

THE PROJECTOR RESTS ON A PILE OF BOOKS:
VOID AND MEDIUM IN POSTWAR U.S. CULTURE

By Matthew Allen Tierney

A.B., Cornell University, 2000

M.A., University of California—Santa Cruz, 2006

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dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date _____
Ellen Rooney, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date _____
Rey Chow, Reader

Date _____
Daniel Kim, Reader

Date _____
Michael Silverman, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____
Peter M. Weber, Dean of the Graduate School

MATTHEW ALLEN TIERNEY

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Modern Culture & Media, Brown University (Providence, RI)—2012
M.A., Literature, University of California (Santa Cruz, CA)—2006
A.B. Cum Laude, American Studies, Cornell University (Ithaca, NY)—1999

PUBLICATIONS

“Oh no, not again!: Representability and a Repetitive Remark.”
Image & Narrative 11:2 (2010)
Review of Jonathan Auerbach, *Dark Borders: Film Noir & American Citizenship*.
Film Criticism 36:2 (2012)

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS:

“A Breath of Dissent: Novel Histories and Political Denarration”
Society for Novel Studies, 2012
“Breathing, Talking Politics: Disastrous Liberalism and the Prose of Mere Dissent”
American Comparative Literature Association, 2012
“Unreasonable Preference and Critical Poiesis”
Modern Language Association, 2012
“The Medium of Power and the Gaping Wounds of Empire”
American Comparative Literature Association, 2011
Nominated for the Horst Frenz Prize
“The Present Is a Void: Van Wyck Brooks and the Contingent Literary Past”
Modern Language Association, 2011
“Dumb Blankness Full of Meaning”
World Picture Conference, 2010
“The Projector Rests on a Pile of Books: Cultural Studies, Cinema, and Literariness”
Cultural Studies Association, 2010

FELLOWSHIPS

Graduate fellowship, Pembroke Center, Brown University
Graduate fellowship, Graduate School, Brown University
Dissertation completion fellowship, Graduate School, Brown University

LANGUAGE

French

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Cultural Studies Association
Modern Language Association
Society for Novel Studies
American Comparative Literature Association
Society for Cinema and Media Studies

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INTRODUCTION: THE MEDIUM AND VOID OF NATIONAL CULTURE

*"Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void
of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history?"*
—Ralph Ellison (1952)

"He who leaps into the void owes no explanation to those who watch."
—Jean-Luc Godard (1958)

I. Nation

This dissertation is a study of political formalisms and literary and film aesthetics in the United States during the two decades that followed the Second World War. I am especially concerned with what was often called "the void": a principle of rhetorical and technical negativity in postwar cultural practices that pried at the cracks in early Cold War ideology and that lodged there as the possibility of as-yet-unimagined forms of social and aesthetic life. I am interested as well in how the void impacted and distorted the concept of "medium," a principle of culture's material form that was highly contentious during the same period. By tracing the path taken by voids as they travel through media, I mean to describe some of the negative and loose textural properties of postwar culture that have been overlooked in contrast and contradistinction to their positive and technical properties. What results of this description is a spatial modeling, or formalism, of the political entanglements, cultural production, and critical intellectual writing of the United States during the period between World War II and the rise of Sixties social movements.

During those years, the void was not a negativity in any pure, unitary, or transcendental sense. In any case, mine is not an ontological approach to void and has little to say about the being of categories of political otherness, or about their exclusion from procedures of political deliberation. Rather, I focus on the void as a variegated text, and as a hollowed-out site of contestation residing within literary, cinematic, and political cultures of the postwar: a rhetorical and poetic figure for exclusion, death, or absence, rather than what might be called exclusion, death, or

absence “as such.” The void was a symbolic site, in other words, where fleeting contact could occur among political identities, or between media, that had not yet cohered into their present institutional and ideological forms, and yet that had already begun to degrade. The void takes many legible forms. Thus, for example, the void was a place where the very concept of “race” begins to come apart just as new forms of Black radicalism begin to come together. For another example, the void was where political fear, over the threat of the bomb or the risk of complicity, becomes indistinguishable from political conviction. And at last, for present purposes anyway, the void was where literature and film could battle one another for expressive territory. In all instances, what is at stake is the openness or closedness of national (as well as subnational) identities in their constitution of national (as well as transnational and postnational) communities.

The postwar period itself is often considered as the sum of attributes that are fully and positively expressed, even when such attributes are also fraught and dynamic. Anxiety about sexuality and gender roles; protestation among American races; tension between conservatives and liberals, as between liberals and radicals; strain between federal and state governments, as between U.S. and Soviet governments; unease about both the communicative and the destructive potential of emergent technologies: all of these are phenomena that are positively expressed, fully visible across the representational modes of U.S. culture. Moreover, in general, these phenomena also contributed to the shifts toward cultural consensus and containment in the United States during those years. What licenses consensus is thus its capacity to produce and accommodate even what would seem to exceed it. So it is that the social phenomena—anxiety, protest, tension, strain, unease—should exert themselves in the dissensual terms of contestation, disidentification, and break, rather than in contained or consensual terms, and yet still be reducible to consensus politics. In an ever-narrowing field, consensus converts the languages of negation and

conflict into a language of placid, positive stance-taking. Objections thus get included within the frame of consensus, while opposition becomes just another position and the constitutive fact of exclusion is itself excluded. The void is thus not a kind of dissent, but rather a point within the consensual field where consensus is shown to be incomplete, faulty, non-totalizing, and yet perhaps always in the process of being made.

A model for this way of looking at consensus in the postwar period might be seen in one of the first book-length studies of the period's literature, Tony Tanner's 1971 book *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*. For Tanner, postwar culture was characterized by a struggle between formal rigidity and formal looseness, as between closed and open forms of language and national identity. He cites images of fluidity and disaggregation in fiction of the period and offers them in contradistinction to images of constraint and convention, thus restating the bind:

Clay, jelly, jelly-fish—what this image cluster suggests [in its guidance of postwar fiction] is the dread of utter formlessness, of being a soft vulnerable, endlessly manipulable blob, of not being a distinct self. The nightmare of non-identity, of no-form, is a recurrent one. On the other hand, any one adopted armature which will contain and give shape and definition to the jelly or clay is at the same time felt to be an imprisoning deathly constriction. (18)

To Tanner, postwar literature is flanked on one side by dissolution and flux and on the other side by rigid institutional stricture—it belongs, he says citing the novelist James Purdy, to “a nation of frozen jelly-fish.” But might the period's culture and aesthetics also open up a space where action might be taken within and against the normative armature, within and against consensus? Might there be a strategic management of the oppositions of identity and non-identity? Of form and no-form? Tanner asks the question in just these terms: “Can the binary opposition of fixity/fluidity be mediated by some third state or term?” (19) And then he answers that yes, indeed “there is a third or mediating area in which the writer searches for his freedom and his form—and that of course is *verbal space*” (19, my emphasis). That

third space is the void with which this dissertation is mainly concerned: insofar as the void is a spatial figure and a medium (a “mediating area”) for formal, symbolic manipulations of identity and language (a “verbal space”). The void is a host to both form and movement, where these may exert themselves against the uselessness of total structure as well as against the senselessness of total fluidity. Within this “mediating area” of certain cultural texts, the nation makes itself apparent not as Purdy’s frozen jellyfish, but instead as blankness, as void. Terrifying in its metaphoricity, the nation is multiform, mobile, and as enormous as Melville’s whale.

As it emerges in the fiction and film and the poetry and criticism of postwar culture, the void is a contentless site of negotiation and contestation. And as Tanner suggests, it is also a medium. But as a medium, it is not reducible to technical substrates or means of communication. Rather it is a figural condensation of the problematic of mediation: in-betweenness, the difference between consensus and itself, the suppressed problematic of contestation, conflict, and structural exclusion. The cost of ignoring these voids has been high, since even the critics of consensus politics have tended to agree that such a consensus did in fact exist. The void would insist upon something else, however, in maintaining an empty place within the postwar cultural plenitude. The problem is just how Louis Althusser put it in his initial call for symptomatic reading in *Reading Capital* (I have modified the translation, but left Althusser’s emphasis intact):

If we suppress our dotted lines [*pointillés*]—our blanks [*blancs*]—we merely reconstitute a sentence that, if taken literally, designates in itself these *places of void* [*vide*], restores these dotted lines as so many sites of a lack [*manque*] produced by the “fullness” of the utterance itself. (23)

In this light, to situate a study of postwar culture in terms of the void is not to deny the fullness of consensus, but rather to insist upon the made but incomplete qualities of the purportedly full narrative and representational forms that consensus took. To analyze the concept of “medium” under the sign of such a study, then, is to work

against the commonest methods of theorizing film and literature of this period, in which we find fullness in each medium as well as in the media landscape to which we now regard them as having belonged. It is to deny that there was any single axis of postwar political contention (one that would link youth cultures or domestic containment to, say, the struggles of a “minority group”) that guided postwar cultural production.

To see how void and medium interact in film and literature is also to reject out of hand the matter of fidelity that steers so many studies of adaptation. Instead, I read literature and film for formal signs of negative contestation, and find that mediated culture, like racial, gendered, and other conflicts, must be examined in its differential structures, not just in the separate terms that it brings together and opposes. These conflicts are formal and thematic tropes. And, as tropes, they carry the tremendous transformative capacity of rhetorical and poetic language to mold the culture and its epistemology. Void and medium manifested in texts, and thence affected the forms of knowledge that we now have for talking about those texts. The void is one historically significant term for the division or split that is imposed upon social and political space, and that covertly enters the basic language that is used to talk about any conflicts and contest that may enter there. The medium is a way of organizing objects in culture that is then taken to be an innate quality of those objects. Together, void and medium (medium as void, void as medium) anchor a differential structure that both disrupts and anchors national identities in postwar culture.

The void is what Pierre Macherey saw as the “real and necessary discontinuity” that marks the fractured mirror of literary ideology (122). In the postwar period, it does not contribute to the triumphal narratives of successful rebellion or rise as a flag of political surrender. Instead, the void is merely legible, a momentary effect in those narratives of textual and political incoherence.

Ultimately, the void can be any manifestly negative space in a postwar text. In such spaces, ideology may brush up against its opposite, and spark a form of critical political knowledge in whose fire ideology could not survive. The void is a symptom of media cultures: an element and effect of aesthetic form (though not a hidden secret, a product of artistic genius, or a politically autonomous action) in the sense given to that term by Macherey along with Althusser. As a symptom, the void can be found in moments of rhetorical excess and intermedial reference that are built into the period's works of fiction, film, poetry, art, and criticism, irrespective of their canonical or non-canonical status. The void marks the semantically undecidable entanglements and disentanglements that occur among the period's shifting regimes of race, class, and gender antagonism, as well as within the increasingly popular awareness of nuclear and anti-communist threats. The void is an intermedial divide, as well as an interruption of the discourse of communications technology and "medium," emergent during the postwar years. And the void is a crack or formal incoherence in the dominant political identities that define the American nation.

In comprehending the postwar era in terms that are negative, stylistic, and ephemeral (terms that commingle with more positive articulations of tendencies toward repression, technologization, or rebellion), I am reacting in part against the unchecked growth of the field of new media studies. That field has lately evinced an appetite for cultural objects, apparatuses, and texts that were previously thought to be separate from mediatic discourses of telecommunication and technology. Not just print or painting, but also puppetry, policing, public protest, and innumerable other objects all become, simply put, media technologies first, and objects of art or politics only in their secondary applications. To call such a pre-mediatic object a medium, I would argue, is to close down its negative form in order to slot it comfortably into a positive category. By contrast, I refuse to accept any explanation of productive modes and materials that sees them only as mediatic in the positive and often

technocratic terms that the term medium too often implies. I thus take a position within a revitalizing field of cultural studies that I believe is ready for a different kind of receptivity toward media. And I seek to put objects of the traditionally recognized media (print, film, television) through the paces of figural reading; to devise an approach that is both materialist and textual; and to exhaust some of the positivist faculties of technocracy and communication, while stirring from objects of print, film or television a faint, negativist breath of something otherwise, a whiff of aesthetic and political potential.

What I insist upon is a mode of cultural thinking whose axis is aesthetic and political, rather than just technical and interpersonal. Such a form of thinking sees subjects as having formed through acts of reading and denies any assumption of a social or political subject who is in any way preconstituted or given before the moment of its becoming legible. Ultimately, this way of thinking takes a position on the past while also investing in present theories of subjectivity and reading. This does not mean discarding the descriptive languages of technology and medium. To the contrary, I hope to retain and broaden the available definitions of those terms while also examining a moment in their re-theorization and cultural spread, and raising questions about medium.

2. Void

After the aesthetic adventure of modernism and the technological advancements of wartime—the atomic bomb and early computers, but also the newly broad availability of mass media—the postwar period developed an abundance of new cultural forms. Because so-called “new media” had not yet established themselves, these forms remain irreducible to the categories of medium that we might now, with retrospection, seek to apply to them. Moreover, a great many of those forms really were marked with fractures and blind spots, both real and

metaphorical. A great many of the era's artists, writers, filmmakers, and producers of mass culture were preoccupied with the possible range of void-forms, as they turned to specific tropes of falsity, emptiness, alienation, isolation, misrecognition, and the failures of communication or identity.

The examples proliferate: Hugh Kenner built his transformative critique of modernism in part on a "revenge of the void" that took shape in the works of Wyndam Lewis and James Joyce; the popular Christian theologian Paul Tillich advocated a cultural theology that should manifest as "a theology of the end of culture, not in general terms but in a concrete analysis of the inner void of most of our cultural expressions" (83); and the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*—translated either as *emptiness* or as *void*—came to fix the attention of numerous hip scholars and poets. (A preoccupation of D.T. Suzuki, America's key philosopher of zen, and an originating concern of the comparative journal *Philosophy East and West*, *sunyata* was also an increasingly popular poetic device that Philip Whalen called "a Void/an empty figure containing/all that's multiplied" (44).)

The notions and formations of void pervaded U.S. culture at all its levels and in all its media, and was most clearly spelled out in these works of intellectual culture and critical prose. Yet the preoccupation with void went far deeper and wider. We might think, for example, about apocalyptic films that come out of science fiction (e.g. Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) or out of fantasies of total nuclear annihilation (Roger Corman's, *The Day the World Ended*). We might also look at how literary texts took up paranoia with regard to forgery and imposture (William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Patricia Highsmith's *Talented Mr. Ripley*, much of the work of Philip K. Dick) or how it tried to manage the dissolution of religious authority (Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*). All these objects appear against a field of art that featured key experiments in black or blue monochrome by Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt

among others, the popular reception of Yves Klein's famed *Void* series (1958-9), and John Cage's 1952 composition without instruments, 4'33.

