyment, which is always imaginary, partial enjoyment is Real. It involves an experience of the Real, specifically the way in which the Real throws the symbolic order out of balance. In the experience of partial enjoyment, the subject enjoys its own lack without feeling this lack as a deprivation. This experience frees the subject by breaking its link to the symbolic Law: the Law no longer seems to hold within itself the secret that eludes the subject; the secret exists in the subject itself. Such a transformation offers the subject

the freedom that has continued to elude it within the society of prohibition. Thus, partial enjoyment eludes the limits of the symbolic order. Even though it is partial, it is also an unlimited, infinite enjoyment.

The turn from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy has fundamentally transformed the experience of the subject while leaving the subject in an unchanged situation. In both structures, the subject remains deprived of—and haunted by—the idea of complete enjoyment. In this sense, nothing substantive changes for the contemporary subject despite all of the phenomenological transformations we have explored. However, the emergence of the society of enjoyment produces a window of opportunity: we might obey the command to enjoy in a way that frees us from its superegoic compulsion and opens enjoyment as such. We can only do so if we reject the image of completion—and of complete enjoyment—that this command proffers. As long as we pursue and defend an image of total enjoyment, we remain within the domain of the superego. Accepting the partiality of enjoyment is the path to freedom that the contemporary world offers us.

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## NOTES

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### INTRODUCTION

1. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 132–33.

2. As Deleuze and Guattari put it (securely in the tradition of Marx), capitalism substitutes money for code or regulation, thereby pushing society toward what they call a “deterritorialization” of the social order.

3. Rather than emphasizing a shift in the relationship between the social order and money, most of those who discuss the transition to modernity point to the birth of modern subjectivity, the Cartesian cogito. The emergence of the cogito represents the nascence of modernity because of its determination to think for itself, its radical questioning of all authority. Even for someone like Michel Foucault, who tends to view the cogito negatively, its emergence is nonetheless epochal, the mark of the West’s most profound transformation. With the emergence of the cogito, according to Foucault, authority turns inward: instead of ruling externally over bodies, authority takes up a position within the individual subject, producing the subject as a subject—and thus ruling all the more despotically than the former external authority.

4. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 227.

5. I will use the terms “enjoyment” and “jouissance” interchangeably throughout the project.

6. Lacan does comment at times on this historical transformation, though never in a sustained fashion. For Lacan’s explicit mentions of it, see Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 10–30; and Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 281–312. Followers of Lacan, such as Joan Copjec, Teresa Brennan, Juliet Flower MacCannell, and Slavoj Žižek, have worked to develop psychoanalytic

accounts of history that often overlap with the one taken up here. See Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994); Teresa Brennan, *History after Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999).

7. Of course, in a society of prohibition, enjoyment is not entirely absent. In fact, even the sacrifice of enjoyment that it demands produces a share of enjoyment. For instance, the “organization man” who gives up his individuality for the sake of the company’s productivity derives enjoyment from his affiliation with a large and powerful collective organization.

8. The turn toward an all-volunteer army indicates an instance of the disappearance of the explicit demand for the sacrifice of enjoyment. Prior to the abolishment of the draft in the United States, the state demanded that male citizens sacrifice some quantity of their private enjoyment for the sake of the social whole. Now, however, no such demand for sacrifice exists, which helps to usher in this new epoch. Incidentally, this is precisely why Hegel, flying in the face of common sense, viewed war as an ethical activity. War forces individuals to sacrifice their private enjoyment (and even their lives) for the sake of the whole; it thereby makes subjects aware of their indebtedness to the social order, its constitutive role in their lives. As Paul Franco puts it: “There is no getting around the fact that Hegel sees war as serving a positive function. In peace, individualism is promoted at the expense of citizens’ commitment to the universal or the whole, and civil society threatens to overwhelm the state” (Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999], 332).

9. Marxism, of course, understands that we do actually act against our interests quite often, but it attributes such activity to a lack of awareness as to where our real interest lies, to “false consciousness.”

10. John Farrell, “Paranoia Methodized,” in *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*, ed. Frederick C. Crews (New York: Viking, 1998), 234. Jedediah Purdy also exemplifies this line of attack in his critique of contemporary culture when he points out that “Self-aware in the extreme, we are permeated by Sigmund Freud’s view that ‘we are all ill,’ that everyone’s motivations are in some measure selfish, ignoble, or neurotic” (Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* [New York: Vintage, 1999], 16).

11. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre V: Les formations de l’inconscient, 1957–1958* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 313, my translation.

12. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 53.

13. In one sense, Freud and Lacan’s stress on the importance of the “jouissance factor” remains within the orbit of a Marxist version of history because we can understand jouissance in economic terms. As Lacan points out in his *Seminar XIV*, “The value of jouissance [. . .] is in the principle of the economy of the unconscious” (Jacques

Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967*, unpublished manuscript, session of 19 April 1967, my translation).

14. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 87, her emphasis. It is in this sense that, as Lacan says, “human desire [. . .] is fundamentally perverse” (Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 315, my translation).

15. Though both Freud and Lacan stressed the role of enjoyment in governing our actions, neither linked this to any political project.

16. Not only the previous example but this project as a whole is greatly indebted to the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose work has made the political importance of enjoyment a prominent topic. My effort here is to provide a systematic formulation of what lies implicit in Žižek’s many works. See especially Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 1991).

17. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.

18. Hollywood director Sydney Pollack also exemplifies this turn from political to personal concerns. In the 1960s and 1970s, Pollack directed pointedly political films such as *They Shoot Horses Don’t They* (1969) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). But in the 1990s, larger political issues completely disappeared from Pollack’s work. His recent films *Sabrina* (1995) and *Random Hearts* (1999), like U2’s recent songs, confine themselves wholly to romance. In fact, *Random Hearts* explicitly devalues political commitment in the face of personal commitment in the way that it depicts a relationship between two people with opposing political views. The power of the romantic attachment completely dwarfs this political opposition, which quickly recedes from the film altogether, as if to say that politics means nothing when one has love.

19. This is perhaps why commercial trends tend to run their course so very quickly in today’s society of enjoyment: everyone is able to have direct and fast access to the product, which militates against the enjoyment of it. Two-year-old children shift their affections from Barney to Teletubbies to Elmo as fast as adults move from Jeeps to SUVs to minivans.

## CHAPTER 1. FROM PROHIBITION TO ENJOYMENT

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 43, his emphasis.

2. As Freud puts it: “Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family; and for this reason, in the case of every individual, but in particular of adolescent boys, it seeks by all possible means to loosen their connection with their family—a connection which, in their childhood, is the only important one” (Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey [New York: Basic Books, 1962], 91).

3. Enjoyment is the antithesis of productivity; as Lacan puts it: “jouissance is what serves no purpose” (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink [New York: Norton, 1998], 3).

4. Freud, *Three Essays*, 48.

5. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXI: Les non-dupes errent, 1973–1974*, unpublished manuscript, session of 14 May 1974, my translation.

6. At the conclusion of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter loses some of his anti-social radicality. He becomes less dangerous—more palatable for the audience. His behavior in the film’s final scene evinces a subtle character change: he announces his plan to eat his longtime doctor and tormenter not for the sake of pure enjoyment, but for revenge, revenge motivated by his animus toward the doctor. He tells Clarice Starling, in what is perhaps the most remembered line of the film, “I’m having an old friend for dinner.” This conclusion provides the audience great satisfaction not just because of Lecter’s witty pun, but because we recognize that the hateful doctor will soon get his comeuppance from Lecter. However, it also dissolves the radicality of Lecter insofar as it displays his “consideration” for the Other, a turn away from his pure enjoyment that wholly disregards the Other. Now, we see that Lecter, like all of us, doesn’t act purely for his own enjoyment but from a common, everyday motivation such as revenge. In this sense, though the ending has the subversive effect of making the audience aware of its identification with a serial killer, it also domesticates Lecter’s horrific enjoyment, transforming him into a more tolerable figure with which to identify. With this concluding scene, Lecter becomes one of us—that is, reunited with the big Other. The diminution of Lecter’s psychotic otherness becomes even more apparent in Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal* (2001), when we learn that Lecter eats *only* those who deserve it as a result of their own sins. Lecter thus appears in this later film as a moral figure in a way that makes complete sense to us.

7. Serge André, *What Does a Woman Want?*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 1999), 230.

8. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L’envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 130, my translation.

9. This is the point at which psychoanalysis challenges the foundations of evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology attempts to use “natural history”—that is, history prior to the onset of the social order—to comprehend phenomena within the social order. On this basis, the predatory actions of any CEO can be understood as the natural behavior of an alpha male. When we try to understand social beings in this “natural” light, however, we see only our own ideological presuppositions, presuppositions which serve to justify capitalist exploitation. In “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan makes a similar point about Darwin: “Darwin’s success seems to derive from the fact that he projected the predations of Victorian society and the economic euphoria that sanctioned for that society the social devastation it initiated on a planetary scale, and that he justified its predations by the image of a laissez-faire system in which the strongest predators compete for their natural prey” (Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink [New York: Norton, 2002], 27).

10. In *Seminar II*, Lacan uses a joke—taken from Freud—to illustrate what is at stake in this initial exchange of enjoyment for symbolic identity. He tells the story of a man who goes into a bakery and asks to look at a cake on display. After looking at the cake, the man hands it back to the baker and asks for a glass of liquor. After the man drinks the liquor, the baker asks him for payment, but the man claims that he has already given the cake in exchange for it. He pays for the glass of liquor with a cake that he hasn't paid for. That is, in this exchange that represents the initial sacrifice of enjoyment, the man gives up what he doesn't own in order to acquire something else. This “nothing for something” is the basic matrix of the incest prohibition and of entry into the symbolic order.

11. Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, session of 12 February 1974, my translation.

12. This is why it is not difficult to understand the appeal of psychosis. Unlike the normal subject, the psychotic refuses this uneven exchange, refusing desire as a substitute for sacrificed enjoyment. To return to our earlier example from *Silence of the Lambs*, this refusal to sacrifice enjoyment is what makes a psychotic like Hannibal Lecter so attractive to those of us who have made the sacrifice. Lecter clearly enjoys, and even though we might shy away from the results of the way he enjoys, we are nonetheless drawn to him.

13. Even though Lacan himself formulates, in *Seminar VII*, an ethics of holding fast to one's desire, he later comes to see the limitations of this position, precisely insofar as desire constantly remains in a dependent position vis-à-vis the social order, dependent upon the Law that it constitutes itself in reaction to. Later, in “Kant avec Sade” and *Seminars X* and *XI*, Lacan begins to equate desire and Law, seeing the emergence of desire as simply a manifestation of the Law. Which is not to say that he completely abandons the idea of an ethics of desire, but that it no longer occupies its former privileged position in his thought.

14. Again, this is not to say that there isn't a kind of enjoyment consonant with the functioning of the symbolic order. Every symbolic authority relies on its obscene underside—an underside replete with enjoyment—in order to sustain its hegemony. Enjoyment's role as a support for symbolic authority becomes clearest when we look at the importance of the festival or carnival in traditional class societies. This one day of the year during which social hierarchies were reversed and the authorities permitted subjects to indulge themselves in all kinds of transgressive enjoyment had the effect of reconciling subjects to their subjection for the rest of the year. Rather than undermining authority, such outbursts of enjoyment serve as its necessary supplement.

15. Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 306.

16. Imagining a prohibited enjoyment is precisely what the neurotic does, and in this sense, neurosis is an attempt to cope with society's demand for renunciation through an imaginary detour. The neurotic figures that as long as she or he confines her or his transgressive enjoyment to the imaginary level, it will avoid drawing the ire of social authority. Unfortunately, because this enjoyment remains only imaginary, it also avoids an act that would explicitly call symbolic authority into question.

17. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*, unpublished manuscript, trans. Cormac Gallagher, session of 22 May 1963.

18. It is thus a mistake to think that the imaginary represents a radical alternative or a subversion of patriarchy. Though patriarchy isn't overtly present within the functioning of the imaginary, it nonetheless exercises a determinative control over the former register.

19. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), 257. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text. In *Seminar V*, Lacan elaborates further and insists even more emphatically on the originary status of the symbolic order. He says, "there is already symbolization—right from the origin, right from the first relations with the object, from the first relation of the infant with the maternal object in as much as it is the primordial, primitive object on which depends its subsistence in the world" (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient, 1957–1958* [Paris: Seuil, 1998], 222, my translation).

20. This accounts for the error, often made by those summarizing the difference between the symbolic order and the imaginary, of seeing the imaginary as a stage of development that exists prior to the symbolic. Nowhere is this error more widespread than in film theory's appropriation of psychoanalysis. For instance, in the *Aesthetics of Film*, the authors state, as if they are only stating a commonly recognized fact, that "entry into the imaginary precedes access to the symbolic" (Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992], 201). Kaja Silverman also takes up this position when she says of the imaginary that "within the Lacanian scheme it not only precedes the symbolic order, which introduces the subject to language and Oedipal triangulation, but continues to coexist with it afterward" (Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983], 157). This view mistakenly takes the experience of the subject at face value: the subject's experience of the imaginary precedes her or his experience of the symbolic, but the symbolic is there from the beginning, orienting this imaginary experience (just as the imaginary is there until the end, supplementing the symbolic experience).

21. Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 87, his emphasis.

22. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), 171. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

23. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 3.

24. When those who have fled to the suburbs complain about crowding and expanding development in their suburbs, they wrongly assume that without this crowding, they would find the distance that they sought when they initially moved to this milieu. But the only distance that eliminates overproximity of the other is symbolic distance, and the number of people who move into a suburb has no bearing on this.

25. Making a mistake akin to Thoreau's, Erich Fromm, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, 1991), sees *real* proximity as one of the root causes of aggression and violence, thereby missing the vital role that the symbolic order can have in procuring distance where there isn't any.

26. Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 343, my translation.

27. Ironically, then, authentic privacy is only possible when we accept that privacy must be sacrificed for the sake of a public (symbolic) world. Only when there is a public world to avert the Other's eyes can there be privacy. Hence, all of the emphasis on the protection of privacy today—especially in the wake of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal—is wholly misconceived. If we really want to protect privacy, we should place our emphasis on protecting the public world—fighting against things like private prisons, the privatization of social security, etc.

28. E. L. Doctorow, *Loon Lake* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 159.

29. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 51.

30. This is why the slave, not the master, attains independence. As Hegel puts it, "The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman" (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 117, his emphasis).

31. At the same time that it introduces the possibility of being conscious of our own death, however, the symbol also makes an absolute consciousness of death impossible. Because I can only think of my death through the mediation of the symbol, I can't really grasp it, insofar as it indicates my own disappearance. The symbol conserves and preserves—providing a sense of permanence—which is the antithesis of death. This is what leads Jacques Derrida to wonder, "Who will guarantee that the name, the ability to name death (like that of naming the other, and it is the same) does not participate as much in the dissimulation of the 'as such' of death as in its revelation, and that language is not precisely the origin of the nontruth of death, and of the other?" (Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993], 76). For Derrida, any effort to arrive at one's own death through language is doomed to run into the essentially preservative nature of language.

32. Donald Trump seems at first to refute this thesis of the inverse relationship between enjoyment and recognition. He is, unquestionably, one of the most recognized subjects in the world, and yet he is constantly parading and even trumpeting his enjoyment of many different "beautiful women." He seems to have attained recognition without the requisite renunciation of enjoyment. However, we should not be deceived by Trump's own protestations of enjoyment. In proclaiming how much he enjoys, Trump is in fact attesting to his complete sacrifice of enjoyment. If he were really enjoying, he would not have to display his enjoyment. He does display it, however, because enjoyment itself is immaterial to Trump; the appearance of enjoyment is everything (and this is why he continually points out the number of models with whom he has slept, etc.). In detailing his enjoyment publicly, he employs enjoyment only as a vehicle for gaining recognition. In this sense, Trump's abandonment of enjoy-

ment perhaps goes further than anyone else's in contemporary American society, even that of Clinton. We can still imagine Clinton enjoying his hamburgers in a back room of the White House, but we must imagine Trump in bed with the latest model totally preoccupied, thinking only about the story he will tell of his escapades, thinking about how to transform enjoyment into increased recognition.

33. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 121.

34. Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 147, my translation.

35. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 49.

36. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 56.

37. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings: Volume I, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 248.

38. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 3.

39. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992), 157.

40. Historian Gary Cross marks 1900 as the beginning of consumer culture, a time that "set the course" for the century that followed. See Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

41. Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 110.

42. This sense of obligation to the social order is precisely what it has become popular to celebrate nostalgically today, in the age of the pathological narcissist who feels no such obligation. This nostalgia pervades such immensely popular works as Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998) and Bob Greene's *Duty: A Father, His Son, and the Man Who Won the War* (New York: Morrow, William, and Company, 2000).

43. For the definitive accounts of the organization man, see William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956) and David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

44. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 102.

45. Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 102.

46. Dennis Prager, *Happiness Is a Serious Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 3.

47. Prager, *Happiness*, 3.

48. In his sociological study of current American morality, Alan Wolfe chronicles this turn away from the idea of duty and morality as a limit on one's happiness, and he questions whether or not society can survive with this new "moral freedom." See Alan

Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Impossible Idea That Defines the Way We Live Now* (New York: Norton, 2001).

49. Bloom's critique, despite the fact that it is over a decade old, remains the predominant conservative position on contemporary American culture. It has, however, been recast throughout the 1990s and 2000s in a variety of different incarnations, all of which retain Bloom's fundamental thesis: see David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999); and William Bennett, *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); just to name a few of the most notable rearticulations of this argument.

50. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 73.

51. In the discussion that follows this passage, Bloom makes clear that this focus on enjoyment is a threat to high culture, because appreciation of this culture requires a willingness to delay gratification. As Bloom says, "as long as [students today] have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf" (Bloom, *Closing*, 81). That is to say, one who spends her/his time only enjoying cannot but fail to appreciate anything that the great achievements of culture have to offer, because they all demand some initial sacrifice of enjoyment.

52. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 1991), 237, his emphasis.

53. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 176.

54. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 71.

55. Bloom's mistake is nonetheless understandable—and actually is itself symptomatic of the predominance of the superego in contemporary society. The presence of the constant pressure to enjoy causes us to feel as if we're doing an inadequate job of enjoying, and that the other is enjoying without restraint, even stealing the enjoyment that is rightfully ours. Bloom sees the thieves of his enjoyment everywhere—in students listening to rock music, in African Americans isolating themselves from whites, in teenagers placing no special value on their virginity. In this way, the transition to a society of enjoyment not coincidentally parallels the rise in a general sense of paranoia, as marked by Bloom's reaction and the proliferation of so many conspiracy novels and films.