In his 1961 collection *Silence*, Cage summed up an ethos that might describe much of the decade's cultural output: "Our poetry now / is the realization / that we possess / nothing...Nothing more than / nothing / can be said" (111). Warding off the truest failures of dense language and unendurable time, the void was marked out as a negativity that was not absolutely vacuous, but that was instead textually open. A sign of semantic and political possibility, it was a kind of cross between the clichés "blank page" and "blank slate." Without any content or capacity to communicate, the void may thus also be unassimilable to any available concept of medium—a concept that itself settled during the same period into the identification with electronics and communication that it possesses today—but that would always require a medium through which to be represented. The void permitted some thinkers and artists to begin addressing the more positivist elements of postwar culture, as Susan Sontag did in 1964 when she famously declared her intention to "*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more" by emptying out some of the pressing "conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness" (14). This dissertation's emphasis upon aesthetics is continuous with Sontag's efforts as well as those of Cage and Althusser, in that it regards art, literature, music, film, and belles lettres to be inconclusive clues into the culture that produces them. In other words, while objects of culture are what crowd modern life, each object alone, when subjected to the pleasures of a void-attentive reading, can begin to yield a degree of negative space or wiggle room.

Perhaps a better and more precise way to think about this wiggle room is through the literary theoretical language of openness, a language that also first gained purchase during the period, in books such as Robert M. Adams's *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (1958), and that was soon made popular, at least among

some scholars, by Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta* (1962). Adams had seen the openness of a literary work in its multiplicity of available interpretations, its deviation from common conventions, and its consequently variable impact upon culture, asking: "Does the open form serve to express one sort of world view, one definition of the human situation, better than another?"; and answering that "works in the open form...often imply an image of man as an essentially divided and self-antagonistic creature" (17, 208). Eco, not long afterward, came to see openness as both a general quality of literary art and a particular quality of avant-garde work: both a common rule by which "every work of art...is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings" and the narrow potential of certain experimental forms that "though organically completed, are 'open' to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover" (63). In Adams's perspective, an open text could capture the fragmentation of modern subjectivity, while in Eco's view, openness was both a type of polysemy belonging to all texts, and a hermeneutic demand issued by powerful modernist works. Both of these ways of looking at openness—formalist/subjective and social/linguistic—get folded into the production of void aesthetics during the postwar.

Describing the political context of his position on openness, Eco wrote that in the late 1950s and early 1960s: "moving toward a point of total rupture at the level of...the global communication by which a society continues to exist" meant that "we had to smash the very media of communication." The American forms of void were implicitly opposed, I would argue, to those same ideals that Eco's Italian avant-garde had opposed: "communication" and "mediation." Fencing with forms of technology that would bring the world into tighter and more crowded communication, the American aesthetics of void—of loose contradictions and open futures—makes for a radical form of political and social unbinding. The aesthetics of void is opposed to the technologies of communication as well as the politics of identity. It may appear

facile to map the form and technology of culture onto such social and political configurations as nation and identity, but as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written, “the world actually writes itself with the...openness of a work of literature” (95). From such a perspective, worlded inscriptions are susceptible to literary modes of interpretation, especially those that would seek out textual forms of void and openness in oft-neglected works of literature, film, and political speech. In reading these works, we stretch them thinly the world, not as geopolitical maps or diagnostic diagrams, but instead as translucent guides to a future that remains to be written, about national, technical, and identitarian forms.

The void has its cousins in the European critical theory of the later twentieth century, from Jacques Derrida’s *trace* to Michel Foucault’s *thought of the outside* to what actually called *void* in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, the literary fiction and theory of Maurice Blanchot, and the theories of community of Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Roberto Esposito. As will become evident, my historical approach is informed by these diverse (and at points incommensurable) theoretical positions and poetic images. But I am generally less interested in the family relations among master-theorists and more intrigued by the forms of void that fill the postwar American archive. I take as points of departure such objects as: Richard Wright’s misbegotten film work and postwar nonfiction; Paul Goodman’s engagement with the kinds of speech possible in the “Fertile Void” of contemporary culture; Jonas Mekas and Allen Ginsberg’s joint attempt at an intermedial yet unmediated “film-poem”; Sterling Hayden’s terrified flight from movie acting into prose writing and public intellection; the fearless flight from literature by the first founders of the Society for Cinematologists; and the aesthetic critique of postwar “post-politics” by the scholars and artists behind the Melville Revival.

The period that I analyze starts right after the Second World War, reaches its apex in the late 1950s, and achieves a kind of endpoint around 1966. That was

when Adams would argue that the “void”—which he defined as “the willful submission of oneself to non-experience as an active form of experience”—had been the very central preoccupation of the period just passed (3). That same year, as well, Foucault would write a major retrospective essay on the work of Blanchot, in which he identified “*le vide*” as having been the critical focus of the latter’s radical *pensée du dehors*, or “thought from outside.” Moreover, in that very year, Jacques Lacan arrived on American shores, speaking (at a famed conference at The Johns Hopkins University on the futures of structuralism) about a contemporary subjectivity that should be theorized in terms of “lack, loss, or void”—rather than the terms of a Sartrean *néant*—and locatable only in “the sliding and the difficulty of seizing, the never here” (196). By the time all this happened, by the time Lacan arrived and Foucault was translated, the void had already been established in American film and letters as a significant mode of negative representation. The dissertation focuses upon this preceding period.

The void in postwar American culture, appears to originate in at least three sites: the emphasis, especially by Western Buddhists (and among them, especially by philosophers), upon conceptions of *Sunyata*; the Greek tradition in atomist physics and poetics, traceable to Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius; and perhaps most forcefully, in the set of romantic and modernist techniques, such as irony, allegory, *ostranenie*, as well as other forms of so-called “spacing” or “distance.”¹ Over the course of the dissertation, I will do some work to loosen this dense knot of encounters. But still there is too much, and a complete genealogy would have resulted in a different kind of work than the present dissertation. From the standpoint of philosophical aesthetics, the void (a concept, a formal problematic, a thematic device) has been,

¹ Yet of course it is more complicated than this. What of Blaise Pascal’s emphasis on the persistence of the placeholder zero? And what of the ontological visions that explicitly conceptualize a void, like that of Leibniz, as against those that explicitly deny it, like that of Spinoza?

very separately, each of the things I've invoked. Yet at the same time that the void belongs to all these traditions, the middle of the Twentieth Century is, among other things, the period in which these lines of thinking and making negativity come to collide and become indistinct, at the same time that they came to the forefront of both aesthetic and political strategy.

So independent of the causal lines and isomorphic accidents that pull together these diverse lines of negative thinking, I focus on that late phase of the void's career in intellectual and cultural history, when its knotted genealogy becomes a concrete, though indistinct, object in itself. What then is that twisted version of void that expresses itself in postwar U.S. culture? In poetic and rhetorical terms, the void is a figure. This may sound counter-intuitive, as if The Void (a proper name that, when capitalized, looks as if it should be spoken in a dark and thunderous voice) might instead be defined as the absence of any figures in the universe, an absolutely bare form of negation, like God or His absence, the soul, or radical evil. In fact, as this dissertation shows by way of a limited set of examples, void has been something very different: a disruption in the smooth functioning of symbolic and often destructive concepts of "race," "empire," "language," or "technology."

3. Medium

What are cinema and literature? And, more importantly, what are they to each other, and how are we to describe the force of the void that separates them? These evidently simple questions are ones that I must raise at the outset, and ones that I hope will not resolve. For me, the film-literature divide is not an ontological problem that might be answered by delineating the precise nature or essence of each of the two cultural forms—rather, it is an ongoing political challenge to the epistemological question of what we think we know about creativity and activity in the world. As far as I am concerned, literature and film are more than mere

representational forms. As media of representation, yes, in part, both drive mimetically toward showing and describing a world that both inhabit. Both make and unmake that world for the benefit of separate audiences, and both produce or enable microcommunities of connoisseurs and fans. But as dynamic aesthetic modes, marked by individual, industrial, and communal styles, film and literature, both are also capable of something beyond representation and beyond audience.

I argue that both can be considered “media” at all only to the extent that this term is taken no longer to promise communication among people or peoples. By emphasizing the negative relation between apparatuses of culture, and by locating negativist strategies in the period’s art and criticism, I hope to loosen some of the strictest perceptions about this most closed-off (straight-laced, buttoned-up) period of the Twentieth Century in the U.S. In my reading of critical as well as aesthetic works of the period, I define the void not only as a gap dividing textual, social, national, and subjective identities, but also as the homologous and contingent form of irresolvability that separates film from literature. Indeed, as far as this dissertation is concerned, literature and film share nothing in common. That is, what they share in common is a nothing, a void. While I do find dynamic historical or aesthetic relations between the two cultural forms, I consider that the space in culture that they share, and that obtrudes upon both, to be precisely that—a differential relation—and not in itself a thing.

To a degree, this runs against the logic of “medium specificity,” by which any media form can be defined by its boundedness from other media and its isolable narratives of development and variation. I would also oppose the increasingly common wisdom that media can become indistinct or hybridized when they partake of other media from which their “specificity” would ostensibly separate them, as movies do when they attempt to “adapt” fictions, and as novels and poems do when they mimic the cadences and perspectival shifts of the movie camera. I do not mean

to suggest that a film is purely a film and a literary work is only a literary work, and neither do I want to assert that our world is principally driven by rapid technological change, or else composed of media that in the face of change can no longer be distinguished from one another. Rather, I want to show how literature and film are marked by a negativity that both hold in common and that partakes of both: the mediating gap or substance that separates them, the void, the blank, the site of encounter, or the “no-thing” (as English translators of Zen texts would have it) that prevents any hybridity, as well as any purity, between and among media.

But what then is that thing we call a medium? Is it an innate quality of technology or art? Is it instead a function of knowledge? Is it a tool by which users, industries, or critics learn to categorize, show, or see culture? The readiest answers to these questions might resolve through a medium ontology, but I seek something else: to expose the risk that any reader, viewer, or critic must run in encounters with the figural order of media; and to ask whether a medium may be political, not in its application to a world of things, but rather from the very instant of its ambiguous invention, as a composite of institutional knowledges, objective materials, and subjective practices. I ask: what if intermediality were not the joining of this discrete medium with that one, but instead the site where nothing joins, and where a thing is neither this nor that, nor even fully itself? What if immediacy were not the fantasy of unimpeded access to material reality, but instead the moment of critical clarity that can occur in encounters between a historical object and a regime of thought under which it doesn't quite cohere? And what if the crisis in new media studies had nothing to do with the unchecked speed of technological growth, but arose instead from the limitations of “newness” and “technology” as forms of determination?

Threading the disciplinary needle, sliding between cultural history and critical theory, how might we continue to account for the technological composition or aesthetic effects of these cultural artifacts, while foregrounding anew the political

and epistemological factors that guide the present historical meeting points of critic and object? The void that separates literature from film (demarcating each from the other just as it splits each down the middle, both demarcating and deconstructing the identity and specificity of each) continues to exert a tremendous force upon the American cinema and American fiction of the postwar period. And it does so both as a thematic and as a formal element of the period's literary and cinematic texts. A conjunction and a dynamic pair, the film and the novel traveled the Twentieth Century with shared basic material: terms like narrative, rhetoric, and imagery, none of which can be said to belong to one tradition more than the other, and all of which together might as well go under the general name of form or structure. "Medium" names the sort of form that would separate these two objects, literature from film. But the medial relation is also a political, aesthetic, epistemological, and technological form of self-difference: the empty point that marks each of these objects in the "place of void" (Althusser's *lieux du vide*) where adjacent objects can obtrude in their absence.

I situate this point of absence—that void in literature where film is not; that void in film where literature is not—within the frame of cultural history, giving it a time and a place, the postwar period in the United States. I do this for two reasons. First, a textual account of the intermedial divide will permit access to numerous specific political formations (including nation, race, and community) that would necessarily go missing in any ontological account. Second, the postwar period of American history is one in which many current cultural narratives were put solidly in place and were put in place most especially by developments in the popular forms of literature and film. I do not mean to deny entirely the claim—made by scholars from Martin Heidegger to McLuhan to Friedrich Kittler—that instruments of vision, knowledge, politics, or society are all in a sense technological, and therefore both mediating and medial. But I do hope to loosen the universalizing grip of this thesis,

its implicit suggestion that these instruments are only or especially technological, and its consequent leveling effect on diverse areas of discourse. In other words, I insist that there are non-technological, even paratechnological, elements that characterize even the most machinic of apparatuses.

Many of the objects I examine in this dissertation, film and literature, are contested objects in the present moment of technocentric, technocratic academic discourse. But I believe that continuing to bring film and literature together, in spite of their clear differences and most obvious overlaps (adaptation, again), can push aesthetic questions of form into productive crisis with technical matters. In other words, by bringing the largely technical study of film together with the largely aesthetic study of literature, I hope to attend to the materiality of rhetorical and poetic figures, while also remaining alert to the poetry and argumentation that inheres to mechanical and social machines. At the points where technology and art, film and literature, text and politics, come together and fall apart during the postwar period, the American Twentieth Century itself also binds and unbinds, surfaces and submerges, coheres and explodes. Literature and film enjoyed a last moment of dominance during the postwar period, before the arrival and quick popularity of what became known as the “new media.” It has become routine to refer to these forms as the “old media” because they preexisted the new ones, predate them, and perhaps eventually die out now that the new ones have arrived. Certainly, in a present moment when literature is often read on portable digital book readers, and films are much less commonly subjected to any kind of photochemical process, there is abundant evidence that books and movies are both old and dead. My dissertation is fairly indifferent to matters of death or survival, but it does resist the back-formation “old media.” Instead of accepting any such narrative of mediatic development, I ask by what processes of compensation and consolidation the mediatic order itself came to hold sway over forms of art as well as communication.

Print and celluloid are certainly technical forms of representation with a long history of converging with other technical forms, but is this all they are? And if they are more than simply technological, does this make them more than just media? I answer these questions no and yes respectively. Film and literature are not just mediatic, and not just technical, but are instead epistemological and material procedures that may be categorized and captured by many diverse means. The technological order is ideologically as well as historically determined. The language of technology is one way of knowing pretty much any cultural material that could just as well come to be known in other ways. And each ahistorically “old” medium can be defined by other means than just its belonging to a specific and delineated material or disciplinary history: that is, it may invoke a history aside from the medium-specific one that would divide the field of multitudinous cultural texts and objects by way of the question “what is _____?” Each medium, I would argue, can equally be defined by its consistent historical deviation from any such artificial, categorical ideal. And, at the risk of repetition, I give the name of “void” to this simultaneous deviation from and appeal to the conceptual field. The void constitutes a break in the hardness of film and literature epistemologies. It institutes a negation that can connect the two technological and aesthetic forms by disconnecting them, and that can relate them in their unique failures to relate.

Never merely a theme or just a device in film and literature, the void of a substantive and textural “nothing” is also what divides them from one another as “different aesthetic genera, as different as ballet is from architecture” (174). Unlike George Bluestone, whose hallmark 1957 effort at theorizing adaptation I’ve just quoted, I focus neither on the twinning of the two forms nor on their lines of influence. Rather I emphasize how the void between film and literature—what Bluestone considers a space of “mutation” and “fluidity”—has generated a rich variety objects that are undesignated or indeterminate: not quite film, not entirely

literature; divided by a non-relation, but so all the more fruitful for the analysis of post-war social and political identities, themselves irremediably split (174). The title of this dissertation asserts a seemingly simple form of relation: the projector rests on a pile of books. The cinema as an institution rests in a relation of dependence upon literature. Films would not exist if literature had not existed first. These propositions are ones with which I neither agree nor disagree. In hoping to supplant them, I might cite the claim, as old as cinema, that the movies arise more directly from traditions in photography and figural painting than they do from any literary tradition. At other times, I might consider the argument, ongoing since the turn of the century, by which fiction and poetry have long tried to mimic the rhythms and perspectival shifts of film. But I would rather not take either of these sides either. Instead, I take this evidently simple assertion—the projector rests on a pile of books—to be the proper name of a critical and aesthetic problematic, one that posits a relation between film and literature, yet that refuses to let that relation ever resolve. Either way one comes at it (with the projector perched precariously on the books, or with the books held in place by the projector) the relation being described is one of cause and effect, or of parent and child. I resist these lines of cause and inheritance, and consider my objects instead in their forms of intersection or mutual interruption.