56. The functioning of the Law of the Father in no way depends on the presence of actual fathers, which is why, in *Seminar V*, Lacan attacks the "environmentalists" in the psychoanalytic establishment—the ancestors of Bloom, Quayle, Bennett, and the rest—who lament the damage done to children by the absence of actual fathers. According to Lacan, the paternal function operates (or fails to operate) regardless of the presence or absence of an actual father. He says, "the father is there even when he isn't there" (Lacan, *Seminaire V*, 168, my translation).

## CHAPTER 2. THE DECLINE OF PARENTAL AUTHORITY

1. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient, 1957–1958* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 155, my translation.

2. Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 155. Lacan's insistence on the necessity of the subject's encounter with the Name of the Father and its interdiction seems to indicate a failure on his part to think through cultural difference. The concept itself appears to universalize a historically located and determined function. However, Lacan points out that the Name of the Father does manifest itself differently in different cultural and historical situations. What remains constant is the interdiction or prohibition itself, even as its form changes dramatically. Lacan claims: "The position of the Name-of-the-Father as such, the qualification of the father as procreator, is a matter that is situated at the symbolic level. It can be carried out according to diverse cultural forms, but it does not depend as such on the cultural form; it is a necessity of the signifying chain" (Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 181, my translation).

3. Paul Verhaeghe, "The Collapse of the Function of the Father and Its Effect on Gender Roles," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 135.

4. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 261.

5. Qtd. in Richard Benedetto, "Quayle Slams Views of 'Legal Aristocracy,'" *USA Today*, 20 May 1999, 10A.

6. David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 1.

7. Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, 45. Interestingly, Blankenhorn doesn't fear an outbreak of female violence or of male sexuality—the former because it is unimaginable to him and the latter because it is simply an immutable biological fact of life.

8. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 35.

9. Faludi, *Stiffed*, 328.

10. Tony Evans, qtd. in Faludi, *Stiffed*, 229, his emphasis.

11. Verhaeghe makes this same point: "reinstallment [of traditional paternity] is virtually impossible nowadays, because its very basis, the symbolic father function, has been destroyed." This means, instead of restoring unity and prohibition, the reinstated father will bring even more divisiveness and struggle for enjoyment, which is why Verhaeghe calls this an "ever-failing solution" (Verhaeghe, "Collapse of the Function of the Father," 142).

12. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 182.

13. Alenka Zupančič, "A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992), 101.

14. In one sense, Keating is not yet the anal father in full flower. His command to enjoy does spur the students on toward their various efforts at enjoyment, but he does not become a rival in enjoyment to his students. As we will see in the case of David Mamet's play *American Buffalo*, the fully developed anal father is both authority figure and sexual rival.

15. David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 4. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

16. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 159, his emphasis.

17. Here we see the contrast between the dead father and the living father most emphatically. The living father knows about enjoyment; there is no seedy, criminal activity that he doesn't know about or that escapes him. The dead father, on the other hand, precisely because he is dead, knows nothing about enjoyment. This knowledge that the new living father has leads to the paranoid delusion that he controls everything. Eric Santner's discussion of the famous paranoiac Daniel Paul Schreber suggests that Schreber's paranoia was a response to the initial emergence of this new father who knows the secret of enjoyment. As Santner puts it: "Schreber's soul murder becomes, from this perspective, a sustained traumatization induced by exposure to, as it were, *fathers who knew too much* about living human beings" (Eric Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 86, his emphasis).

18. For a more detailed discussion of the figure of Mr. Eddy as anal father in *Lost Highway*, see Todd McGowan, "Finding Ourselves on a *Lost Highway*, or, David Lynch's Lesson in Fantasy," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (2000): 51–73.

19. I am indebted to Joan Copjec for this point. See Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 141–61.

20. Even Reagan's personal "moral" failings, such as his divorce, in no way compromised his ability to be a spokesperson for "family values" and for a return to traditional morality. The more his past seemed tainted, the stronger people's identification with him became. The failings indicate his great strength, a strength required in order to overcome them and remain the "moral leader" that he was.

21. In terms of its commitment to revealing the process of production, the very mainstream *Wayne's World* would be an exemplary work of Brechtian cinema, with its subtitles such as "gratuitous sex scene" or "product placement." At one time, these subtitles might have distanced the spectator by commenting on the filmic diegesis, but today they serve only to increase spectator investment in the film.

22. To be fair, I should point out that Charlie Dalton's desire here, while ostensibly subversive, actually aims at capturing the desire of Keating. That is, Dalton believes that his disobedience will please Keating. He knows that Keating desires the transgression that would indicate a moment of private enjoyment. But this in no way invalidates the point because one might make the same critique of attempts to subvert the authority of the symbolic father. No attempt at subversion entirely escapes the desire of the Other. It is just that under the reign of the anal father the subversion is the very thing that the father demands.

23. Paul Verhaeghe, *Love in a Time of Loneliness: Three Essays on Drive and Desire*, trans. Plym Peters and Tony Langham (New York: Other Press, 1999), 116.

24. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 177.

### CHAPTER 3. EMBRACING THE IMAGE

1. Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11. Stephens is almost alone among culture critics in viewing this change in positive terms. He claims that even though the proliferation of the image does destroy our attention span, it simultaneously increases the amount of information we can process in a brief period of time, thereby providing a net benefit.

2. Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Noonday Press, 1983), 204, his emphasis.

3. Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 30. Renata Salecl echoes this point as well: “The symbolic structure today seems more and more often to have been replaced by imaginary simulacra with which a subject identifies” (Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* [New York: Verso, 1998], 159).

4. In these instances, images seem either more inclusive or easier to understand than words, which is one reason they have become increasingly popular. (One does not need to understand English to grasp that the image of the person walking signifies that one may cross the street.) The symbolic order appears as a closed-off universe unto itself, accessible only to initiates (who understand the language), while the imaginary offers a sense of openness. But as we’ll see, this openness is *imaginary*: that is, the imaginary is every bit as exclusive as the symbolic order.

5. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 200, his emphasis.

6. Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 25.

7. DeLillo, *Americana*, 11. David’s relationship with his mirror image—and the enjoyment he finds in it—has many echoes in contemporary film and fiction. See, for instance, the obsession of Patrick Bateman with his mirror image in Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000).

8. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 30.

9. Stephens, *Rise of the Image*, 188.

10. DeLillo’s second novel, *End Zone*, attempts the reverse procedure—trying to reclaim the symbolic structure underlying the proliferation of images. The novel focuses on football, a game predominated by the image, but reduces football to the symbolic coordinates of its various plays. In his subsequent novels (and especially his masterpiece *Underworld*), DeLillo is better able (than in *Americana*) to sustain a narrative while drawing attention to the power of the image because he abandons the

more traditional narrative structure (following a single protagonist through his development) that he tried to maintain in *Americana*.

11. “Excerpts from Interviews with Wenders,” in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, eds. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 85, emphasis added.

12. Gerd Gemünden, “Oedi-pal Travels: Gender in the Cinema of Wim Wenders,” in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, eds. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 215.

13. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 92–93.

14. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 74.

15. “Looking Past the Verdict,” *Newsweek*, 26 April 1993, 23–24.

16. In his discussion of the beating, Frank Tomasulo rightly notes that the images on the videotape—like all images—exist within a specific symbolic context that provoked the reaction that ensued. In paying attention only to the image, we missed this symbolic context. See Frank Tomasulo, “I’ll See It When I Believe It: Rodney King and the Prison-House of Video,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 69–88.

17. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 151.

18. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 155–56.

19. For Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage, see Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 3–9.

20. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*, unpublished manuscript, trans. Cormac Gallagher, session of 22 May 1963.

21. *The Game* has the effect of producing uncertainty and desire in the audience as well. Like Nicholas, we remain unsure as to what the game includes and what it doesn’t, even after the game’s ostensible conclusion. This ability to arouse the desire of the audience through dislodging all certainty is one of the salient features of all David Fincher’s films. In a Fincher film—and even after a Fincher film—one is never certain as to the desire of the Other, as *Alien 3* (1992), *Seven* (1995), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Panic Room* (2002) all attest.

22. Lacan identifies the turn to images that obscures the *objet petit a* as an attempt to avoid anxiety because “in the specular image,” he notes, “anxiety is sufficiently rejected” (Lacan, *Seminar X*, session of 7 July 1963).

23. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schutze and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext[e], 1988), 35, his emphasis.

24. The film’s most famous scene depicts Guido’s fantasy in which he does have all the women in his life at once, including women from his childhood, his wife, his mistress, and the star actress in his film.

25. In addition to illustrating the appeal of the imaginary world, the other virtue of *8½* lies in its depiction of the monotony that characterizes the imaginary. Like Guido's film within the film, the narrative cannot move forward because Guido cannot break out of his imaginary isolation, and what results is a monotonous series of repetitions that never lead anywhere. In response to the monotony of the overwhelmingly imaginary nature of the film, a friend with whom I saw the film left the cinema at the film's halfway point in utter boredom, and afterward he condemned Fellini for his failure to engage—or even attempt to engage—the desire of the Other, a charge that testifies to the complete success of the film in its depiction of the isolation of the imaginary.

26. Cyberspace does not only provide a kind of satisfaction modeled on the imaginary, but it also provides an image-oriented experience. This is why Paul Virilio insists that “generalized *visualization* is the defining aspect of what is generally known today as *virtualization*” (Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. Chris Turner [New York: Verso, 2000], 14, his emphasis).

27. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), 137.

28. Walter A. Davis, *Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 283. This characterization of the image is all the more significant in that it appears in a work that celebrates the traumatic and liberatory power of the image.

29. Alice Kuzniar, “Wender's Windshields,” in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, eds. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 223.

#### CHAPTER 4. SHRINKING DISTANCES

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schutze and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext[e], 1988), 12.

2. Baudrillard's fame as a philosopher of simulation has even spilled over from the academy into popular culture. It is no accident that the one book we see in *The Matrix* (1999)—a film about simulation par excellence—is a copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*.

3. In one sense, Baudrillard sees a fundamental link between simulation and universal communication because he links the elimination of distance to the process of virtualization. When reality becomes virtualized or simulated, we no longer have to navigate distances in order to arrive at our destination: in the simulation or the virtualization, we arrive instantaneously. In this sense, the elimination of distance forms the perfect correlate to the predominance of the imaginary because images are always fully present and available. The ubiquity of images today plays a crucial role in the elimination of spatial and temporal distance. For instance, the imaginary realm of virtual reality allows anyone to experience an alternate place without moving, thereby

overcoming both time and space. I can be transported elsewhere virtually without moving at all in reality. Distance proves no barrier to the virtual universe. Images overcome distance because they offer us a sense of proximity. When we see an image of an object, we experience that object as close-at-hand. Unlike a word, an image cannot convey absence. Even when an image presents absence to us (as an image of nothing), it transforms the absence itself into something present. We cannot form an image of nothing. In the image, we can see it because the image does not suggest something beyond itself. Instead, it provides an illusion of total presence; it produces plenitude rather than absence. In contrast, the word or the symbol communicates absence. The word suggests something beyond itself that it replaces or conceals. The word doesn't pretend, unlike the image, to provide the presence of the thing.

4. Paul Virilio's objection to universal communication and the elimination of distance has a different, more Heideggerian, focus. For Virilio, the elimination of distance threatens our very mode of being-in-the-world, endangering our worldliness itself. As he puts it, "getting closer to the 'distant' takes you away proportionally from the 'near' (and dear)—the friend, the relative, the neighbour—thus making strangers, if not actual enemies, of all who are close at hand, whether they be family, workmates or neighbourhood acquaintances" (Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose [New York: Verso, 1997], 20).

5. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988), 92.

6. Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*, 21–22.

7. Paul Verhaeghe, *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*, trans. Mark du Ry (New York: Other Press, 1999), 145.

8. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient, 1957–1958* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 19, my translation.

9. Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 174.

10. Murray, *Hamlet*, 174.

11. Murray, *Hamlet*, 256. In addition to allowing us to fill in the holes of traditional narratives, cyberspace allows us to fill in the holes of our subjectivity as well. In cyberspace, as Sherry Turkle points out, one can construct a self that "is not only decentered but multiplied without limit" (Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999], 185). This multiplication of the self into an infinite number of fantasmatic identities has the effect of closing off the gap in which the Real makes itself felt.

12. Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 257.

13. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 182.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 21–22.

15. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 143, my translation.

16. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 7. Foucault is nonetheless among the first to recognize and detail the contours of the shift from the prohibition of enjoyment to the command to enjoy. His thought in the 1970s grasps a fundamental transition in the way that power functions—away from prohibitions and in the direction of positive commandments.

17. Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 7. Foucault's attempt to confine himself to immanence inevitably fails to explain what gives rise to the symbolic structure because, as Lacan notes in *Seminar III*, "in the symbolic nothing explains creation" (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg [New York: Norton, 1993], 179). That is to say, the symbolic order ipso facto lacks the terms to account for its own genesis. Thus, as long as one remains dedicated to pure immanence, one will never grasp the way in which a new symbolic structure emerges.

18. Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 154.

19. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 167. We can see an instance of this historical reduction in cultural studies theorist Anne Balsamo's claim that "Any given text within a discursive system is a symbolic enactment of the cultural preoccupations of a particular historical conjunction" (Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1996], 4).

20. For a standard version of this accusation, see, for instance, Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

21. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), 34.

22. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 33.

23. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 34. Contemporary analytic philosophers have become a bit less dismissive of speculation about transcendence than A. J. Ayer. However, the fundamental attitude has remained the same. Rather than attack metaphysics, a philosopher such as Donald Davidson simply incorporates its speculative dimension into the structure of logic and language. In the conclusion of his essay "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," Davidson claims, "the problems of metaphysics, while neither solved nor replaced, come to be seen as the problems of all good theory building" (Donald Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in *Inquires into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984], 214). Speculation about transcendence is, for Davidson, not really concerned with transcendence at all. Instead, transcendence is just an illusion of perspective—another way of talking about "the problems of all good theory building."

24. W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 192.

25. Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.

26. Adorno, *Critical Models*, 9.

27. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 243.

28. Because one cannot relativize death, it becomes the ground for authenticity. An authentic act remains possible for Heidegger because he stresses Dasein's relationship to death. When this emphasis drops out of Heidegger's thought after the so-called *Kehre* or turn, so does all discussion of authenticity. Not surprisingly, it is precisely for its insistence on authenticity that Derrida has attacked *Being and Time*. Insofar as he insists on authenticity, according to Derrida, Heidegger succumbs to the lure of transcendence. Despite his debt to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, Derrida has been unremitting in his critique of the early Heidegger's concept of authenticity. He says, "I have [...] explicitly criticized this value of propriety and of original authenticity, and [...] I even, if it can be put thus, started there. This fanaticism or monotony might be startling" (Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 54).

29. Baudrillard, *America*, 30.

30. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 234.

31. Clearly, not everyone today is committed to behavior that aims to prevent death. In fact, the prevalence of this behavior—and the imperative to engage in it—has occasioned a predictable backlash. It has become commonplace to say something like, "If I'm going to die anyway, I might as well enjoy myself and smoke four packs of cigarettes a day, have unsafe sex, or eat three packages of Twinkies." Far from being a grasp of the "nonrelational" character of death, however, this attitude also aims to transform death into a future event, something yet to come, rather than a certainty that has already been determined. It does this by attempting to sustain enjoyment, a sign of life and vitality. As long as I am an enjoying, vital being, I am not yet dead—my death is not yet assured. But the whole point of death's nonrelational character is that from the moment of birth death *is* assured—and this is what the contemporary proponent of unalloyed, nonstop enjoyment necessarily misses.

32. This is not to say, of course, that smoking doesn't increase one's risk of lung cancer, but simply that, whether one smokes or not, one necessarily experiences death. For Heidegger, what is decisive is not *how* one arrives at death but *that* one arrives at it, and so it makes little difference whether one keeps oneself healthy or not. Heidegger has no advice to offer us about lifestyle choices, as the choices that he made during his life reveal most clearly.

33. Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 67.

34. Gregg Easterbrook, "Medical Evolution: Will *Homo Sapiens* Become Obsolete?" *The New Republic*, 1 March 1999, 21.

35. Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, 119.

36. Critics have claimed that *Angels* represents a rediscovery of tragedy and that the AIDS epidemic has made this rediscovery possible. Upon first seeing *Angels*, James Miller was struck by the possibility that *Angels* represented “the birth of gay tragedy from the spirit of musicals (at last)” (James Miller, “Heavenquake: Queer Analogies in Kushner’s America,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, eds. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 56). And according to Graham Dixon, “The Western world was starting to forget about death: the old infectious diseases were fading memories, one died of luxury or old age.[. . .] But now Tragedy reappears, reasserts itself as young men and women die an often terrible death” (Graham Dixon, “The Obscene Paradox: Hope and Despair in *Angels in America*,” in *Essays on Kushner’s Angels*, ed. Per Brask [Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995], 98). AIDS serves as a reminder that our enjoyment is not total, that barriers still remain in the way of us having everything. But despite its power as this kind of reminder (and despite the hopes of Miller and Dixon), AIDS has not produced tragedy. As we will see, *Angels in America* eventually embraces the very non-stop motion and progressivism that militate against tragedy.

37. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 122. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

38. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 11. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

39. The possibility of having his homosexuality become public knowledge is, for Roy, far more devastating than the prospect of his death. What Roy dreads more than his real death is his symbolic death, the possibility that the recognition attached to the name “Roy Cohn” might disappear. We can see other evidence for this priority of symbolic over real death in Roy’s attitude toward being disbarred. On his deathbed, Roy’s concern is not his death, but that he will die while still a lawyer, before the disbarment committee disbars him. He tells Belize, “The Law: the only club I ever wanted to belong to. And before they take that from me, I’m going to die” (2:89). As his statement about being a lawyer evinces, Roy welcomes his real death insofar as it provides respite from a symbolic one. Unfortunately for him, however, the disbarment does come before his real death, leaving him to face the latter truly alone.

40. According to Framji Minwalla, Roy Cohn is not an advocate of motion, but actually shares the angels’ investment in stasis. As he puts it, Roy’s “worldview converges with that of the Angels—resistant to any change in the social order, adamantly sustaining a power structure that even he has been ejected from” (Framji Minwalla, “When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, eds. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 115). While this convergence is clearly apparent on the level of Roy’s ideology (which he shares with Reagan), through the way he lives—his frenetic activity and his flight from the diagnosis of AIDS, for instance—Roy demonstrates his belief in the power of motion. Be that as it may, however, this overlapping of an investment in stasis and an investment in motion in the

character of Roy shows how they are not really at odds with each other. Motion and stasis can converge—and do, in the character of Roy.