In criticism and art production of the early Twenty-First Century, it has become commonplace to posit media forms as infinitely porous, actively permeable, and apt to merge into one another in historically inevitable acts of technological or artistic transgression. Such transgressive acts, so the argument goes, usually occur on the order of “conceptual art” or under the aegis of one or another “avant-garde.” Moreover, they are purportedly what keep literature and film alive. If morose protestations against the “deaths” of literature and cinema are grounded in any real shifts in cultural production, and they may be, then this dissertation might be

imagined as a preliminary autopsy on a pair of conjoined twins. The increasingly prevalent logic of “media bleed” is usually, and often admirably, aimed at exposing the non-identity of media to themselves, exploring their formal and technical fluidity, and implicating them in the invidious industrial practices of a fast-changing media environment. Like other concepts of hybridity however, this notion of bleed usually invites us to think something quite different instead: that media were actually unhybridized and self-sufficient once upon a time (as if in a pre-intermedial past) but that the present highly-digitized mediascape has made such specificity impossible. What that logic disavows is that cultural objects have always been composed of mixed materials: print having been linked to speech and song; painting to drawing and print as well as sculpture; radio to film and later to television, but also to music and speech and therefore to print, etc.

Film and literature do not fade in and out of political relevance, but are instead inconstant products of an always-political activity of cultural representation. Nation and medium, meanwhile, are not the twin heroes of a patriotic *Bildungsroman*, but are instead a pair of mundane and symbolic terms for form’s mode of entry into the world. I mean to recruit these old signifying forms. The postwar is a historical point of great symbolic density, upon which several national narratives cohere and conflict. It is a moment of dire political fate (the last gasp of a popular labor movement; the first cries of contemporary Conservatism) but also one of transcendent political potential (the founding images of the Romantic movement recovered and recruited in the founding gestures of the New Left). As the localization of expansive trends within an attenuated temporal and geographic field, however, the signifiers of the postwar may still be read as traces of broad and important change in the institutions of political identity, art production, and higher education. Certainly, this can be done only after predominating exceptionalist themes of American Studies are punished, shoved aside, and tossed into the loose,

foundationless void out of which they emerged. But what the void enables is a way to think about American forms of community and political togetherness that are founded not in unity, exceptionalism, and communication, but that thrive instead in principles of formal contradiction and material complexity.

Leslie Fiedler offered a succinct prescription for a void-inspired criticism in the introduction to his 1960 collection *No! In Thunder*: “The negativist is no nihilist, for he affirms the void...[and knows that] to give form is to provide the possibility of delight—a delight which does not deny horror but lives at its intolerable heart” (18). If Fiedler thus calls for the critic to inhabit the very brokenness of the object and so to occupy rather than to mend or deny it, then my response will here be to locate and then read certain formal and thematic voids in films and novels. I will ask how we might learn to read the void-like division between disciplinary objects—American literature and American film—and how such a reading might help us to re-construe those U.S. identities that are so often thought in terms of wholeness or presence, rather than division or absence. In general, critics demand that their objects conform to a certain self-identity, that they remain part of a priori categories (such as one medium *or* another; reactionary *or* potentially liberating) even if they finally appear to be paradoxical or enigmatic. To such criticism, voids must be “intolerable” or “horrible.” But if this is so, I ask, then what are the implications of a “negativist” reading in the political domain, of such cultural wreckage as Van Wyck Brooks called “unfinished and already half in ruin”? Negativisms like the void lie at the basis of American culture studies, even though they are often ignored. But if we attend to them, in their historicity and in their dynamic pressure upon present methods, we might initiate a reading strategy that indeed critiques, from the start, the still under-questioned forms of national, medial, racial and disciplinary identity that films or novels express.

A note on the organizational scheme of the dissertation: I've organized it into four chapters composed of several parts each. Each chapter begins with a long theoretical discussion three out of four of them then follow with exempla of smaller scale, in which I take up individual works of literature or film (M.H. Abrams tells us that an *exemplum* is a story that serves as a "particular instance of the general theme") (6). I don't perform close readings of all these objects, although this would be tremendously valuable, but I instead push each one to illuminate and extend some element of the theoretical argument, while also rooting that argument in a historical object. Each of these objects demonstrates a formalization and conceptualization of the void. Moreover, several of them also demonstrate a kind of intermedial relation that is not reducible to the mere combination of two media that would remain otherwise discrete.

The first chapter of the dissertation concerns void; the second chapter concerns medium; the third concerns blankness, a type of void that acted as a medium; and the fourth chapter concerns the emotion of terror, which emerges as the kind of negativist medium capable of voiding all the other media with which it came into contact. Chapter 1 brings recent experiments in post-national American literature studies into contact with an older, modernist idiom. Inspired by Brooks's comment that "the present is a void," and with reference to contemporary theorists from Berlant to Spivak, I propose a mode of historical reading that can attend to both the ruination and the persistence of national signifiers. To this discussion, I append two exempla: the first on the concept of "Fertile Void" as it is developed in the fiction of Paul Goodman as a source of possible response to postwar political impasses; and the second on a scene from the 1950 film version of *Native Son*, on which Richard Wright collaborated with the filmmaker Pierre Chenal. Chapter 2 reads the founding moment of cinema studies in the U.S. as an instant in which the literature scholars who turned to film would ground their thinking in the same

technophilic and largely apolitical impulses that drove the contemporary movement in the study of media (led by the Canadians Innis and McLuhan). I observe in these scholars' work a missed opportunity to see in the American Romantics (Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville) their open and void-like conception of "medium," driven by aesthetic and political motives as much as by technological ones. Following this, I attach another pair of exempla: one on the collaboration between Allen Ginsberg and Jonas Mekas upon a seemingly ideal form of what Mekas called "film poetry"; and the other on the iconic filmmaker of the Fifties, Douglas Sirk, whose films expose literature not as an object to be adapted but instead as the constitutive blindness of film to its own conditions of possibility, that is to its medial difference from itself.

Chapter 3 considers the major work of the postwar revival in Melville criticism, and finds there a fixation with Melvillean forms of negation ("a NO! in thunder"; "a dumb blankness full of meaning") that enabled an early critique of liberal "post-politics." In concluding this argument, I read three major Melvilleans—Ralph Ellison and Orson Welles, as well as the critic Richard Chase—for traces of what Chase proposed as an ironic and open-ended practice of "cultural radicalism." And finally, Chapter 4 wrestles with a peculiar body of work: the films and writings of the actor Sterling Hayden. In a lifetime of self-castigation after his friendly testimony before HUAC, Hayden describes a perilous emotion combining rebellion with guilt. This emotion, which Hayden usually calls "terror," is legible across his movies, his memoir, and his novel, and its definition is the chapter's main objective. The voids that run throughout the postwar period are also expressions of this form of radicalism, and they belong to the same negativist repertoire as the beautiful bomb, the rebellious terror, the elusive ideal medium, and the Melvillean "NO!" of blankness. Together, these aesthetic and cultural radicalisms of void must constitute

a repertoire of intrusions into the smooth functioning of national consensus as well as the hegemony that depends upon it.

CHAPTER I—VOID

PART I: THE PRESENT IS A VOID, OR, RECREATING THE USABLE PAST

How does one begin a study of postwar national culture that is committed neither to the nation as a form of political and social life nor to the war as a singular influence on the national projects that follow it? From the standpoint of method, in other words, how might one come to a greater understanding of the effects of nation and war from the perspective of *longue durée*, by learning to read these as difficult and pervasive figures rather than as privileged objects? This chapter begins by stepping outside the postwar period, first by asking very contemporary questions about the possibility or impossibility of postnational analysis, and then by investigating at length a reading strategy that I derive from prewar literary and political thinking, in the work of Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks wrote that “the present is a void,” and this is the perspective that I adopt and explore here, whereby formalist criticism must be predicated first upon an active emptying out of historical presumptions. To read the postwar past from the standpoint of a void present will mean discarding the nation as a necessary form without ever letting go of how the signifiers of nation have steered a world of texts. It also means recognizing the overwhelming influence of WWII upon the postwar period, while putting it in a field of contact with other tendencies (including racism and anti-communism) that are irreducible to the iconic military victories and traumas of white American men. To think transnationally or postnationally, in other words, one must first learn to read the nation as a rigid category of thought that cannot be so easily escaped.

I. Postnationalism

What indeed is the other side of the nation? If the nation is something that can be transgressed or moved past, then what kinds of organization are waiting for us just beyond? This essay aims to re-imagine the conditions for a theoretical study of

the American literary past that would be productive of something that is properly new and that is capable of moving us around, or beyond, or straight into the nation. It also means to reenergize the old phrase “creating a usable past” as a way of pointing up the motives of historical creation, or poesis, in any given present. Much recent scholarship in U.S. literary history is transnational or postnational in its focus. But the postnationalist impulse should be paired with a mode of reading that keeps the form of the nation itself in view: not as a real and self-sustaining apparatus in the world, but rather as a legible text. Is it possible to read the nation in a contradictory fashion, where it is both an outmoded institution rotten at its foundations, and an incomplete institution still in its youth? In short, can we read the nation *through* and *as* literature? Can we be responsive to the nation’s symbolic force, able to describe and disarticulate it, ready to recognize and name it, and yet resistant to identifying ourselves with it? Is it possible, as historians and theoreticians, to assemble a range of diverse national pasts whose very multiplicity both displays and disables the most damaging procedures of nationhood?

I take this to be the task of one the field’s earliest critical models, Van Wyck Brooks’s practice of “creating a usable past”: to imagine how reading the symbolics of American nationhood might be more than just an interpretive strategy, but also a worldly form of life and a radical poesis of art and identity. In order to clear the ground and sweep away the stagnant canons that cluttered it, Brooks demanded that his contemporaries learn to see their present as a field in which texts and concepts could actively circulate and collide. Brooks argues that it is for the literary writer—whether novelist, poet, or critic—to stage diverse and spontaneous encounters among such objects as pour into the present from the past, where the “present is a void” and the past is “an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals [that] opens of itself at the touch of desire” (223). The task of the American critic, for Brooks, is one of passionate, sculptural bricolage. Criticism must reach

into the national storehouse for attitudes and ideals, and then torque and recombine them in the present, guided not by fidelity to these affects and objects of history, but instead by intimate desire for them. Putting the past to work in a void present, making it usable, means exploiting literature's capacity to tear down present presumptions and every kind of conservatism, from the security and sovereignty to the self-identity of nations in the world.

Since the Second World War, the study of American literature and culture has arguably organized itself around a critique of American politics whose principal text is the nation form itself.² In the effort to unravel the foundational political fictions through which the United States has so long maintained a destructive hold upon a range of global discourses, critics have taken nationalism, national identity, and exceptionalist ideology to be privileged objects as well as primary obstacles in their production of knowledge about American culture. And just as the unmaking of nationalist concepts now motivates the practice of Americanist cultural theory, it also marks the place that Americanist cultural theory has long claimed for itself within a loosely-knit intellectual left alongside other less scholarly efforts at the critique or rehabilitation of national power, with an occasional voice in public policy, arts administration, progressive pedagogy, legal advocacy, and so on. But there is a problem. Whenever the nation is invoked, across these discourses, nationalism quickly follows. And whenever we retain the name of America in the headings of our

² In my use of the term "nation form," I am drawing on the thought and work of Etienne Balibar, for whom nationhood constitutes an ideological problematic, that is, a manifestation both of thought and of identity. He writes: "The question of the nation form...if it is to be an open one, is, at bottom, the question of knowing under what historical conditions it is possible to institute such a thing: by virtue of what internal and external relations of force and also by virtue of symbolic forms invested in elementary material practices?" (93) While Balibar is principally concerned with the changing shapes of European nations under late-stage capitalism, his question bears weightily on the present matter. The "relations of force" exerted by "symbolic forms" is precisely what is at stake in inquiring after what method of literary and cultural history might exploit both national and postnational ways of knowing.

disciplines (as in American studies, American literature studies, etc.) we invariably accept, at least to a degree, that nations can function as default categories in the organization of knowledge. In other words, whenever we “do” American studies of literature and culture, we accept that the signifier “America” might have an innate epistemological force. We repeat the exceptionalism that underlies and structures Americanness. In attempting a radical rereading of an American canon, we lapse into something that is tantamount to a re-exploration of the American nation.

Americanist cultural histories are in this way compromised by territoriality and nativism, even as territoriality and nativism are just what those histories are trying to disable. How then to proceed? In what shape might a national criticism acknowledge its complicity with the nationalist formations that house it, but also unsettle and unseat those same formations?³

The bind in its current form might be restated like this: either exceptionalism will be allowed to remain the point of departure for Americanist criticism, in which case the object itself (that is, the nation) must remain basically inviolable; or else Americanist criticism will surrender its exceptionalism up front, in which case it loses its claim first to an exclusive object and then to a recognizable disciplinary language, archive, and audience. I presume and sketch out a third possibility. There is a potential form of criticism that would engage in the political history of national

³ In my emphasis upon history in this chapter, and indeed in this dissertation, I confront a particular legacy of Fredric Jameson’s famous dictum: “Always historicize!” (9) Jameson himself seems eminently sensible when he distinguishes between the “two distinct paths” of historicization—one practice that traces the “historical origins of things,” and another practice that chases the “more intangible historicity of...concepts and categories”—and then chooses the latter path, toward theory (9). But in our inheritance of it, Jameson’s dictum has too often been embraced as a kind of secondary procedure or alibi: first do your theory, and then historicize it; first follow your improvised, even presentist itinerary, and then drop anchor in positivist notions of the past. In what emanates from Brooks’s modernist criticism, I see something rather more like Jameson than like his inheritors, in the emphasis upon a national past as one of the mutable “interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text” of an American literary tradition (9).

signifiers and at the same time perform a figural and anti-foundational reading of those same signifiers. This criticism is theorized by Brooks and is also a fruitful way to approach Brooks's own text, filled as it is with competing tendencies toward both the formation and the deformation of national myths. The only way to remain Americanists is to let stand the basic assumptions of the nation form, just for a moment, so that we then might read and break that form, again and again. This difficult task would describe a U.S. criticism that can provisionally accept its American identity and then learn to feel its way around America's residues, persistent constructions, and ruins.