41. It is not insignificant that the departure of God occasions one of the most memorable earthquakes in human history. Earthquakes are, in a sense, phenomena of a world in constant motion because they serve as a reminder that there is, in fact, no stable and permanent ground beneath us, that we have no secure foundation. This is why it is completely appropriate that Los Angeles, a city of motion if there ever was one, should be more prone to earthquakes than any other major city in the United States.

42. Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 12.

43. Shalit, *Return to Modesty*, 193.

44. Shait, *Return to Modesty*, 236.

#### CHAPTER 5. INTERPRETATION UNDER DURESS

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 44.

2. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

3. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 96.

4. The tendency to view the work of art as an experience rather than as a text becomes clear in the ways that both moviegoers and critics talk about film today. One often hears a film characterized as “a good ride,” an identification of the film with the experience of the amusement park, and, in fact, at Universal Studios and other theme parks, films such as *Back to the Future* and *Jurassic Park* have literally become rides.

5. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 190.

6. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 208–209.

7. This anti-universalizing sentiment has perhaps been most visible in the realm of feminism. Mainstream feminists, it is often asserted, violently universalized their own experience, i.e., the experience of the white woman, and ignored the experience of nonwhite women. bell hooks gives this critique of white mainstream feminism its most well-known formulation: “In most of their writing, the white American woman’s experience is made synonymous with *the* American woman’s experience” (bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* [Boston: South End Press, 1981], 137, her emphasis).

8. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 191–92.

9. Hate crimes illustrate this failure perhaps even more remarkably. Whenever an area within the United States becomes the site of a hate crime, the residents of the area immediately insist that this one hate crime is an isolated phenomenon, wholly

anomalous and not reflective of the attitude of the region as a whole. This attitude appeared, for instance, in full force in and around the town of Jasper, Texas, after the brutal murder there of James Byrd by white supremacists.

10. I am indebted to Hilary Neroni for this example.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 60, his emphasis.

12. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 66.

13. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities, or, The End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston. and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 70.

14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), xv. Though there are, of course, obvious differences between the positions of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger vis-à-vis phenomenology, I will speak of them here as synonymous, because, on the question of the priority of experience over interpretation, they are like-minded.

15. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

16. Merleau-Ponty readily admits the inaccessibility of the immediate, direct connection with the world—"the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (xiv)—and yet this is not, for Merleau-Ponty, an argument against the existence of immediate experience. It is almost as if the impossibility of accessing it serves to convince him all the more of its existence.

17. Of course, unlike the first-year literature student, the phenomenologist recognizes that the originary experience of the text is not immediately accessible to the subject. It requires work—the phenomenological reduction—to arrive at it.

18. Heidegger does rightly emphasize that Dasein's relationship to its world remains always ecstatic or out of joint. Even though, for Heidegger, Dasein cannot be conceived beyond its connection to the world, this connection is not a connection implying identity. Dasein continually feels alienation from its life-world, which distinguishes it from other animals who find themselves completely at home in their worlds. While Heidegger does see this necessary alienation of Dasein from the world, he does not take the next step and see the possibility of a complete break.

19. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 190, his emphasis.

20. Heidegger uses the term "Dasein" rather than "subject" precisely in order to avoid this theoretical way of thinking.

21. The great *theoretical* achievement of *Being and Time* occurs in direct contradiction to Heidegger's stated hostility to theorizing and interpretation. As Heidegger himself shows, it is only through theorizing that we can overcome whatever problems theorizing itself has wrought.

22. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 113.

23. The very name “Beloved” represents, in fact, the power of trauma to distort the symbolic order. Sethe, the mother who kills her child to save it from slavery, refers to the daughter that she killed as Beloved, rather than using her name. “Beloved” is the only symbolic marker of the daughter’s existence: Sethe could only afford to have one word put on her tombstone—which was “Beloved”—before she ran out of money. Thus, rather than signifying the lost daughter, the name Beloved fails to signify properly, thus indicating the horror of the trauma that Sethe has endured and the inability of the symbolic order—the realm of universality—to commemorate it properly.

24. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 274.

25. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Intercultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994), 173.

26. Anthony C. Hilfer, “Critical Indeterminacies in Toni Morrison’s Fiction: An Introduction,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 33 (1991): 91.

27. Lisa Garbus, “The Unspeakable Stories of *Shoah* and *Beloved*,” *College Literature* 26, no. 1 (1999): 59.

28. Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 186.

29. James Phelan, “Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 39 (1993): 714. The most famous section of *Beloved* recounts the Middle Passage in a way that evinces the novel’s resistance to language and its emphasis on what the universal cannot capture—what Phelan labels the “stubborn.”

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 119, his emphasis.

31. Many narratives produced today begin with phenomenology, as Morrison does, but, in contrast to *Paradise*, they remain wholly phenomenological, never making clear the presence of the universal. We can see this most clearly in a recent trend in war films, specifically *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998). In these films, plot is minimized, and the events depicted are depicted in order to isolate and capture a *particular* experience. Both films present a phenomenology of war, attempting to capture the war experience without regard to the symbolic frame that invisibly underlies it. This creates the feeling—which is undoubtedly the feeling of the individual soldier—that there is no significance to the battles being fought or to anything that is happening. There are only the horrible *images* of war, not the *symbolic* context in which the war exists. In this sense, both films represent the antitheses of *Paradise*, whose project lies in precisely the opposite direction—making evident the functioning of the symbolic structure that images, especially violent images, work to disguise.

32. The first paragraph of *Jazz* also depicts an act of violence that seems to emerge from nowhere: “When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church” (Toni Morrison, *Jazz* [New York: Penguin, 1993], 3). As in *Paradise*, it is long into the

novel before this initial event begins to make sense. In this way, both *Jazz* and *Paradise* represent a radical departure for Morrison, away from the emphasis on the failure of universality that populated her earlier fiction and toward an emphasis on the continued existence of the universal in the face of its seeming absence. This indicates that, though both *Jazz* and *Paradise* are historical novels, Morrison has written them, at least to some extent, in response to our contemporary situation, in which the universal seems to have receded.

33. Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 3. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

34. J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 194.

35. In a sense, every novel works in the same way—beginning with something that we can't fully understand and then gradually providing the symbolic context. While this is no doubt the case, Morrison's novel makes this process its actual subject matter, taking what occurs inevitably in the novel form and transforming it through the act of paying attention to it.

36. The April 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado provides a "real life" analogue. While conservatives tried to interpret the event as an index of cultural decay and liberals tried to interpret it as the product of the widespread availability of firearms, the predominant response, at least immediately in its wake, was to emphasize the event's complete resistance to explanation. One often heard something like, "It's a senseless tragedy" or "The horror of the event goes beyond all attempts to explain it."

37. The method of interpretation that reduces every event to its symbolic causes and refuses the possibility of an irruption of the Real is what leads Walter Davis to claim in his *Get the Guests*, "We don't need censorship; we have interpretation" (Walter Davis, *Get the Guests: Psychoanalysis, Modern American Drama, and the Audience* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994], 4). In order to avoid making interpretation a mode of censorship, a mode of taming the Real, one must insist upon the necessary gap between symbolic causes and the Real effect. The effect always goes beyond the cause; it is not wholly contained in embryo form in the cause, but is an effect as such only insofar as it can't be reduced to the cause.

38. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 212.

39. Morrison's description of how the eight-rock families received this rejection indicates the extent to which it shattered their symbolic universe: "for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. Serious enough that their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters. The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain" (194).

40. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 334, his emphasis.

41. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan makes clear the opposition between work and jouissance. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 314–15.

42. Though this passage is in the first-person singular, it does not appear as a direct quotation in the novel. That is, Morrison does not distinguish a specific character who is speaking, allowing it to seem as if each and every man might be saying it. Clearly, this statement gives voice to the feelings of each of the men, rather than to the feelings of only the one who articulates it.

43. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 73–74. Because feminine jouissance is “beyond the phallus,” it resists every attempt to describe it or nail it down. Even women themselves cannot pinpoint this jouissance in language. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XIV*, “neither man nor woman has been capable of articulating the least thing that holds up on the subject of feminine jouissance” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967*, unpublished manuscript, session of 7 June 1967, my translation).

44. This idea of the self-sufficiency of feminine enjoyment also explains Morrison’s decision to make the house of the women a “Convent,” rather than, say, a brothel. A convent, even more than a brothel, houses women that eschew the community of men, and thus represents even more of a threat than the latter. Morrison’s convent is doubly threatening, however, because it has the appearance of a brothel. The former owner, an outlaw, had overt sexual images built into the house, in the form of, for example, faucets shaped like women’s breasts. Though the next occupants, the nuns, tried to destroy as many of these images as possible, some proved intractable and remained in the house. Hence, the house, both convent and brothel, brings together all images of feminine enjoyment, at least in the minds of the men of the town.

45. One of the women of the town asks rhetorically, “How would you like to have somebody dancing nasty at your wedding?” (158), suggesting that it isn’t so much what the women are doing, but that they are using this special town event to do it, which outrages the people of the town.

46. Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 225.

47. Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 184.

48. Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 198.

49. In fact, guns, the weapons that the Ruby men employ to eliminate enjoyment, are themselves instruments of enjoyment. This is why the National Rifle Association’s claim that having more “peaceful citizens” carrying guns would limit (or eliminate) crime is flawed. The gun represents an insistence on one’s private enjoyment, and so it has the effect of accentuating the criminality of even the most lawful citizen. When I carry a gun, I am *de facto* saying, “if you encroach upon my private person (or my pri-

vate property), great harm will come to you.” The recognition that the gun is an instrument of private enjoyment is why all *public* buildings—even in Texas—demand that guns be checked at the door.

50. The primary mode of obtaining enjoyment that the teenagers introduce into Pleasantville is, as one would expect, sex: soon after their appearance many of the residents are having sex for the first time. However, the enjoyment that manifests itself in Pleasantville also takes the form of an appreciation of the arts. A love of painting develops in one character, and long lines to check out great novels and books of poetry form at the library. Several scenes depict characters reading poetry to each other on the banks of the river, after or in the midst of sexual encounters. Here, art is yet not stuck in the antiseptic, desexualized world of the museum, and sex is not yet a vehicle for selling commodities. Art is sexualized, and sex is artistic. Through these utopian scenes, *Pleasantville* is returning us to the moment at which the society of prohibition broke down in order to show the possibilities that existed at this point, possibilities that have remained, of course, unrealized in the development of the society of enjoyment.

#### CHAPTER 6. THE APPEAL OF CYNICISM

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969), 134, Hegel’s emphasis.

2. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.

3. We can see both the emphasis on the mind and on mastery present in Kant’s famous description of the Enlightenment from his essay “What Is Enlightenment?” Kant concludes the opening paragraph of this essay by proclaiming, “The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!” (Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2d ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 54).

4. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 540.

5. This is not to say that the cynic completely rejects the existence of a symbolic fiction or a public ideology. Though she herself sees through it, the cynic, in order to sustain her cynicism, must believe that it is effectively deceiving others, the dupes who have allowed themselves to be taken in. This feeling that the symbolic fiction functions successfully for others feeds the cynic’s identification with an ideal ego which is not subject to the restrictions that hamper others.

6. Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (New York: Verso, 1998), 151.

7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 323. The failure of the cynic to see the symbolic structure is what leads Lacan to insist, in the titular words of his *Seminar XXI*, that “the non-duped err.”

8. In the desperate effort to avoid conformity, the cynic de facto makes evident her/his investment in what she/he is trying to avoid. To be truly indifferent is thus not

to eschew the fashion, but to follow it indifferently. Hegel's comments on this, in his discussion of Cynicism in the *History of Philosophy*, are especially poignant today: "The cut of my coat is decided by fashion, and the tailor sees to this; it is not my business to invent it, for mercifully others have done so for me. This dependence on custom and opinion is certainly better than were it to be on nature. But it is not essential that men should direct their understanding to this; indifference is the point of view which must reign, since the thing itself is undoubtedly perfectly indifferent. Men are proud that they can distinguish themselves in this, and try to make a fuss about it, but it is folly to set oneself against the fashion. In this matter I must hence not decide myself, nor may I draw it within the radius of my interests, but simply do what is expected of me" (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995], 484).

9. The distinction between acting-out and the authentic act, between a staged—i.e., a cynical—rebellion and a radical break from symbolic authority manifests itself within *Hamlet*. The play shows us both acts, acting-out and the authentic act, at different points. In Act III, when Hamlet *stages* the play for Claudius, he openly shows his defiance of this uncle, publicly identifying Claudius with the murderer depicted in the play. And yet, at this point, Hamlet remains wholly under the spell of symbolic authority, which is why, just after the performance of the play, he is unable to kill the king when he comes upon him in prayer. The rebellion that the play-within-a-play stages is a case of acting-out. In Act V, however, Hamlet no longer evinces any investment in how he stages his rebellion. He no longer has his former investment in symbolic authority and thus is now able to kill the king, to accomplish an authentic act, even though it means his own death.

10. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, 486.

11. The investment of Diogenes in symbolic authority illustrates the chief problem with Sloterdijk's otherwise insightful *Critique of Cynical Reason*, which holds up Diogenes as a model for the properly oppositional position. Diogenes, according to Sloterdijk, represents "kynicism" as opposed to cynicism. Kynicism mocks public power by revealing its obscene underside, without cynicism's investment in that power. But as the example of Diogenes shows, the line between kynicism and cynicism is not as easy to draw as Sloterdijk would have us believe. Every cynic considers him/herself a kynic, and very often what initially appears as kynical activity is revealed later as cynical, as occurs with Plato and Diogenes. This is because the gesture of mocking authority often sustains a fantasmatic investment in the functioning of that authority.

12. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5, his emphasis.

13. Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You with My Eyes"; or, The Invisible Master," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 101.

14. We know that the widespread contemporary acts of transgression remain within the domain of the big Other precisely because they occasion no disruption in the identity of those doing them. An authentic transgressive act has the effect of stripping away the security of symbolic identity. One cannot accomplish such an act while retaining a "sense of self."

15. The film demonstrates that the price for this “end of violence” is the introduction of a whole new kind of violence, as the attempted assassination of Mike and the successful assassination of Ray prove. We can end violence, the film seems to be saying, but we can only do so violently.

16. This surveillance system is, in a manner of speaking, Foucault’s worst nightmare. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the functioning of “panoptic power,” a power that utilizes widespread surveillance to see everything without allowing itself to be seen. The system that Ray develops works precisely in this way, with small cameras installed all around the city, allowing law enforcement—or whoever occupies the site of power—to have everyone constantly under surveillance.

17. This limited symbolic contact creates a misunderstanding between two sons of one of the gardeners and Mike. The sons wake him up one night to question him, because they are worried that he might be bringing trouble for their father. Mike, of course, has no such intentions, but because there is so little communication between him and the family, this suspicion on the part of the children develops.

18. Because of the power of this fantasy, we see so many films in which a disenchanted Western subject plunges him/herself into the world of the Other in order to find his or her “true self”—a self prior to the fall. This is the primary motif in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Salvador*, *Under Fire*, and *Beyond Rangoon*, just to name a few.

19. It is this aspect of images—their seeming revelation of everything—that prompts Lacan to warn his students against being taken in by Freud’s imagery. Reliance on the image has, according to Lacan, played a central role in the many misunderstandings about psychoanalysis that have developed. As Lacan tells his students, “what we always see being reproduced in the most tightly argued parts of Freud’s texts is something which, while it isn’t quite the adoration of the Golden Calf, is still an idolatry. What I am trying to do here is tear you away from it once and for all. I hope that I will do enough so that one day your tendency to use highly imagistic formulations will disappear” (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli [New York: Norton, 1988], 53).

20. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, unpublished manuscript, trans. Cormac Gallagher, session of 3 July 1963.

21. *Enemy of the State* is a translation of *The End of Violence* into a Hollywood film. Tony Scott, the director of the former, even includes a brief homage to Wenders’s film, to let us know that he is fully conscious of the debt: Gabriel Byrne (Ray in *The End of Violence*) appears in a small cameo role as a cab driver who informs Robert Dean of the conspiracy at work.

22. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X*, session of 28 November 1962.

23. In this sense, Foucaultian fears about a system of total surveillance are misdirected. The problem with such a system isn’t that it will see everything—and thus eliminate all sites of private resistance to public power—but that it will foster the belief that it *can* see everything, thereby creating even more faith in the revelatory power of the image, a faith which has the effect, as we have seen, of causing us to fail to see desire.

## CHAPTER 7. POLITICS OF APATHY

1. The psychoanalytic cure is precisely a refusal of this kind of imaginary satisfaction, and so, in this sense, psychoanalysis as a practice is a mode of political contestation. The point of analysis is not to cure dissatisfaction, but to cure satisfaction, to allow the analysand to see that the satisfaction she has is purely imagined. In opening up the analysand to her Real dissatisfaction, analysis aims at the possibility of a Real transformation. If we understand analysis in this way, we can see how far the charge of “normalization” misses the mark when it is applied to analysis. Rather than adjusting analysands to accept the world or become satisfied with it, analysis works to break them from their compromise satisfaction, thus holding out the possibility of a Real enjoyment.

2. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 107.

3. Lasch, *Revolt*, 47.

4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 24–25.

5. E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 140.

6. Doctorow, *Book of Daniel*, 289.

7. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 23.

8. Carol Iannone, “E. L. Doctorow’s ‘Jewish’ Radicalism,” *Commentary* (March 1986): 53. Henry Claridge celebrates *World’s Fair* precisely because of its abandonment of the political concerns of Doctorow’s earlier novels. In his praise of the novel, he claims that “Doctorow is at his best, like so many other writers, when he ignores his manifesto” (Henry Claridge, “Writing on the Margin: E. L. Doctorow and American History,” in *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature since 1970*, ed. Graham Clarke [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990], 26).

9. Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, *E. L. Doctorow* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 118.

10. The critical reception of *World’s Fair* has focused almost exclusively on these two readings of the novel. According to Claridge, the novel represents a “shift to the autobiographical” which finds “Doctorow replacing the self-examining voice of Daniel with his own” (Claridge, “Writing,” 24). Douglas Fowler argues that “Doctorow’s intention was to recover the emotions of his life, deriving from those things only that which was really in them” (Douglas Fowler, *Understanding E. L. Doctorow* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992], 143). Harter and Thompson claim, “however responsible [the depression] era might have been in shaping Doctorow’s own social convictions, the narrative remains that of the boy as artist, not of the writer as political radical” (Harter and Thompson, *Doctorow*, 118). It has become a critical commonplace to note the connections between Edgar Altschuler and the biography of Doctorow (their shared first names, birth dates, neighborhoods, etc.). Clearly, *World’s Fair* lures us into thinking that its primary importance is as autobiography or as

description of the artist's consciousness in emergent form, but these trails, in the last instance, disguise the novel's underlying political significance.