Wai Chee Dimock has offered some of the most dynamic efforts at recasting of American literary history outside of the presumed dominance of national boundaries and identities. In her intervention lies the most forceful version of an Americanism that sees itself superseding national categories. Acknowledging debts to the temporal scale of the geological sciences, as well as to the *longue durée* histories of Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school, Dimock situates American literature within an extended historical conception of "deep time." In this temporal re-scaling, she hopes to make visible parts of American literary culture that are not national, but are instead prenational, subnational, or transnational. She reads putatively American texts through their global circulation as well as through their historical encounters with texts that are not ostensibly American. The primacy of the nation begins to fall away when, for example, in her book *Through Other Continents*, Dimock can track the movement of the *Bhagavad Gita* through its influence upon Henry David Thoreau, as well as its return to India through Thoreau's influence upon Mohandas Ghandi. The Indianness or Americanness of these texts is subordinated to tangled lines of influence. What is left is texture, affect, political and aesthetic demand, in what is either an abandonment of Americanist criticism, or else a new kind of Americanism whose starting point is humanness rather than national identity.

Dimock asks the same question that I have asked here: “will history and literary studies ever free themselves from the nation?” (“Scales of Aggregation” 225) However, where she goes with this question is to a project that I cannot envision as achievable, or even desirable: “to level out both fields [and]...allow a baseline humanity to emerge” (225). Dimock triangulates her three scales for thinking before, below, and beyond the nation, yet when she determines, once again, that “these prenatal, subnational, and transnational words belong to a baseline humanity,” she can but conclude that “it is only by an act of violence that we can elevate them to a national paradigm” (227). Dimock argues that invoking differences in scale can help to unseat the dominance of the “national paradigm,” but she warns that the appeal to scale might not be quite enough to avoid falling into national thinking; that is, to thinking that does violence to all our forms of non-national humanness. Like Dimock, I suspect that manipulating scale will not do enough to move beyond the hegemony of nations. But I also suspect that pursuit of a criticism couched in “baseline humanity” will lead only to new forms of idealism and essentialism. Instead, in returning to the notion of a “usable past,” I intend a criticism that would leave historical fields uneven and incongruent. In fact, a rereading (perhaps a Brooksonian reading) of Brooks would force us to halt before believing that we have achieved any baselines at all, humanist or otherwise. What remains instead is to make readable the unevenness and multiplicity of the possible narratives of national literary history.

2. The Usable Past

Appearing in *The Dial* in 1918, Brooks’s call to “create a usable past” aims to tie national identity to a now-familiar canon of uniquely American 19th-century writers.⁴ Yet, perhaps even in spite of itself, his literary-historical method would mix

⁴ One important late exchange around Brooks’s phrase appears in the “Critical Response” section of a 1997 issue of *Critical Inquiry*. There, Loren Glass criticizes a

critique into its articulation of the structure and spread of national power. Literature and culture offer to the critic or theorist a way to analyze the nation in all its contexts and effects, to oppose the nation without pretending to have escaped it, and so to create something: nation reinvented as a non-totalizing and legible form. “Creating a usable past” means producing the past in the present, where the past is an “inexhaustible storehouse” of objects, and the present is defined as a variable and near-empty stage for aleatory encounters among those objects. History, on this view, is a method, a form of narration, a collective speech act, and a metaphysical performance. As Brooks describes his modernity in a 1915 biography of H.G. Wells: “Things in general are not fixed and static, but...are, on the contrary, infinitely plastic, malleable, capable of responding to any purpose” (22). Brooks's nation and his present will not sit still long enough to be cast as stable objects or mapped sites of historical practice. And national identities will be without consequence until brought to order—and disorder—by a sufficiently plastic act of historical writing and reading.

Much of Brooks's early criticism is sharply antagonistic toward U.S. pragmatist philosophers like John Dewey and William James. Feeling that literature and thought should be antithetical to ideological assumption and political

reading of Henry Adams by Paul A. Bové, and Bové subsequently responds. As far as Glass is concerned, the critical interest in Adams's formal and intellectual innovations could only “identify with the modernist call to ‘make it new’”; whereas a serious consideration of historical nostalgia would need to be complemented “with the equally modernist search for a ‘usable past’” (938). Bové, in his response, defines a usable past as “a settled good” that must lend itself to fascistic nationalisms like those of Ayn Rand (942). He also sees the usable past as a concept that demands far greater refinement: “How does thinking relate to the past? More narrowly, we might ask how pasts are made usable—to, for, and by whom and according to which requirements of will or reason” (942). In this essay, I am sympathetic to Glass's claim that formalism can lend itself to an ahistorical nostalgia, but I am yet more sympathetic with Bové's insistence that nationalism becomes especially dangerous when it is consolidated into a pithy, ready-to-use narrative of the past. For this reason, Bové's latter questions are in part what have motivated me in pursuing the “usable past” as in fact an un-“settled” practice of literary history directly opposed to any notion of a popular “good.” (An extended analysis of the Glass-Bové exchange, *vis-à-vis* Brooks, can be found in Benjamin Schreier *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the History of Modern American Literature*, particularly pp. 62-63.)

domination, Brooks regretted the imperialist implications of pragmatism: it subordinated art, culture, and political discussion to philosophy, science, and positivism, leaving no evident place to house the more vibrant energies and ideas for which Brooks dearly yearned. Here is his lament:

We want bold ideas, and we have nuances. We want courage, and we have universal fear... We want emblems of desire, and we have Niagaras of emotionality. We want expansion of soul, and we have an elephantiasis of the vocal organs. Why?... The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can, and that is what a vital criticism always does. (223)

A criticism that can make one past more “usable” than another is a criticism that can see pasts in their multiplicity, as narratives that must be produced and set against one another in order to be “vital.” Brooks could hardly blame those émigré modernists who had left the United States behind: to him, the American audience had no use left for vitality or invention, had grown content with available historical narratives, had lost the will to invent new ones or to test the limits of national rhetoric, and had ceased to show interest in contemporary or emergent poetic forms. But expatriations, no matter how understandable, had taken their toll. And U.S. culture had been left barren of imagination and creativity.

Pragmatic, expository, philosophical prose was thus all there was in a country that needed a communal national project, shorn of written signifiers of “national identity.” Although Brooks later reversed this position, his early writings still praised the modernist literature that he found capable (as Melville, Twain, and the early Henry James had not been) of both avowing and interrogating the distinctly American contradictions that it had inherited. “Creating a usable past” was thus to be a practice neither of coldly describing social ills, nor of positing a melodramatic or utopian alternative vision, nor certainly of resting on an unreconstructed nationalism, as is sometimes claimed. Instead, it was to describe a “bold,”

“courageous,” and above all “inventive” practice that aligned criticism with modernist poetics, even erasing the difference between the two positions and refusing to see criticism as a mere supplement to literature. Brooks's “American writer” was at once political, critical, and poetic, an experimentalist and also a commentator on history and national identity.

Brooks derives his key phrase from a related phrase, “the usable truth,” that appeared in a well-known letter from Melville to Hawthorne in 1851. There, Melville had complimented his older friend for having written himself straight down into the darkness of national and spiritual existence where he had captured the “tragicalness of human thought [with] the intense feeling of the usable truth.” When the “present is a void” because the “past is without living value,” literary history can activate literature’s living use (its capacity to create, cite, invent, produce) rather than excavate or exhumate literature’s dead corpse. There is no way to extract the individual writer from the procedure of active reinvention that Brooks describes, but still, it is hard to recognize that procedure as individualist in any familiar way, opposed as it already was in Brooks to the exceptionalist American goals of capitalist accumulation, colonial annexation and gain, the rise of an industrialist class, and the tenacious residue of aristocratic preordination. The “personality” in this analysis was not that of the individual patriot or thinker-celebrity, but always the “individual” personality of a loose American collective. In order to create a usable past, a critic must first displace the first-person singular of American exceptionalism in favor of the diverse and multiple first-person plural of community. Faced with a national identity that we can neither accept nor refuse, *we* want courage; *we* want “emblems of desire” and “expansion of soul”; *we* must discover or “even invent” a past of which *we* can make immediate, if fleeting, use. The task of American writers and critics is thus not to fulfill a historically determined matrix of national identity, but instead to

make use of identity, collectively, as a point of departure for history, as well as a site from which to enunciate with a shared yet disharmonious voice.

Brooks's politics were never this clearly or consistently spelled out. Stanley Edgar Hyman once said of him that he "occupied almost every political and philosophic position of our time and called them all 'socialism'" and furthermore, that the modernist phase in Brooks was just his "total arty rejection of America" (107). Still, in the present conjuncture, why shouldn't critics call on "boldness" and "courage," rather than just expertise, in their reinvention of an Americanness stripped of its industrialist and imperialist underpinnings? While the word "identity" could not have had the resonances for Brooks that it has now, many of us might still hope to echo, in some qualified way, his claim that: "cultural identity was all that ever interested me, while the actual America of my belief was the nation of its promise, a nation that too often broke its word." A history conducted in an aestheticist, pseudo-identitarian, first-person plural remains a provocative possibility for a communitarian and, in many ways, anti-national criticism: something that is both more and less than a "rejection of America," and that bears a complex relation to the imperative to speak of the past.

In its first formulation, "creating a usable past" can indeed be considered as a kind of pastism (and therefore as a method that might be friendly to contemporary historicisms) insofar as Brooks turned his back on contemporary Futurisms and techno-utopias. But now, when we oppose pastism not to futurism but instead to presentism, the "usable past" thrashes out a defiant alternate path. It lodges the practice of cultural history within a double bind and then insists that the historian or critic struggle there—between a vision that is absolutely presentist but has stripped the present down to contentless conflict and contestation; and a vision that is committedly pastist but has made of the past a mess of material that is still roiling and colliding in the current moment. From the point of view of this kind of

precarity, the past is dead, the present is a void, and the least-worst thing we can do is to bring together some of the cultural fragments that appear to have preceded us, stringing them into a loose set of objects that, joined together, might yet live enough to imperil all the self-actualizing and self-justifying forms of exceptionalism.

3. Worlding

The challenge now is to imagine a cultural historical practice that might correspond with what Randolph Bourne called “trans-national America”: not a hegemonic America of expanded boundaries, but a version of Brooks’s “expansion of soul” that would be landless, minor, destabilizing, communal, and multiple. An appeal to a larger-scale analytic—something like reading the nation in the world, or reading the world over and above the nation—has as its whole purpose the calling into question of the givenness of scale and frame. This moves us beyond Dimock’s emphasis on alternate scales and a “baseline humanity” and toward an emphasis upon the symbolic wreckage at all scales of the contemporary nation-form. Dimock’s *post-*, *pre-*, and *trans-* cannot move us beyond the accepted dominance of the term that they modify—their common root *-national*—and so they remain insufficient to get us beyond a national way of thinking, even as an escape is just what they advise and attempt. Moreover, in trying either to rise above or duck beneath the nation, they do nothing to make the nation more legible. What is needed is not to dodge or ignore the nation, but rather to accept it as a surviving concept that includes and attaches itself to all of Dimock’s scalar distinctions. Then the nation might be held under erasure, emptied of all but its symbolic power, and pressed up against other symbolic forms of cultural organization, both at the intimate level of the readable text and at the large scale of the multiform planet itself.

Rob Wilson has called this process “worlding,” and positioned it as a transformative activity of interpretative and creative practice that is capable of

overturning “taken-for-granted and normal life-forms” upon which an ideological formation like globalization always rests (212). Wilson explains:

As such a *gerundive* process of situated-articulation and world-making, ‘worlding’ thus would help deepen and show how modes and texts of contemporary being and uncanny worldly dwelling (as in reading the language of first-world novels against the imperial grain, for that matter) can become a historical process of taking care, and setting limits, entering into, and making the world-horizon come near and become local and informed, situated, instantiated as an uneven/incomplete material process of *world-becoming*. (212, Wilson’s emphasis)

The worlding of cultural objects, even those that identify themselves or are identified with American hegemony or empire, means submitting them to reading, as fragmentary and active forms of address. And just as a worlding criticism can break apart its object into the “uneven/incomplete” practices that compose it, it is paradoxically also a curatorial practice of “taking care and setting limits” in the comprehension of a symbolic terrain. The work of worlding is a work of building and destroying, loving and defamiliarizing until the object—whether it be novel, film, nation, or national monument—has lost its stable claims on real-world reference but before it has lost its legible signifiers of national identity.

No “baseline huma[n]” or historical essence could ever walk upon Wilson’s dynamic and symbolic world. Worlding is a material and conceptual engagement with an entirely uneven cultural field, and yet it is also a way of making that field critically usable. Moreover, it is consonant with the notion of planetarity that has spun out of the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Wilson and Dimock provide tools for brilliant destabilizing readings, but it is Spivak’s analytic that can make the most use of a ruined American identity and culture—even though it is very often skeptical of Americanist discourses. Spivak’s principal definition appears in her book-length reconsideration of the field of comparative literature, *Death of a Discipline*, where she urges critics to think from a planetary perspective by identifying with “the names of alterity” by acts of imagination through which we might position

“ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities [where] alterity...contains us as much as it flings us away” (73). To think about world cultures within the field of the planetary is to hold them always at a distance, but to hear their demand that we read them. To think about the nation within that same field—as a merely functional artifact of world cultures—is to reduce it also to a name, and then to retain it as an inadequate organizing structure, a container for forms of life, ours, that it is in no way equipped to sustain.

To think across distances and differences to imagine “*our* past,” rather than the singular ownership implied in a phrase like “*my* past,” is perhaps an impossible task. Yet where “the present is a void,” the past cannot be learned, remembered, or owned except perhaps in a process of invention or exchange. The past must be created in an act, not of radical retrieval or re-narration, but of generative practice. In short, “*our* past” might denote less the past that we possess—as if the world or its nations were knowable in advance of our encounters with it—than a past that we produce, and (in time) that we may allow to be destroyed and supplanted.

In the essay collection *Letters & Leadership*, published the same year as “On Creating a Usable Past,” Brooks assembled a portrait (or perhaps a self-portrait) of the inventive “American writer” and a description of the intellectual and creative culture that he thought might pull the U.S. out of stultification and conservatism. Here, Brooks tried mapping his void present by charting and making use of local American sites that were marked by decay, halting growth, and muddled stillness:

There is a certain spot in New York where I love to go and ruminate...A lonely, sunny, windy plaza surrounded by ramshackle hoardings and warehouses unfinished and already half in ruin...It is the fag end of a great cross-town thoroughfare, a far-thrown tentacle...that likes there sluggish and prone in the dust, overtaken by a sort of palsy...[and] bordered on one side by rickety wharves, on the other by a succession of tumble-down tenements left there like the sea-wrack at the ebb of the tide. (1-2)

These city warehouses and hoardings are metaphors for the present tense of American identity: the “inexhaustible storehouses” treated like “sea-wrack”; somehow both noisy and silent; ebbing; “unfinished and already half in ruin.” Making the past usable here means reading the present as a mixed temporality of growth and rot—human construction and natural decay, mythical narrative and demythologizing history, expansive spatial force and the failure or refusal of force—that characterizes American institutions of art and industry.

Brooks then contrasts this scene to a rural setting in the Southwest, an evidently thriving small town, as opposed to New York’s desolate and impoverished margins:

One of those half-built cities that sprawl out over the prairie, their long streets hectically alive in the centre but gradually shedding their population and the few poor trees that mitigate the sun’s glare till at last, all but obliterated in alkali dust and marked only by the chaotic litter of old out-buildings and broken-down fences that straggle beside them, they lose themselves in the sand and the silence.

Half-built but giving way to “sand and silence,” this scene begins prosperously enough, but ends up, like the New York tenements, as a landscape all-but-obliterated, unfinished, and already half in ruin. The critical act occurs in these spaces—that is to say, in any space that can be seen in the contradictory lights of ruin and reinvention—where a writer must requisition all available tools however “rickety,” make no claim on novelty or security, and attempt simply to make sense.

Brooks perches at the edges of these scenes, standing like yet another symbol of political modernism—the *Angelus Novus*—albeit a symbol that would not be painted by Paul Klee for another couple of years, nor brilliantly unfolded by Walter Benjamin for another two decades after that. In Benjamin’s ekphrastic re-imagining, however, the angel of history will face the ruin of the past with a clear demythologizing eye, a perspective that Brooks might have envied. Caught in a maelstrom that is otherwise empty and from there blown backward into the future,

the angel sees in the past only a junklike material, and that “keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” until, at last, “the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (258). This is Brooks’s void as well, his “sea-wrack at the ebb of the tide”: a pause in the unremitting flow of organized chronology, and a detrital accretion of historical materials that are either too new or too broken to be put in order. Brooks, like Benjamin, sees that without a metaphorical or narrative form of writing to cohere this aggregation of stuff, history itself may well be condemned to being only and ever a set of nationalist platitudes and fascist formulae, endlessly repeated.

The terms of Brooks’s writing are thus set: intertwined timelines (uncompleted progress versus progressive ruin) wrap around a mute spatial metaphor (America as industrial wasteland, America as underpopulated suburb). Heading back east to put these terms to work, Brooks’s prosaic landscape scenes become models for the scene of radical historical criticism, as well as for cultural reading. Resolutely unphilosophical, making no claim to truth or to knowledge of the being of his objects, Brooks at last retreats into “one of those ancient Long Island villages that still seem to preserve unbroken the atmosphere of the early Republic.” If the usable past were to be merely pastist, and in fact the justification for any available historicism, then this would be the place where he would represent America’s primal origins—favorable or unfavorable, these would need to be cast from florid, explicatory detail. Instead, Brooks evokes the emotional difficulty of pastness without making of it something beautiful. If he brings pastness to order through narrative, then it is only through a modernist narrative that emphasizes the gaps and rot of national history and identity. If he gives pastness a set of familiar metaphors (involving settlement and home), then he only does so in order to push those metaphors far enough that the past can no longer comfort.

Recognizable as “our past,” the past that we continually invent becomes unsavory, an object that, once created, we would have no desire to own:

The rotting porches and the stench of decay that hangs about their walls...the insect-ridden fruit trees, the rusty litter along the roads...Nature has been robbed and despoiled and...is taking its revenge on a race that has been too impatient and self-seeking to master its inner secrets. Incapable...of lying fallow...they have accumulated no buoyant fund of instinct and experience, and each generation, a little more spiritually impoverished than the last, runs out the ever shortening tether of self-reliance. Still pioneers, pioneers or nothing, they have lost the sap of adventure without developing beyond the stage of improvisation...How all but irrevocably [America] commits us to a sharply individual, experimental existence! (5)

Brooks’s praise of the usable past, so often misread as a paean to the individual’s creative labors, is shown here instead to be a critique of the very object, “individualism.” In the void present, the illustrations show, an exceptionalist individualism is an individualism that does not work. The individual doesn’t thrive in “our past,” but survives. It is up to writers who exhibit Americanness, as a quality of reckoning, mutually dependent community, to do the best with what they’re given. As America becomes a geographically variable site where identities decay as quickly as they’re built, the nation persists as a catalog of tired tropes that may yet be fruitfully reproduced, recombined, and redeployed.

If the void space of a national present is a space of nearly impossible criticism, of difficult but ravenous reading, and of the negation of self, then it is really a matter for questions of point of view.⁵ When seen as a naïve and nativist endorsement of

⁵ In thus locating the critical activity in a spatial, but also political, architectural, and historical void, the comparison of Brooks to the *Angelus Novus* remains apt. Moreover, Brooks may also call to mind Benjamin’s own recollection, in “Berlin Chronicle,” of a youth spent gazing from high train platforms, out over his own city’s marginal wastes. As far as Berlin is from New York, Benjamin echoes Brooks when he stands in sight of the “yellow, sandy colors of the station building and the boundless horizon opening behind its walls.” Benjamin recalls both the vacancy and the class difference of Brooks’s urban “windy plaza,” when he describes impoverished neighborhoods that have been “opened up under the auspices of prostitution” and then declares that “the places are countless in great cities where one stands on the edge of the void” (11). Such intervening spaces, he argues, are

American exceptionalism, the imperative to “create a usable past” can be a justification for national as well as nationalist canons and identities, rather than a demand to remake them. But when seen as a least-worst activity in the face of national ruin, it can instead encourage a willingness to admit the incompatibility of political extremes, and along with it a stubborn methodological resistance to critical moderation or dull plain-speech description. It poses a historically-minded criticism that will be pastist insofar as it takes a chance with the past, in the most drastic sense, by surviving in the mute present as a form of invention. How can Brooks’s critique, or something like it, be imagined in a young 21st century that is just as devoid of courage and the “emblems of desire” as was the young 20th? To answer this question may also be to address how it is even possible from a humanist standpoint to study any national culture at all, let alone the particularly invidious forms of culture that sprout in a hegemonic nation like the United States. Over recent years and in more theoretical quarters, so-called postnational modes of scholarly analysis have risen to dominance and have begun to unsettle the ostensible object (i.e., Americanness) that is shared by both American literature and American Studies. Yet, like Dimock’s pre-, sub-, and transnational approaches, postnational theories tend to cling to human experience as if it were lived simply without nations. Each of these non-national approaches can regard national institutions as being either constructed or effectively given, but not both. And yet, were they combined with an aesthetic dynamism like that of Brooks—a dynamism that makes room for historical contradiction and diversity of experience—transnational theories could begin to lift

capable of “assuming a transparency in which, however mistily, the contours of what is to come are delineated like mountain peaks” and, moreover, that “the present in which the writer lives is this medium” (10).

the partition that currently separates the political history of national identities from the theoretical languages and methods of figural reading.⁶

In what remains, I would like to suggest some ways in which to view both the artifice and the presumed (that is, ideological) forms of givenness that sustain the nation. Figural reading is one name for engaging with contradiction in this way. What I propose is a return to two figural metaphors with long histories in cultural theory: plasticity and suture, both of which mark the anti-foundational philosophy and theory of the late 20th century, but both of which begin much earlier. In the context of a critique of nation, these metaphors can help critics to historicize the Americanness of American texts while also teaching us how to read the ruinous national identity that those texts have claimed for themselves as undamaged. The American canon, along with the narrative of America's founding and development, encloses a space that starts and ends empty, and that never stops decaying or being built: a void.

4. Suture

Fundamentally, a criticism that makes use of the "present as a void" would first of all identify what is legible in the national cultural fabric, and then demonstrate through reading by what means and to what ends the whole cloth has been woven together. Moreover, in committing to the void rather than the nation as the starting point for reading, criticism might invite the very real possibility that national signifiers may be torn apart, stripped back to the void, cleared away, or else unstitched and retailored into a different shape, for a different use. Pulling

⁶ A forceful effort in this direction, albeit from a perspective that is not Americanist, is Paul Armstrong's recent article, "Form and History: Reading as an Aesthetic Experience and Historical Act." Armstrong states simply: "the choice between form and history is a bad one" (195) if one is "to do justice to the historical dynamic of interpretation as a crossing of temporal horizons" (218).

something useful out of the rag-pile of national identity is the task that Lauren Berlant describes in her *Anatomy of National Fantasy*. She observes:

The Statue of Liberty carries a tablet, Mosaically inspired, which constitutes the “law” of American liberty: the “content” of this text is simply JULY IVMDCCCLXXVI, the space of time that sutures “the people” and the territory to “the nation.” I use the term “suture” deliberately here, to signify the way in which the national totality does not demand the dissolution of the micro-boundaries of individuals; rather, as is the case with the statue’s iconic construction, internal boundaries are conferred on citizens of a geographical and political territory and are legitimated as traces of the nation’s promise of sovereignty. (25)

The concept of “suture,” as Berlant appropriates it, ties together two of the nation’s key features. First, a historical feature: a narrative of creation that is shrunk down to a number, the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And second, a feature of the visual landscape: the ostensibly simple and timelessly punctual virtue of freedom, blown up to the monumental and Mosaic form of the Statue of Liberty. By conjoining these features, Berlant exposes a process of national subject-formation that occurs whenever we encounter signifiers of nationhood in ways that are both historical and familiar. A nation does not identify its subjects from without, on this view, but instead seduces them by regularly offering up the devices through which they are “free” to self-identify as members of nationally bounded civil society. This is a suture, Berlant writes, because it knots disparate subjects together as a territorialized people, and does so in a two-fold process: first, the divisions that might have separated subjects instead become internal to each subject; and second, national subjectivity gets redefined as the outcome of a process by which internal differences are bound and mended. Nationality, then, is a form of experience lived at the contradiction between “me” the historical individual and “me” the iconic citizen.

For Berlant, it is through reading that sutures can be located, mapped, even loosened. The procedures of national subjectivation are diverse and tightly knit, and obviously involve more than just emblazoning a national “birthday” onto a mute

monument. But as a metonym and an exemplum, the Statue of Liberty is both powerful and legible. Its example, in Berlant's terms anyway, can suggest how objects of national culture often invite practices of reading that will cut against the nation, rather than just reproduce or monumentalize it. To make the past usable through reading, as Berlant does here, can be to generate and proliferate re-combinations of old identificatory knots and sutures. In Hawthorne, Berlant finds a figure who in fact begins to disable these sutures, by opening up "other political vistas, based not on mass consent to be politically collective but on a politics of experiment, experience, subjective identification that might or might not refer to or reauthorize the national horizon" (34). This horizon is the nation's narrative and linguistic frame, as well as the primary tool by which the nation justifies itself to itself: through "the National Symbolic [that] sutures the body and subjectivity to the public sphere of discourse, time, and space that constitutes the 'objective' official political reality of the nation" (34). Like Brooks, Hawthorne arrives to disarticulate what has been articulated, those styles of political speech that mythologize consent and democracy, and turn speakers into citizen-subjects.

Rather than the mere disassembly of a national emblem, reading and thus creating a usable past is actually a form of production: not just the interruption of speech but also a kind of speech, a disassembly of artifacts, and a reassembly of component parts in the form of a continuously legible national ruin (like, say, the components of a car engine laid out upon a blanket in no particular order). What critical practice can resist is the renewed allegorization of national culture, a reification of its ostensible losses or wounds, or an establishment of new, permanent theoretical language. Mere enthusiasm for ruins is not sufficient. Instead, criticism must attempt the improbable task of standing with one foot planted outside of national hegemony, yet without pretending that it can thrive or survive in that position. Suture is a two-fold movement that involves both the effective if limited

sovereignty of the individual citizen and the largely imaginary but in fact unlimited sovereignty of the state; both the coherence of a nationally identified collective and the perpetual incoherence of that same group. To match this kind of formation with a criticism of culture means courting a risk of losing oneself in that void that separates the fantasy of national identification from the fantasy (perhaps sadly, this is also fantasy) of a post-national present.

This double movement, however, must also be paired with suture's unmaking. If we are to read the signifiers of nationhood, but sustain our critique of nation, then we must describe how national identities come unraveled, as well as how they are securely knotted. This brings us back to the key term in Brooks's enigmatic statement that "the present is a void"—for it is in the "void" that positive historical propositions are negated, just as it is there that Brooks's attitudes and ideals collide and divide. In Brooks's use, the "void" points to a line of thinking with roots in Greek atomism. This is what Louis Althusser in his last writings called "the underground current of the philosophy of the encounter," that included Epicurus, Democritus, and Lucretius, up through himself and Derrida, by way of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Marx (who Althusser points out had written a dissertation on Epicurus and Democritus). For Brooks, the reference was to Lucretius, by way of George Santayana. Providing the key metaphor for what Brooks sees as the generative possibilities of this decaying American landscape, Santayana writes of the void in Lucretius:

Nothing comes out of nothing...if we consider substance; but everything comes from nothing if we consider things—the objects of love and experience. Time can make no impression on the void or on the atoms; nay time is itself an *eventum* created by the motion of atoms in the void; but the triumph of time is absolute over persons, and nations, and worlds.

The void as the site of a constituting temporal event, without an organized or narrated pastness, is a site of commitment as well as pessimism. To alter an American canon or identity, on this view, a critic must plunge straight into the void

of the present, triggering a revolutionary event that triumphs over the very categories of “persons, and nations, and worlds” by confounding them with words, even if that event also pains the persons, nations, and worlds whose identities it has overturned.⁷

Here appear the high philosophical stakes of Brooks’s assertion that the present is a void. Where the present is a void, two regimes of event—incompletion and ruination—articulate to one another and fall away from one another. The national signifiers in Brooks’s landscapes can be read in the present as a descriptive of past forms that they also unsettle: forms within the nation, but also the form of the nation, the symbolic political force in the world. This could all be to say what Marx and Engels had said seven decades before Brooks, that the growth of an international bourgeois culture would not permit the stable survival of strictly national cultures: “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature” (8). And yet, *pace* Marx and Engels, the lesson to be drawn from Brooks is not that nations have lost their distinguishing features. Rather, the mix of figural reading and historical knowledge depends on the assumption that national literatures never bore distinguishing features that were not ascribed to them in the secondary procedures of national criticism. World literature on this view would name any revised canon or disciplinary formation that can accommodate but also resist the nationalism of certain hegemonic literary traditions. Against an approach like Dimock’s, this marks a difference not of scale but of kind from dominant historical practices. Making worldly use of a national past means drawing out the sutures of national identity, putting stress upon them, learning by what means they’re secured, breaking some while leaving others in place, and at last peering through the national wound into the roiling planet beyond.

⁷ For a well-known and pertinent vision of the void as a suture, albeit on a complex ontological register, please see pp.66-9 of Alain Badiou’s *Being and Event*.

So how do we proceed with the collective project of American literary or cultural history, when to do so means immediately and inevitably to grant U.S. culture its separate—even its exceptional—status? And moreover, how can we begin to interrogate the specific subcategories of Americanness, like those based on U.S. racial and sexual identities, when their subcategorization (their reduction to mere components of a collective American experience; their submission to “broader” and more dominant divisions of American identity by region or class) is so largely the problem? The tool that Brooks provides is a theory of partial and contingent reading that would refuse to disentangle a text’s intrinsic from its extrinsic meanings and instead encourage open-ended and momentary encounters among archival objects and available methods.⁸ In Brooks and Berlant, this procedure is a performed one, a metaphorical dance in prose that navigates the American landscapes from Liberty Island to Brooks’s Manhattan “plaza” and his Long Island “hoardings” (an admittedly small triangle). For both writers, criticism is enacted in spatial terms as against the settled designations of nationality and nationalism. A theory and practice of reading articulates with a theory and practice of social and cultural history. These seem at odds with one another: reading demands a kind of presentist immediacy of the affective textual encounter, while history demands a pastist rifling-through of the archive. How then can we produce historical readings of a nation’s self-representation, while also describing the process by which we read? Put another way, what sort of critical practice produces national identity as both mutable and legible? More importantly perhaps, what vision of the world—and of the nation’s place in the world—enables us to manipulate or discard identities? Might we learn to live the fantasies of usability and liberation in a way that attends to the ethical obligations conferred by the past?