11. E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York: Random House, 1985), 47. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

12. The fact that this transformation occurs at the 1939 World's Fair is not, as one might suspect, merely coincidence. The World's Fair represents an historical moment of epochal importance, a moment of transition in the structure of capitalism presaging the emergence of "late capitalism." In 1939, the world, still mired in depression, stood on the verge of not only World War II, but also the Keynesian increases in state spending which would both rescue capitalism from its doldrums and forever change the nature of capitalism. The World's Fair itself, as Michael Robertson notes, "promised its visitors a glimpse into the 'World of Tomorrow'" (Michael Robertson, "Cultural Hegemony Goes to the Fair: The Case of E. L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*," *American Studies* 33 [1992]: 31), and in Doctorow's novel, we see a corporate vision of the future late capitalist world in the General Motors Futurama.

13. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 272.

14. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, in *The Oedipus Cycle* (San Diego: Harvest, 1949), 49.

15. Rose knew all along that Norma, a "loose" woman, presented the possibility of sexual knowledge for Edgar, which is why she refused to allow him to visit Norma's house.

16. Robertson, "Cultural Hegemony," 38.

17. Robertson, "Cultural Hegemony," 38.

18. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1995), 191.

19. One reason that the subject isolated in the imaginary wants nothing to do with politics is that from his or her perspective, politics is nothing but a series of violent collisions. It involves one position attempting to impose itself on another, ad infinitum, and so, for such a subject, it is, to put it in Sartrean terms, a "useless passion."

20. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 218.

21. And yet, this alienation of the subject is not something we can simply opt out of and still retain our status as subject. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*, "There is no subject without, somewhere, *aphanisis* of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 221).

22. This is not to say, of course, that politicians don't engage in manipulative lying as well, but even their manipulative lies almost necessarily have a constitutive dimension to them, at least insofar as they are done in response to the Other's desire.

23. Though the subject recoils from the lie in order to remain true to his or her own subjectivity, the recoil from the lie also, ironically, calls into question the status of the subject qua subject. In *Seminar I*, Lacan claims that it is only on the basis of his or her ability to lie that we can recognize the subject: “We are necessarily obliged to admit the speaking subject as subject. But why? For one simple reason—because he can lie. That is, he is distinct from what he says” (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester [New York: Norton, 1988], 194).

#### CHAPTER 8. A MISSING PUBLIC WORLD

1. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 27.

2. Ruth Rendell, *Kissing the Gunner’s Daughter* (New York: Mysterious Press, 1992), 263.

3. Ruth Rendell, *Road Rage* (New York: Dell, 1997), 71. Sherry Turkle, for one, draws the connection between this retreat into privacy and the search for jouissance. According to Turkle, “increasingly, we want entertainment (such as video on demand) that commutes right into our homes. . . . We seem to be in the process of retreating further into our homes, shopping for merchandise in catalogues or on television channels, shopping for companionship via personal ads” (Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999], 235).

4. The exemplary case of the “superiority” of enjoyment at home is watching movies. Watching a movie on video assures me that I won’t be stuck sitting next to a talkative person in the theater, and it allows me, even if I have to go to the bathroom during the movie, to enjoy without interruption simply by touching the “pause” button.

5. Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 49.

6. Sunstein, *Republic.com*, 55.

7. Another significant problem with Putnam’s work is the solution to the declining public world that he advances in the final section of the book. Despite the fact that his description of the transformation toward privacy depicts it as the result of concrete social forces, Putnam’s solution is entirely voluntarist and takes no account of these forces: he argues that we must work to facilitate civic engagement on a societal level and participate ourselves on an individual level. This line of thought reaches the point of absurdity when Putnam calls for entertainment executives to help in turning Americans away from their dependence on television: “Let us challenge those talented people who preside over America’s entertainment industry to create new forms of entertainment that draw the viewer off the couch and into his community” (Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 410). Since convincing couch potatoes to abandon the television for participation in the community would have the effect of putting themselves out of business, it is difficult to imagine those in the entertainment industry responding positively to Putnam’s call.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 36.

9. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 175.

10. As I write, the spread of advertising into the public world has taken yet another step forward. Some municipalities, desperate because of a lack of public financing, have begun to sell advertising on police cars. Here, the overt absence of public neutrality takes on another dimension. We might wonder if a police officer would become a bit reluctant to arrest the local business owner who was directly paying for the police car.

11. Certain private interests today are actually attempting to re-create the public world in a new, privatized way. As Renata Salecl points out in *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*, malls “are destroying the social fabric of suburban towns by causing small shops to go out of business and by offering new, supposedly public spaces in their stead. For the mall developers, it is essential that, on the one hand, the mall appears as the new public space in American suburbia, but on the other hand, that it is legally defined as a private place, which limits the rights of visitors to engage in activities that do not meet with the approval of the mall’s management. In the mall, people are not allowed to hold demonstrations, distribute leaflets, sign petitions, etc., without the permission of the owners. Freedom of speech, therefore, is limited” (Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* [New York: Verso, 1998], 94–95). What Salecl details here is the gradual transformation of public space into a privatized public space. As a result of this change in its status, public space thereby loses all of the qualities that made it distinct from private space: its guarantee of equal access, its bracketing of market laws, and its freedom from enjoyment.

12. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

13. Fraser, “Rethinking,” 11.

14. This is not Fraser’s position. She proposes not ridding ourselves of the idea of a public sphere, but rethinking the idea in order that it take into account social inequalities, thereby achieving authentic neutrality rather than just the illusion of it.

15. Though our jury system attests to the importance of effective fictions, we are often reluctant to accept them today, preferring to “see things as they really are.” An example from my own past attests to this reluctance. I was teaching in an academic department where a dispute arose over the question of merit pay. Some members of the department, upset with the way merit pay had been awarded, expressed a desire for an objective, quantitative system for deciding which faculty members would receive merit pay. This idea encountered vociferous and widespread resistance, but it was finally dealt its deathblow when an opposing faculty member made the “obvious” point that such a system would provide the illusion of objectivity and fairness without actually achieving it. Better to have a subjective system that we know is subjective, than a subjective one that appears in the guise of an objective

one, so he claimed. But what this faculty member missed was precisely the importance of the effective fiction. Even though the new system of evaluation wouldn't actually have been objective, the illusion of objectivity would *effectively* produce a fairer system than the old, blatantly subjective one (where the department chair made all decisions about merit pay by fiat), which lacked even the illusion of objectivity. This very mode of argumentation exemplifies the contemporary blindness to the effective fiction.

16. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 183, her emphasis.

17. Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 183, her emphasis.

18. We can see the binding power of disaster in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks. The attacks produced a widespread sense of a public bond and sense of obligation to the public world among American subjects. Properly speaking, however, the September 11th attacks didn't change anything in American society, which testifies to the prevalence of the society of enjoyment. One of the salient, if underreported, features of the American social climate after the September 11th attacks was the *absence* of any increase at all in military enlistment. This marks a clear contrast with the immediate aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack that commenced American involvement in World War II, when military enlistment ballooned (even though enlistment then meant entry into a far more deadly conflict than the "War against Terror"). The outburst of post-September 11th patriotism confined itself to primarily to acts—such as displaying the flag—that left the subject safe within its private world.

19. This is the controlling idea in *Independence Day* (1996). In fact, the film goes out of its way to stress that the alien attack has united, among others, Israeli and Arab.

20. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 88, my emphasis.

21. The specific city in which the film takes place remains ambiguous, though it is clearly a large city in California. This ambiguity suggests that this is the story of "every city" in the society of enjoyment.

22. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), 142.

23. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 88–89. I have normalized the spelling in this and the following quotation from *Leviathan*.

24. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 89.

25. The opening shot of the wolves misleads us insofar as it suggests that the human violence that follows in the film mirrors this kind of natural violence. As we shall see, despite the seeming absence of a symbolic bond in the film, the struggle for recognition—which indicates the presence of a symbolic dimension—plays a central role in every violent encounter that we witness.

26. Here we see one of the ways in which sexual difference impacts the way in which the subject experiences the society of enjoyment. Because the ideal of noncas-

tration haunts the male subject in a way that it does not haunt the female subject, the male subject experiences even more guilt for his failure to heed the command to enjoy. He is also more reluctant than the female subject to enter into the public world in this society because that world demands the sacrifice of his *jouissance*. For the female subject, the situation is not as menacing because the ideal of noncastration is not lurking behind her symbolic identity. As Lacan notes in *Seminar XIV*, “the woman does not have to make the same sacrifice since it is already credited to her account from the beginning” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967*, unpublished manuscript, session of 19 April 1967, my translation).

27. Matthew may in fact be including this preamble to his action in order to prompt Annie to ask him *not* to speak up. If this were true, the preamble would indicate Matthew’s reluctance to act, his fear that the other would get the better of him in the encounter. And if this were really Matthew’s intent, it fails completely when Annie seconds his proposed action.

28. The proliferation of security systems today also indicates the extent to which paranoia has become the *de facto* mode of relating to the other in the society of enjoyment. If there are only competing private worlds, then it becomes difficult to be anything but paranoid in relating to the other. As a result, in the last forty years paranoia and conspiracy theory has moved from the margins to the mainstream in American life. In his account of the rise of today’s paranoid culture, Peter Knight notes that “conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone” (Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* [New York: Routledge, 2000], 3).

29. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 230.