⁸ For detailed instances of this strategy, see Brooks’s earliest single-author monographs, especially those on Mark Twain and H.G. Wells.

Critical efforts that extend themselves beyond the interpretive frame of a single nation (transnational studies) or even beyond the presumed dominance of the nation-form as such (postnational studies) are invariably lodged either in the same political strictures and structures that they mean to leave behind, or else adrift in a dream of a posthegemonic, postpolitical, autonomous, and non-national culture.⁹ Yet perhaps it is not so impossible to resist this dream. *America* is a name that is given to a land, to the map of a land, and to the set of functional identities that cohere upon that map, as the fulfillment of its promise to represent the land. With a rhetorical or poetic focus, the study of America or of “the literatures and cultures of the United States” might consider all three modes of reference—the name, the map, and the identity—as it tracks their constant construction as well as their confounding contradictions, their qualities that are unfinished as well as those that are half in ruin. This is the work of denaturalizing that should be required of any theory of nationhood, now that we have learned to question the nation’s sovereignty and to interrogate our individual and collective capacity for socially transformative speech. Neither the land nor the identities preexist the map that charts their relation

⁹ In the introduction to a recent edited collection, Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman describe such a practice as a “time-honored tradition of shifting the object and disciplinary mix of American studies work in order to respond to current states of emergency...[where] object matter depends on different scales rather than being determined by area of study” (14). According to such a view, it might be possible to adjust the admixture of Americanist disciplines (presumably history, English, political science) if only the studied object were compelling enough. Yet it is the very rare academic department or journal that will make space for us to insist upon the radically “improper relations to our different fields” that Castronovo and Gilman advise (14). Or rather, one imagines, a critic can take whatever improper positions she pleases, but she is in no way likely to be published or understood. The languages of the disciplines exist for a number of reasons, one of which is to permit the institution to police its borders and to identify there the proper or “improper” use of shared materials. These languages may bend or break but, in general, their efforts at distortion are designed to move us toward, rather than away from, a discipline’s traditional context or object. Even to acknowledge that one’s field has a terminology or a method that can be used improperly is, in a way, to speak through it and to celebrate its propriety. And in the case of American culture, that invariably means accepting the givenness of the nation as a reasonable way to organize archives and methods.

to one another, and it is for this reason that a symbolic analysis of this map—that is, a radical practice of *reading* the gaps and flaws in a nation’s efforts at self-imagination, self-actualization, and self-depiction—is the vital epistemological complement to the efforts at “worlding.”

5. Plasticity

Writing in 1921, in a mournful elegy to his friend Bourne, Brooks described the kind of critic who he hoped would emerge to fence with American nationalisms without suspending his stodgily intimate identification with American culture:

The toughest and most intransigent mind and one who might well have convinced us that we have had too many cheerful meliorists, too many apostles of the 'glad hand.' How much we should enjoy the spectacle of a sour-faced American Schopenhauer, an indigestible American Tolstoy, an insufferable American Ibsen, an incredible American Nietzsche—just one true-blue solitary rhinoceros!

Without either avowing or disavowing pastism, or by avowing pastism only in a limited sense, a “rhinoceros” might manage to survive—even if it only survives—by committing to past objects through its collisions with them; by making them usable as well as visible; and by sparking in some of the persistent, dead, old forms (of nation, ethics, aesthetics) a barely “living value.”¹⁰

¹⁰ The costs of such a critical practice, generative but self-annihilating, appear high, not least in the case of Van Wyck Brooks himself. Repeatedly hospitalized for depression, the later Brooks eventually claimed that modernist experiments—those he had previously championed for dissolving the congealed forms of American identity—chased a powerful “death drive,” precisely because they’d unmade those forms and left U.S. culture too weak to fight fascism. Crucially, in one of his three memoirs, he returned to Santayana and Lucretius for language to describe his life-changing depression: “Even after I sailed out clear and free I remained conscious at moments of an abyss beside me. I seemed to catch out of the tail of my eye a *cold black draughty void*, with a feeling that I stood on the brink of it in peril of my reason; but it was only rarely now that I had this glimpse of the *néant*.” A direct connection exists there, between the constant lived dissolution of the American writer and the historical problem of a perpetually empty present. And a vision of history requiring total commitment to unrestrained creativity and historical contradiction may also mean living one’s life in that dynamic space, even if having plunged oneself into the “void” of the “present,” one could not hope to reside there.

In an affectionate essay that recalls Brooks's own paean to Bourne, Waldo Frank once noted this form of total commitment in the work of his friend Van Wyck:

He studies, not to dissect, but to heal. He is lit with a passion, also, to create America. He works to help it find its legs, to set it up and point it forward and *make it move*...He is caught in a vast dream of giving America a brain and a nervous system, *so it can go*; he does not stop to discuss joints and fingers. (196, Frank's emphasis)

This is the called-for dual movement: to mend that which does not yet properly exist; and to rebuild as if one is building, passionately and creatively, for the first time. This is not a description of a "continuous present" but is instead a halting practice of poesis by which pasts are made, and made usable. Returning to Brooks in this way is to treat him as he treated his own wrecked American objects and landscapes. That kind of return can reveal in Brooks a discontinuous void present where the useful coming together of national identities and spatial formations occurs only so that a more active splitting, a breaking of the useful thing, may also take place. One can then see in Brooks a use not only for historical narrative but also for the theory of history—not only a limited reading of the American landscape, but also a theory of reading.

The void present of historical reading is a site where two forms of negation intersect: one, the negation of all the presumed contents of the nation; and two the negation of the form of the nation as such, the refusal to see the nation or any other social category as given or historically inevitable. As Brooks writes in his book on H.G. Wells (and so predicts Stanley Hyman's criticism of him): "Though there are nine and sixty ways of being a socialist, they all unite in a certain sense of the plasticity and malleability of things human" (25). And here precisely is the tension within Brooks's theory of reading. His landscapes of ruination are gathered metamorphic shapes. And his void present is the terrain of where gathering and change can happen, where national histories and identities might shift, conflict, and

be brought to crisis. From the void present, national signifiers may be read and manipulated in a way that divides the narrative of national origin and growth from the categories by which we organize that narrative; but also that breaks the form and displaces it into something different, something usable. The plastic approach to the literary histories of the U.S. can separate the material components from the conceptual components of nation; nullify the hold of the National Symbolic upon the real landscape; and drop national identity from its privileged position into a place down among other forms of identity that would no longer be subordinated to it.

And yet it should be recalled that Brooks is not content with a gesture or method that would be only hermeneutic. (Nor either are Berlant or Wilson.) The worlding, unsuturing, plastic, literary-historical gesture is transformative and generative. And it is inventive (reinventive, unconstrained, archival) to the point that it imperils its own theoretical armature. In his Wells book, Brooks offers a notion of plasticity that is built and ruined upon the American landscape:

Things in general are not fixed and static, but...[rather] infinitely plastic, malleable, capable of responding to any purpose...The universe, in short, is like a vacant field which may or may not belong to some absent landlord who has designs of his own upon it; but until this absent landlord appears and claims his field, all the children in the neighborhood can build huts in it and play games upon it and, in a word, for all practical purposes, consider it their own. (22)

In this vacant field reclaimed from the landlord, we have (three years before the coinage of “the usable past”) a form of invention that hinges simultaneously upon the usability of void space, the multiplicity of practicable socialisms, the infinite possibility of “things human,” and the playfulness of cultural production. These are elements that can be brought to bear on the practices of American literary history, to complement and push back upon the necessary impulses toward sub-, pre-, post-, and trans-national criticisms. Yes, there are national structures that are capable of laying claim to the present at any time and of doing so by force. But in the

meanwhile, there is space to be made for radically transformative critical, historical, and literary play.

6. Visibility

The “usable past” is one theoretical formulation by Brooks that was taken up in the postwar period, yet it is not the only one. Very influentially, Brooks also theorized the separation of highbrow from lowbrow cultures, and advised the creation of a middlebrow culture that would come to fill the space between them. Concerned to re-theorize Brooks in the years following the war, writers of the center-left from Dwight MacDonald to Richard Chase would turn to this opposition. Chase, for instance, was convinced that Brooks had been right to see a gap separating, on the one hand, highbrow cultural apparatuses that could describe the nation but not appeal to it; and, on the other hand, lowbrow apparatuses that could appeal to the nation but not describe it. But Brooks’s resolution to produce middle-brow cultures—what became advertising, television, Eisenhower, *Reader’s Digest*—was a non-solution as far as Chase was concerned. Instead, the latter was convinced that the gap must be allowed to survive unfilled. In 1957, Chase wrote:

Brooks’s early writings are radical because they isolated and define for the first time the nature of a realistic criticism of American culture...His error was to conclude that all departments of our civilization would benefit by a reconciliation of extremes...At that time it was impossible not to see a rather frightening void between the highbrow and the lowbrow. But now the void, like a hungry vacuum, has long since been filled to the point of suffocation. The doors must be flung open. The cold air, the passionate light, the abounding energy must be let in. (53)

The void between highbrow and lowbrow should thus be, in the postwar period, a space unmarked by compromise. Propped open with a “usable past” of literary materials capable of formalizing and reformalizing negativity, this gap can thus be seen as one formal condition of contemporary life.

Now what about that phrase “usable truth,” the supposed origin of the phrase “usable past,” and the part of the void that might be instrumentalized? Rather stunningly as it turns out, Melville never did use the phrase “usable truth.” In fact, he wrote “visible truth,” and the editions in Brooks’s day only contained the phrase “usable truth” because of a misreading by Hawthorne’s son Julian, who had been the one to transcribe and edit his father’s correspondence. Because of Julian’s error, the first printings of the letter invent by accident one of the most confusing words still at work in American critical discourse. Latent in the phrase “usable past” thus appears this strange, suggestive, unspoken, and ultimately imagined other phrase: “visible past.” For the present purposes of a sort of modernist theorization of postwar cultural politics, this is a happy accident. If a making-usable of the past is always also a making-visible, then the effects are profound for a transmedial or even postmedial, study of literary and cinematic figures of void.

The metaphors of suture and plasticity, when considered from the stand point of the void, can lend themselves to the flux and improvisation of literary-historical and interpretive thought. Catherine Malabou has argued, for instance, that to speak of history is to speak in a first person that flickers between historical subject and historical object, between the voice that speaks history and the silent individual about whom history is spoken. She writes:

Who were we in the epoch of history? The question is legitimate, but this “who” remains unappropriable (not re-appropriable) quite obviously displaced, metamorphosed, and unrecognizable from the second it is approached. It has a new form. It is a new form...[O]ur historical being [is]...like a flutter of an oversized garment. This void...is precisely the crossing point of two presences, two regimes of event, two forms of change. (282, translation modified)

The conclusion that Brooks drew from modernist experiments in narrative and imagery, Malabou here draws from a career-long study of Heidegger and Hegel: that to think historically means yielding to contingent transformations in the thinking subject, through the simultaneous constructions and destructions as well as the

convergent selves and others of a past. On such a view history may open up a break in the subject who speaks it, just as that subject's capacity for unique speech marks a break into the field of history. And yet: "the point of rupture is also a point of suture...not made through contact but via an articulation as though through a jointure, hinge, or partition" (283).

For Malabou, in the context of her theory of ontological plasticity, what separates two kinds of negation is either a line that posits "a systematic tendency...to gather conflict into a form" or else "the crack of the gap [that] threaten[s] the formation of form itself" (6). Via this line and this gap, plasticity is oneway to think about textual and historical form in a way that invokes Hegel's dialectic, but that also draws on Heideggerian theories of formal "destruction" and on Derridean methods of deconstruction. For: "plasticity refers to an autonomous hermeneutic strategy that consists in dialectizing the relation between a text in the tradition with its destructive and deconstructive exterior, at the risk of endangering the dialectic itself" (24). And it is this kind of insight that brings Brooks nearer the centering concerns of contemporary critical theory, and that brings the void into the present moment, as the possible form of any present moment, for the critical study of a cultural past.

PART II: UNFINISHED AND ALREADY HALF IN RUIN

The aesthetics of void were built up against Cold War consensus, and against the tools that were wielded by consensus in its guidance of postwar cultural politics: the rise of mass media technocracy, coupled with a version of liberalism that muted the available range of political speech. In the interpretations that follow, I offer two examples of postwar objects that have learned as much from Brooks's lessons as from the horrors of war. The figures who generated these texts, Paul Goodman and Richard Wright, are among the best-known producers of radical left culture of the first part of the Twentieth Century. And yet, while neither one is generally associated with the postwar period (Wright having been established as a pioneer of political style between the wars, and Goodman having been adopted by the New Left as a standard bearer during the first part of the 1960s), both were in fact highly active during the decades right after the war with major work that has been underserved in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies. My readings take up work that is in many ways minor: a short story published by Goodman in 1949 and a film released by Wright in 1951. In both cases, the neglected objects of cultural history bear in them forms of disruptive textual experiments and open forms of political speech that are often ignored.

Exemplum: Talking Politics in the Void ("Our Meeting, 1948")

The same void that grounded a theory of the present in Brooks came to figure as a formal and thematic concern in postwar American literature, film, and criticism. This negativist aesthetics very frequently invoked by members of a loosely affiliated cultural left, as against a range of consolidations in the national technocracy, including the Cold War consensus, the celebrated "rise" of mass media and expertise, and a consequent version of liberalism that privileged technologies of

communication just as it muted political speech. The principle purpose of this void aesthetics was not simply to resist the hold of consensus. Rather, more importantly, these writers and filmmakers formalized and thematized the void so as to expose the absent foundations of the discourses of individual rights, communicative community, and medium specificity. The void marks the incompleteness of that discourse: a point of failure within the political field where an aversion to political extremes can no longer be legitimated only by the presumption of common agreement. This exemplum is dedicated to reading a couple of metaphors in a 1949 short story written by the American anarchist literary writer and public intellectual, Paul Goodman. Goodman's rumination on the possibility of political speech in a post-political age points to an aspect of 20th-century prose formalism—the problem of how to speak when it is all one can do to breathe.

Here is how this elimination of political extremes, and the rise of consensus politics, were described in 1959, by the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset: “The characteristic pattern of the stable western democracies in the mid-20th century is that of a ‘post-politics’ phase—there is relatively little difference between the democratic left and right, the socialists are moderates, and the conservatives accept the welfare state.” Void aesthetics is a passionate response to the feeling of being trapped in this phase, and takes shape in the work of a diverse range of postwar thinkers and makers. What these thinkers and writers have in common is the presumption that Lipset’s “characteristic pattern of stable western democracies” is just that, a pattern, a repeating symbolic formation marked by a caesura that falls between each iteration. The void signifies this caesura in the pattern of political forms, and names it also as a point of exclusion, indeed of the exclusion of exclusion, papered over by a consensus. The consensus of post-politics, from the standpoint of the void, is then nothing other than this papering-over. Consensus is a myth, a merely compensatory but highly efficient formation of language, a mutable and

muffling textile, the aftereffect of the disaster of liberal political moderation. Out of the void, and in response to consensus, springs a bare and fragmentary form of radical speech, the mere form of dissent.

Entitled “Our Meeting, 1948,” Goodman’s short story combines a critical commentary on the liberal consensus with a passionate plea for bare political speech, under the sign of what Goodman calls “the theory of the Fertile Void.” He sees an American public faced with the evident deaths of formerly viable political extremes: fascism, and more particularly communism. Yet rather than mourn these extremes, this public instead came to fear them, even to the point of denying that there might be other extremes lying dormant in, or immanent to, the post-political situation. This is one way of understanding how a political sphere that had previously been at least partly concerned with communitarian ideals of collective *responsibility*, now began to identify exclusively with the liberal protections of individual *rights*. The public and the majority of its cultures thus drifted toward the ostensible middle ground, in a political spectrum that was regarded as a straight and regular line that ran from left to right. And so the available histories tell, what few radicals remained could not themselves resist the drift toward moderation and consensus.

This has been the story that we have told ourselves about the diminished potential for resistance in the early years of the Cold War, in which disappointment, desperation, and fear were among the characterizing emotions of left thought and therefore of left culture and criticism. Goodman’s story was published in the literary journal *Furioso* in 1949, and describes a meeting among American communists in a small apartment in New York City. This story is a key section of the third volume in Goodman’s five-volume novel *Empire City*, whose first two volumes had been published in 1942 and 1946. Here as elsewhere in Goodman, only the impasse and the Fertile Void can be held in common, and consensus is just their secondary effect. The story tells of a pair of brothers named Horatio Alger, also Horace, and Lothario

Alger, also called Lothair and Lothar, the two principal characters from the preceding volumes of *Empire City*. The characters' names are obviously allegorical, and so is the story—additionally, the story is fragmentary and abstract, playful in an overwrought mock-romantic mode, and disorienting. The focus of this story is Lothair, in whose home the communists have gathered.

The story begins: "Friends have reached the most beautiful part of their meeting: the impasse from which *nevertheless* they do not get up and leave. They are resting in this hell." The impasse in their conversation is a point of struggle but it is also a regular point of procedure; it is a lull of inactivity in a collective effort toward active political change, but it is also a necessary lull, one that the story suggests is indispensable to the least deliberative functions of the group. The life of liberatory political action is stilled in a moment wherein neither the groups to be freed nor the tactic of their freedom is clear. Participants in the deliberation are instead "resting" in a moment in which nothing concrete can be proposed. But this rest, when conducted "in this hell," is paradoxically neither restful or restorative. The narrative proceeds: "Problems for which no one can suggest anything practical. Neither alone nor together. They have exhausted the strength of fraternity." No identifiable or even individual character has yet been introduced, neither Lothario nor Horatio has spoken or been mentioned, and the parataxis of these first two sentences has already evoked the labored speech and hard breathing of those assembled.

Goodman's impasse is a trap of silence, wedged between the purportedly post-totalitarian discourses of weak Left and hard Right, between the rubble of fascism and the high walls of Soviet communism. For Goodman however, it was in the departure from this trap of silence, this precarious centrism or impasse, that some change might eventually arise, and culture and community might survive. He continues: "[O]h, if the friends *remain* in their impasse, close to their impasse, gratuitously suffering the awareness of being in an impasse, must not the Fertile

Void yield up something? Gratuitous effort must lead to something unlooked-for.” In Goodman’s terms, the consensus is an impasse, legitimated by nothing other than collective feeling. The collective feeling, in turn, is volatile, unpredictable and, at any moment, capable of engulfing and superceding the impasse, the site that knots the principle of political possibility tightly to the principle of political impossibility. It is only by clinging to the problem of the impasse that the field of the void will open up upon “something unlooked-for.” This is the impasse with which, and within which, they must live. This meeting is a space of enormous but indeterminate possibility, and this impasse can only be exploited by surrendering the old options while at the same time refusing to fantasize any definite future emancipation. One might find oneself led to “something unlooked-for” if one is only willing to suffer the void, and read the impasse. The question asked is: what is the barest form of protestatory speech? Edged against and apart from the forms of moderation that would commandeer political language, it asks: what minimal vocalization can cause a break in the available forms of knowledge? Goodman’s fiction marks one invented form of a subtly radical aesthetics of near inarticulacy and mere dissent.

In these years during and just after the war, Goodman was accomplished, having by that time also published numerous poems; put out some articles, reviews, a book of urban planning; and completed his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Chicago, though not yet published it as *The Structure of Literature* (1954). Fame would briefly visit him with the publication of two road maps of the New Left, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Mis-Education* (1964). But in the years following the war, what concerned Goodman were the possibility and impossibility of cultural production, political speech, pacifism, anarchism, and protest under the sign of an apparent national consensus. What “Our Meeting, 1948” resolves is that postwar consensus had made it impossible to depart from social norms. Or at the very least, consensus

had made such extreme forms of departure unsayable under the headings of liberalism and moderation.

Loss of a viable political vocabulary can rob a politics only of its words, however. Or, to put in another way, just because something is unsayable does not mean that nothing can be said about it. It's just that what can be said has a sound but no meaning. It drags identity to the point of senselessness and destroys its utterances. This is what happens when Lothario tries to enter his voice into the impasse, but can manage only to interrupt the proceedings:

With a mournful shriek Lothair has broken the silence, saying "Aaiiii!" Wailing, "Auuuuuuuw!" and Oo-oooh." These are not bestial cries, nor are they human cries in extremity...[b]ut Lothair's are the cries of a human person who feels in himself a woeful pang that is his own and yet is alien to what he thought was his. Then it speaks itself, he speaks it, but he cuts it off at the end of the scream, to limit it. Thus, Lothair has cut off the high shriek with a "y," and he has closed the middle wail with a "w." The low moan rose softer from his throat but he has expelled the last of it with an "h" (28).

Lothario can utter only senseless vowel sounds and conclude each one with a breath. The pang of woe "speaks itself" and at the same time "he speaks it." The feeling is vocalized without translation or explanation. The utterance is not adequated to the emotion; the emotion is uttered. The sound can be described barely, by a narrative voice that cannot claim access to Lothair's interior. And even then, the sounds may only enter the space of the meeting when the vowel sounds have given way to the semivowels, "y" and "w" and to the fricative, "h."

The narrator continues: "He is at a social meeting and he must stay within the possibilities of communication. The possibility of communication is saved by the *y*, the *w*, and the little breath *h*. This is how it is with us—this is called 'talking politics.'" What is "talking politics"? It is a minimal form of protest against postwar tendencies toward mediatization, financilization, and consensus politics: that is, a bare kind of speech that remains just this side of communication, convention, and periodization—belonging to those matrices of recognition and representation, but in

no way upholding any. Lothario's punctuated screams can, in other words, confront a manically inclusive public sphere with a noise for which it cannot account.

Goodman would explain this repeatedly years later, in books such as *Compulsory Mis-Education*, where he wrote:

This sentiment of consensus, “understanding,” is so important that much speech and reading does not even give new information, but is a ritual touching of familiar bases...The underlying consensus is assumed—is signaled by the usual words—and no important alternative is offered. (77)

What the story “Our Meeting, 1948” is already attempting to produce is the “important alternative” to “the usual words.” This is not dissent or rebellion in any way that accepts the dominance of hegemonic structures in order then to reverse or overturn them. Instead, this form of resistance is a remobilizing of common speech, a call to attend to the ways in which “ritual” and “familiarity” have halted and limited the procedures of speech and reading. And above all, it is a displacement of the “understanding” that Antonio Gramsci had named “common sense,” and that underpins so many uses of the first-person plural in social conduct—whereby *I* and *you* constitute a *we* based on *our* supposed understanding of the spaces and ideals that *we* hold in common.

In a later volume of *Empire City*, Lothario grumbles discontentedly: “Our consensus is that how we live is tolerable. If I ask, ‘How are you?’ you must say, ‘Pretty good.’ And if I do not remind you, you must not remind me” (456). This is the social contract as gag. Once the agreement has been established, it constrains all subsequent speech. All that remains is either common belief that “how we live is tolerable,” or else a kind of speech that will not assent to this but that is therefore no kind of speech at all. Motivated by the belief that real melioration of social conditions is nearly but not entirely out of the question, this kind of speech opens up like Lothario's screamed vowels, then closes down upon the “y,” the “w,” or the “h.”

Back to the impasse in the meeting of Lothar's CPUSA chapter:

We are struck dumb. Our spokesman cried out „impossible. But the word fell upside down. We are frozen in criticism. It is impossible to have a formulation of freedom and at the same time to do a free deed. Must we not say that we have made a formulation of freedom in order to protect ourselves from the unformulable daring of doing a free deed? How not to dream it up? Is one to call the formulation of freedom a lie when it is not a lie, just because it does not give freedom, and even though it protects against freedom? „impossible“ is a hard problem. Meantime the people of the world are destroying one another and are destroying also our friends. (29)

Consensus was not just to be a weak form of political compromise, it was also a myth that could be brought to incoherence by another myth, „impossible“, turned upside down, arrived without promise of futurity or understanding. The scream and the inverted word appear in Goodman in opposition to a largely unquestioned form of national politics that hinged upon capital flows that were increasingly motivated by narratives of technological “development” that were coupled to increasingly effective narratives of technologically-enabled communication. At a 1967 London conference of left cultural figures (Allen Ginsberg, Stokely Carmichael, Laing and Cooper, Herbert Marcuse, Lucien Goldmann, and others), Goodman would describe both the need for and the absence of popular forms of organization that would traverse national boundaries. He told the assembly there: “Power resides in the people; it comes ‘from below’ ...[but] at present, needless to say, there is no such thing as a working class international” (126). Moreover, argued Goodman, the place that should be occupied by large-scale popular struggle was at that moment occupied by a growing multinational technocracy: “The one actual international in the world at present is the international of technology and management—that spreads its style and exchanges its persons right across the world” (127). This is Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” reimagined as a style of speech, the active comportment and style of consensus: “how we live is tolerable.” What Goodman offers, by contrast, is a world in which power might be, possibly, up for grabs; but is currently in service of a corporatizing culture and economy, and held in place by what he saw as a misuse of

communications technology. It falls to popular movements to use this technology properly or else to shove it aside in favor of other, perhaps less communicative kinds of speech, not to speak about but rather to speak toward another form of life. To Goodman, this is a question of style, a way of using language collectively to disrupt and tear at the dominant “style” of management. And it is a manner of bodily comportment, a way of moving “right across the world” that is not reducible to commercial exchange.

As he said, again at the 1967 conference in London: “People expect to use political power to accomplish some excellence or grandeur. It cannot. What it can do, sometimes, is to guarantee a situation of minimal decency in which maybe something good can occur” (117). And this is the situation in which Lothario finds himself, in “Our Meeting, 1948.” The screamed vowels, the breathed semi-vowels, and the word “*inverted*,” (fallen upside down) constitute a bare manifestation of the deployment of power, a response to the disaster of consensus and individualism that separate popular power from the instrumental aims of what he will later call “technology and management.” Lothario’s vocalizations spring from the Fertile Void, as an articulation of what the nameless narrative voice (now a singular “I”) calls “the truest possible theory” and defines in this way:

The love is boiling in the Fertile Void; it is souring and fermenting there. The Void must yield up an homunculus. (All this is occurring in the dark, on the yonder side of the impasse.) This then is the theory of the relation of the impasse and the Fertile Void: *diminishing error but remaining close in the awareness of the impasse of nothing practical, large increments of love are released that are fermenting in the Fertile Void.* (30)

The homunculus is a living figure whose birth “on the yonder side of the impasse” is produced by Lothario’s scream, rendered provisionally whole by having been uttered, but cast “in the dark” away from political utility. It is the “woeful pang that is his own and yet is alien to what he thought was his,” and it is the site of a reservoir of

love that is capable of transforming the structures of social organization that house public discourse.

The homunculus that emerges from the void, arriving from the yonder side of the impasse as the embodiment in style and form of large increments of communal love: that homunculus is nothing other than a speech and prose that is prospective but not prescriptive, denotative not descriptive, explosive of explication, but what is it for? And what use may it serve in the present post-political consensus? Goodman writes in a moment when neither a fragmentary political formalism nor a paratactic prosaics is a recognizable quality of any U.S. genre. He is not, or not yet, postmodern. But what might be made, after all, of an unclassifiable literary style that is also and only a politics of unclassifiability, an informal deformalization, an active openness to “something unlooked-for”—not a making sense of the senselessness, but rather a dissensus without sense, and a wordless, full-throated call for friends to “remain in their impasse”?

Exemplum: Voids of Race and Colonialism (*Sangre Negra*)

Native Son was published in 1940 but, even in this period of Hollywood’s feverish adaptation of classic and contemporary fiction, Wright’s novel would not come to the movie screen until 1951, with release of the film *Sangre Negra*. And then it was not as a Hollywood film, nor even strictly speaking as an American film. Directed by the French filmmaker Pierre Chenal for the Argentine studio Sono, the film’s exteriors were shot in Chicago, while its interiors were shot in Sono’s brand new sets in Buenos Aires. The film tells fundamentally the same story that the novel had told: a narrative of the life of Bigger Thomas, a young African-American man in Chicago, who accidentally murders the daughter of his employers, Mary Dalton, and then in a panic murders his girlfriend, Bessie Mears. However, where the novel featured a twenty-year-old protagonist, the film’s Bigger was portrayed by the forty-

year-old Richard Wright. In the transnationalism of its production and in its bodily investment in the person of Richard Wright, *Sangre Negra* exceeds the language of film adaptation. By reproducing a founding work of the African-American literary tradition, and by doing so in a way that foregrounds materiality and artifice, *Sangre Negra* fires the first shot in a battle that Wright would continue to fight throughout the final decade of his life: the effort to cast race and colonialism as voids: great, negative effects upon the conduct of political language that have no necessary purchase upon the biology or history of any human individual or community.

Sangre Negra can hardly be discussed in the terms that would guide most “adaptations” of literature to film. Whether because the movie is not really all that good (it is certainly unbeautiful), because it has barely ever been seen, or because it bears the mark of the novelist’s approval, across its surface, in the presence of that novelist’s own body, the film’s supposed fidelity or infidelity to the original text seems beside the point. In one scene late in the film, Bigger is imprisoned for Bessie’s death. There he dreams a dream of intense anxiety in which his guilt, at Mary’s death in particular, is exposed to the world. Through a high crane shot, we see Bigger dig through a pile of coal, as Bessie stands and speaks to him nearby. The set is black, as is the coal and Bigger’s exposed torso, as is everything in the frame except for Bessie’s white dress. Bigger discovers buried in the coal a mysterious bundle wrapped in paper, also white, then runs sweating through what is very obviously a darkened studio set in a former airplane hangar. The scene becomes a field of wheat, at the end of which stands an older black man, Bigger’s father. As the older man embraces his son, a dissolve transforms him into the vicious white police detective whose pursuit had led to Bigger’s arrest. Bigger opens the package, and finds there the head of his first murder victim, Mary Dalton. And he awakes in tears.