30. Teresa Brennan, *History after Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32.

31. In her attempt to develop a Lacanian theory of history, Brennan notes precisely the dynamic at work with the ego in the city: “the city’s spatial restrictions result in needs to escape on the one hand, and an increased social aggressiveness on the other” (Brennan, *History after Lacan*, 41).

32. Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 28.

33. To the extent that we are monads without windows in the society of enjoyment, this society represents an uncanny realization of Leibniz’s philosophy. Leibniz insists that the universe consists of monads and that each monad exists in utter isolation from every other monad and experiences no external influence. What allows these monads to agree about the nature of the world is not the fact that they share a common experience but that God aligns the experiences of each monad in what Leibniz calls a preestablished harmony. This preestablished harmony makes it possible for monads to feel as if they share a world, when in fact they don’t. Thus, one might say that today we have a Leibnizian universe of isolated monads in which the mediating function of God has become obscured (which would be, to translate into Lacanian terms, the Name of the Father).

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 CHAPTER 9. EXPLOSIONS OF INCIVILITY,  
 AGRESSIVENESS, AND VIOLENCE

1. As Philippe Van Haute notes, this sense of not measuring up to the enjoying other is an experience that occurs on the imaginary level. It thus coincides with the predominance of the imaginary in the society of enjoyment. Van Haute says, “imaginary relations are marked by a specific form of *aggressivity*. The ego comes to be in and through an identification with an image: I am the other. For the ego that lives believing in its equivalence with the image, every inequivalence will be unbearable, and will provoke aggressivity” (Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation: Lacan’s “Subversion” of the Subject*, trans. Paul Crowe and Miranda Vankerck [New York: Other Press, 2002], 85, his emphasis).

2. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 116.

3. Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 77. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

4. Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 60.

5. As cultural historian Kristin Ross points out, the car continues to provide an isolated, private space even when roads become overcrowded with other cars. She says, “With the actual decline in mobility brought on by mass car consumption, the inviolate shell of the car can still provide, though in a weakened form, the liberty from social constraint that speed once promised to provide” (Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995], 55).

6. The stain of incivility in Carter’s book also manifests itself in other ways as well. Carter confesses in a footnote that his family home is equipped with a burglar alarm, even though he recognizes that it *might* imply some incivility. The elliptical nature of this discussion reveals how the appeal of private enjoyment subtly undermines the deepest commitment to civility. The footnote says, “My Yale Law School colleague Ian Ayres points out that installing a burglar alarm, or at least affixing an alarm company’s sticker to a window (what legal theorists call ‘specific deterrence’), may be viewed as an act of incivility. Why? Because, he says, there is little functional difference between putting a sign on my house that says ‘Burglar Alarm Equipped’ and putting a sign on my house that says ‘Break into Somebody’s Else’s House, I Don’t Care Whose, as Long as It Isn’t Mine.’ On this point, I suppose my family’s commitment to civility must seem weak: our house is equipped with both a burglar alarm and a decal proclaiming its presence” (185). On one level, Carter recognizes that the burglar alarm represents an uncivil gesture and is thus incompatible with the logic of his project, but on another level, the safeguarding of his private enjoyment exerts a powerful call. It represents Carter’s own refusal to accept the precariousness of enjoyment—its inherent partiality. Like his scorn for public education, the alarm in the house indicates the nearly universal appeal of incivility in the society of enjoyment, even in the most dedicated proponents of civility.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 155. Of course, the constitutive role of the state relative to the family is precisely what one misses when reading the *Philosophy of Right* as a *chronological* account of the development of right (*Recht*), as many interpreters do. Read in this way, the family is prior to the state, and thus it seems as if the family serves as the foundation on which the state rests, when Hegel's point is in fact precisely the opposite. If one reads the *Philosophy of Right* as a history of right, one must read it as pre-history of the present, as history seen backward from the point of view of the present. Only in this sense can the family lead to the state.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right, Heidelberg 1817–1818 with Additions from the Lectures of 1818–1819*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 294.

9. Carter balks at the state's authority insofar as it challenges his private religious beliefs. Interestingly enough, this valuing of private religious convictions over the concerns of the state earns Hegel's particular rancor. He says, "Those who 'seek guidance from the Lord' and are assured that the whole truth is directly present in their unschooled opinions, fail to apply themselves to the task of exalting their subjectivity to unconsciousness of the truth and to knowledge of duty and objective right. The only possible fruits of their attitude are folly, abomination, and the demolition of the whole ethical order, and these fruits must inevitably be reaped if the religious disposition holds firmly and exclusively to its intuitive form and so turns against the real world and the truth present in it in the form of the universal, i.e. of the laws" (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 167).

10. As president, Bush perfectly represents the attitude of the society of enjoyment toward the state. Even in the position of chief executive, the head of the state, Bush continues to experience the state as an alien, private entity, against which he must do battle. Whenever he achieves a legislative victory, he inevitably insists that it represents a triumph over the ways of "Washington." Though wrapped in state power, Bush sees the state not as a public entity but as a private competitor he must work to best.

11. In the 1990s, this fear about the theft of enjoyment manifested itself clearly in the two landmark ballot initiatives passed in California in the 1990s. It sparked the passage of both Proposition 187 (barring "undocumented" immigrants from state social services) and Proposition 209 (outlawing state-sponsored affirmative action). The logic behind them went something like this: immigrants and minorities are *enjoying* services and advantages that I'm not *enjoying*, and I'm more deserving (because I'm a U.S. citizen, because I work hard, etc.). Both of these propositions were efforts to wrest enjoyment back from the other who had "stolen" it with the help of government social services or hiring practices.

12. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 61.

13. Here, Vinny experiences the anxiety that results from coming too close to the jouissance of the other, which he is unable to recognize as his own. As Robert Harari notes, "*The subject fervently desires something, but when faced with the threat of actually carrying it out, of the Erfüllung as Freud puts it, of the desire, anxiety is not long in making*

*an appearance: desire has reached a terrain in which the approach to and of jouissance is unbearable*" (Robert Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety": An Introduction*, trans. Jane C. Lamb-Ruiz [New York: Other Press, 2001], 102, his emphasis).

14. Victoria E. Johnson, "Polyphony and Cultural Expression: Interpreting Musical Traditions in *Do the Right Thing*," in *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*, ed. Mark A. Reid (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52.

15. One might read this song as a critique of the paranoia that it seems to endorse, especially in light of its last line, which undercuts everything that has preceded it. But when George W. Bush took it as his theme song in the 2000 Presidential campaign, he was clearly not conscious of—or just ignoring—this final ironic twist. Of course, it should not be surprising that Bush, an extraordinarily representative figure of the society of enjoyment, chose "Won't Get Fooled Again" as his theme song. Its seeming insistence of reclaiming lost enjoyment helps to underline Bush's promise to deliver to us the enjoyment that Clinton and Gore were stealing for eight years. However, this use of the song demands the omission of its last line. Ironically, when the campaign used the song for the first few times, they allowed it to play in its entirety, thereby inadvertently including these final words—"Meet the new boss, same as the old boss." They soon corrected this mistake and provided Bush supporters with an expurgated version.

16. I am indebted to Hilary Neroni for this discussion of the Columbine shooting.

17. It is perhaps emblematic of President Clinton that he linked the violence to *both* the availability of guns *and* the moral decay in the culture.

18. Ironically, the first piece of legislation proposed in the wake of the Columbine violence required child safety locks for handguns. Such safety locks, while undoubtedly effective in preventing young children from firing guns, would have done nothing to stop what happened at Columbine. The fact that members of Congress choose to begin with this particular focus, despite its tangential status vis-à-vis Columbine, reveals the widespread belief that what is needed is more authority. The child safety lock is the objective correlative of that authority.

19. Jacques Lacan, "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 25.

20. During the time of the shooting, I was teaching a graduate seminar on the influence of Hegel on subsequent theorists, and we were in the midst of reading Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. In this overdetermined situation, students in the class were sorely tempted to interpret Columbine in light of the struggle for recognition, seeing the shooting itself as the result of the popular students' refusal to recognize the members of the Trench Coat Mafia, or as an act of the colonized Mafia freeing itself from the yoke of the colonizer through violence.

21. Harris and Klebold's investment in the big Other reveals itself in the tapes that they made prior to the shooting. In the tapes, they imagine themselves as the subjects of a future film, and they discuss the recognition that that they believe their act will garner them. This information from the tapes suggests that, even if it results in their deaths, their shooting spree is driven by an investment in symbolic *life* and a failure to embrace symbolic *death*.

## CONCLUSION

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 69–70.

2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 87.

3. Throughout *Seminar V*, Lacan insists that the phallic signifier—the signifier of authority and law—is always there for the subject as a third party, mediating every relationship, even the seemingly private bond between the subject and the mother. The problem is, however, that the subject fails to see this mediating presence of the phallic signifier and therefore trusts in its own autonomy (and isolation). This failure becomes increasingly pronounced in the society of commanded enjoyment, where the phallic signifier disguises itself more subtly than in the society of prohibition. Thus, the role of psychoanalysis in allowing the subject to recognize its position relative to the phallic signifier becomes more exigent as well. Psychoanalysis frees the subject to the extent that it makes evident the hidden mediating presence of the phallus. According to Lacan, “The elucidation of the relation of the subject to the phallus [. . .] is the sole proper way permitting us to conceive the ideal achievement that Freud articulated in his “*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient, 1957–1958* [Paris: Seuil, 1998], 486, my translation).

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 91–92.

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