No spectator, now or at the film’s release, could keep Bigger properly in mind through out the scene. For it is not Bigger but instead the great author whose nearly

naked body appears on screen. Meanwhile, Wright's voiceover dwarf the film's presumed story. We hear not the words, but instead the tenor and timbre of a voice that belongs to a celebrity author, political advocate, and newsmaker. This kind of iconography, as Federico Ferrari and Jean-Luc Nancy have observed, situates the author between "the face-without-an-image of a pure character of the work, in the work" and the "image-without-a-face of an author's portrait, which tells us nothing about the work" (26). *Native Son* disappears, and what remains is Wright's ambiguous movement through the darkness. There is a mismatch between the object and the hermeneutic of so-called "adaptation theory." The object itself exerts a demand that we invent a new way to describe what can happen when separate media appear to come together around something other than adaptation.

In *Sangre Negra*, film and novel come together around two kinds of void, thematic and formal. Thematically and metatextually, the film and novel connect and disconnect around what Wright called the voids of race and colonialism. Formally, they conjoin and unjoin at the point where the author's body gets negated in the dark, stagy, void of a Buenos Aires studio hangar. This work has often slipped through the cracks of Wright studies, largely because it is neither a novel nor an essay of explication. Yet in *Sangre Negra*, Wright emerges as a stylist and a thinker upon the problem of medial difference, as well as a theorist of race who was almost uniquely attuned to the conceptual potential of void. The movement of negativity in Wright has been well covered by the thriving subfield of Wright studies: Lewis R. Gordon has written about its phenomenology, David Marriott and Mikko Tukhanen have explored its psychoanalytic investments, Abdul R. JanMohamed has idiosyncratically approached it from both angles, and Yoshinobu Hakutani has linked it to Wright's interest in Zen. Yet for all of these sophisticated hermeneutics, *Sangre Negra* is difficult to read in part because so very few copies of it are even in circulation, and the copies that do circulate are pirated reduplications of the heavily

censored version of the film that entered the United States in 1950. And perhaps even more damningly, *Sangre Negra* is a ruggedly unbeautiful movie (to some it is simply a bad movie) that makes few gestures toward the naturalism of commercial cinema. Yet *Sangre Negra* is also a key site of Wright's negativity and an intriguing intersection between Wright the prewar realist and the Wright the postwar polemicist. As such, it is a keystone text in the analysis of the forms and genres taken by Wright's anti-essentialist struggle toward black liberation. I do not claim that this famously mercurial writer was somehow philosophically consistent. Quite the opposite, I find that he struggled with a discreet set of contradictions throughout a career, and that the period surrounding *Sangre Negra* may be his most deeply contradictory phase.

For Wright, in the period after the war, one such contradiction was the palpable limit to racial discourse. One could claim a racial identity as a place from which to make demands for political recognition, he thought, but race as such was not determining of lived life. Not an embodied trait, it was really more of a societal symptom and a linguistic malformation. In 1953, Wright told an interviewer:

We don't know anything about race. Whenever we speak of race...we speak, in fact, of a void which cannot be filled. I believe that it must be the task of the American Negro artist to liquidate this nonsense about race. The word 'race' should—as long as it is current in our speech—actually always be obliged to be placed between quotation marks. Race is a social myth. (155)

This is the point at which Wright will most clearly argue that race, far from an attribute of bodies, is a complex linguistic operation. Wright's postwar claim that race is "a void" was the very radical "liquidation" of epidermal ideology that he called for, and that in those same years so concerned his contemporary Frantz Fanon. Fundamentally, a perspective based in void is as different from the analysis of race that took place in the social or life sciences, as it is from treatment of "the race problem" as a contested set of questions and answers within the public sphere of advocacy and electoral politics. Moreover, it is radically staged in that scene through

which a half-naked Wright, himself playing Bigger Thomas, races panicked toward death.

Race is not unknowable in Wright. It is neither transcendent of nor absent to his contemporary epistemologies, but it remains something that “we don’t know anything about.” It is the anchor of a persistent socio-cultural narrative. It is also a figure of speech, a rhetorical device that can be shown to be rhetorical, “placed between quotation marks.” It is ephemeral, “current” but by no means permanent, and susceptible to “liquidation” and perhaps erasure. All of this is what makes race a void: a problem for knowledge, a break in the episteme, and a set of questions that has gone unasked but is not unanswerable. Moreover, this void of race “cannot be filled”—its symbolic and phenomenal effects cannot be mistaken for empirical reality. To make such a mistake by filling the void, seeing race as real rather than symbolic, would mean remaining within the episteme of the present instead of tracing cracks in that episteme.

In calling race a void, Wright means to cancel all of that which underpins racial forms of power: the biologically natural relation of race to the body, and the historically natural relation of racial minorities to their majoritarian societies. The void brings to the fore Wright’s linguistic perspective on political identity, and therefore implicates all his writing, philosophical or not, in the conceptual project of “liquidating” race. Wright’s comments on void do not provide a kind of extrinsic key to the hidden inner meaning of his postwar writing, but the interview does provide a frame in which to see how Wright’s essays of the 1950s engaged in realism as a style. Amy Kaplan has argued about this style that it was a way through which American prose writers, after the late nineteenth century, had learned to struggle both with and against new forms of print reproduction and distribution. She argues that “new media promised a coherent and cohesive world in place of older forms of cultural authority,” and concludes: “realism cannot be understood only in relation to the

world it represents; it is also a debate, within the novel form, with competing modes of representation” (13). In Kaplan, and for Wright before her, realism is a deployment of style toward political and aesthetic ends rather than, say, as a form of prose that would seek to access reality without the intrusions of style.

It was during that time that Wright was influenced not just by French phenomenology, but also by a diversity of political and literary traditions, as well as by cinema. Early in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas considers seeing a movie to pass the afternoon before his planned robbery of Blum’s Delicatessen. Wright writes: “He wanted to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open” (14). In his only successful venture into film, Wright’s approach to realism is revised, reinvented as style that might well be considered as a kind of open-eyed, effortless dreaming. This sort of style suits very closely his increasing critical investment in race. In a world where race refers not to a category of embodied identity but instead to a rule or convention of everyday language, Wright is seen to have exerted a form of deregulation, a poetic form of play upon the obviousness and clear visibility of racial and colonial signifiers: a realism, posed against what calls itself the reality of raced life.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West have concluded that the “strange case” of *Sangre Negra* is that it “captures both the tragedy and the triumph that marked Richard Wright’s life” insofar as, despite good intentions, “the film was a grand failure both financially and aesthetically” (190). This evaluation by Gates and West is a common one that echoes across the sparse critical terrain. But insofar as they approach the text through biography and through a simple opposition of success to failure, they open up no space for a dynamic figural reading. Yet a figural reading is just what the film requires, in the dream scene during which Bigger confronts his great fears: his own mortality, the death of his father, his remorse over

Mary, and his love for Bessie, whom he has just murdered. Wright wears only a pair of pants in this sequence, which takes place on a large and barely adorned soundstage. Softly built and anxiously furrowed, the forty-year-old author is quite obviously older than the Bigger of the novel. This writer, so applauded for his realism in the prewar years, appears in a scene that is less naturalistic than stagy, less typological than iconographic. The scene's adherence to a simplistic dream symbolism and its generic investment in melodrama might even lead a viewer to find the scene overly familiar, except for the startling and unfamiliar fact that one of the world's most widely publicized novelists has been photographed in it: weeping, sweating, and stripped to the waist. The film is usually condemned for the failures of its art, when it is discussed at all. When it is taken up, it is treated only in passing, as a minor component of Wright's biography; an instance of failed literary adaptation; or a negligible incident in the histories of French political films or English-language "social problem films." Outside of these frames, the movie has been all but ignored. But how could it be so neglected, this reworking of the novel through which Irving Howe had famously seen "American culture...changed forever" (100)? Indeed, this enigmatic dream sequence brings together two contradictory lines of thought about Wright's work: as a site of bare, virtuosic style; and as a site of abjection and realism. The "staginess" that can be perceived in this scene of a film also signals (and provides us with a way to read) Wright's postwar move, away from realism as the most direct route toward representing the "realities" of race and class, and toward realism as a philosophic and aesthetic practice by which to navigate the problematic of racial unrepresentability.

Wright was no more and perhaps no less an Existentialist than was his contemporary Frantz Fanon. Both men synthesized a way of thinking with and against racial schemas that drew from the intellectual partnerships they had forged with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, but that also stemmed from their

separate encounters with psychoanalysis, anticolonial struggle, and the literary traditions of the United States and of Martinique, respectively. Both men envisioned blackness as a strategic device for social and symbolic action, rather than as an innate or anatomical attribute, and did so most acutely during the decade of the 1950s. Indeed Fanon reached to Wright repeatedly when illustrating his own political and philosophic arguments. For instance, in his *Toward an African Revolution*, Fanon describes a kind negativity in Wright that manifests as the historical disjunction at the center of a human object who is both shattered and ghostly:

Exploitation, tortures, raids, racism, collective liquidations, rational oppression take turns at different levels in order literally to make of the native an object... This object man, without means of existing, with out a *raison d'être*, is broken in the very depth of his substance. The desire to live, to continue, becomes more and more indecisive, more and more phantom-like... In his first novels, Wright gives a very detailed description of it. (35)

Thus in Fanon's view, Wright's early fiction was capable of positing a black American "native" subject that is both "phantom-like" as well as objectified. Bigger is "broken in the very depth of his substance" and yet somehow manages to keep moving through the real social space of the novel and the artificial subjective space of the film.

On screen, panicking and racing through the void, Wright maps Bigger's brokenness onto himself. He takes that which should be the constitutive exclusion of any textual form—the body of its author—and he forces it into the center of the visual field. By implicating his own story with that of Bigger, Wright consolidates his many political and philosophical concerns (across numerous forms, from fiction and film to interviews and non-fiction) into a single, dark figure. As Fanon was illustrating his own work with references to *Native Son*, Wright himself had both moved and not moved beyond that book. Wright continued to produce works in several genres, but the character of Bigger remained central to his fame as well as to his politics (there is also more than a little of Bigger in Cross Damon, the protagonist

of his next major novel, *The Outsider*). As well, *Sangre Negra* allowed Wright to take up the character of Bigger anew, albeit on different stylistic terms than the ones that had guided him in his prewar writing. For the traditional realism of Wright's earlier work soon gave way to formal experimentations in genres other than fiction (film, of course, as well as reportage and polemic) as well as in denser form of fiction that was shot through with philosophical argument and all kinds of abstractions.

It was through these experiments that Wright came to show race to be: a problem for speech and a challenge for poetics and ethical aesthetics. Moreover, for this postwar Wright, race was a purely social abstraction with no real referent in the world, and so could be reckoned only through the ambivalences and contradictions of literary and visual poetics. The more he succeeded in his struggle toward liberation, Wright imagined, the more the world would see race as the redundant and undescriptive word that he knew it to be; and the more quickly it could be allowed to fade out of common usage. For Wright in that 1953 interview, writing by black Americans "in the long run will become a literature in which the problems of the world are summarized" (155). Race in this literature would be deployed as a mere word and as a political formalism sustainable only through certain mythical operations of social inequality. Race might also be the symbolic flag under which such inequality might be opposed—it was a pleonasm, as far as Wright was concerned, living its afterlife through outmoded and accustomed uses.

A familiar narrative follows Wright through the postwar years. His position had become especially acute in the years following World War II, when Wright at last departed the United States for Paris, and from there for Ghana, Argentina, as well as other sites in which he saw deeply unstable politics that were expressed racially. This is, as has often been noted, both part and parcel of Wright's abandonment of party Communism and subsequent participation in transnational black nationalism. Also, as has been noted since Paul Gilroy's magisterial *Black*

Atlantic, Wright's political turn is captured in and complicated by his engagement with a European philosophical critique of identity—especially in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, but also in his readings of themes and formulations from Nietzsche, Freud, Malinowski, and others. At the same time as these political and philosophical shifts, Wright had also begun to focus increasingly on the writing of non-fiction and eventually poetry, as well as on the production of this, his only film. Yet there is much reason to resist the periodization of Wright's work that would see a total discontinuity between his American prose and his European prose, his proletarian thinking and his existentialist thinking, or his anti-racist activities and his anti-imperialist activities.

For one thing, Wright's supposed cosmopolitanism is not merely about a repositioning of his status as social observer.¹¹ This cosmopolitanism is embedded in the dream scene. Bigger dreams in a diegetic Chicago, but as decency codes prevent him from being filmed there, the dream itself must take place in a non-diegetic Buenos Aires. Highly emplaced, but also placeless in a space of void, Wright's cosmopolitanism is a complication of a point of view on the reality of race that he'd begun as early as *Native Son*. While it is true that Wright's worldly mobility permits a greater range of perspectives on the world, he also claims to occupy something like the inverse position: the convergence and "summary" of all "the problems of the world." The role that Wright marks out for himself, and for other black literary writers, is the role of perpetual outsider (the title of the novel he published the same year as the interview) and yet Wright's "outside" has a complex topology. Not merely an external vantage point, Wright argues that black American identity also consolidates something like the essence of human struggle, such that black writers, himself included, would be uniquely capable of recognizing such struggle wherever in

¹¹ Paul Gilroy remains the key thinker about Wright's cosmopolitanism, in books from *The Black Atlantic* to *Against Race*.

the world they witnessed it. Always outside, yet more inside than inside, the corpus of black writing would have to be demarcated according to “race” and nothing else. Yet it must also be the undoing of race, the “liquidation” of its evidently permanent place within “social myth.” This is how Wright comes to understand race as a “void which cannot be filled”: it is a failure of social and political coherence, an exclusion that must remain marked as an exclusion, but whose marker might change through literary endeavor.

We might therefore see a developing idea of race that runs through Wright’s work, from his invention of social types in *Native Son* (which could be called para-realistic, insofar as they deviate from and through realism to capture something that is socially representative but that nowhere truly exists) at least until his philosophical fictions and polemical non-fictions of the mid-Fifties. There is something deeply historical about these texts’ depictions of race. Race can be witnessed, and its injustices can be illustrated and cataloged, before being battled on the spot. But something about race is also ahistorical there, whether in the simplistic symbolism of a social type, or else in a pernicious word that must “always be obliged to be placed between quotation marks.” Chronologically, the filmed Bigger Thomas in *Sangre Negra* falls between the 1940 novel and the 1953 interview. Yet as part of a transnational production built around the nakedly available body of Wright, that onscreen character also consolidates his author/actor’s conception of a racist, divided, and violent world.

This perspective is best expressed in the slightly later nonfiction text, *White Man, Listen!* (1957), in which Wright indicts colonialism in the same terms by which he had indicted the language of “race” four years earlier. Calling for an anticolonialist way of life and writing that would move beyond the available language of class struggle, he writes toward the development of a properly “dynamic concept of the void” (690):

The dynamic concept of the void that must be filled, a void created by a thoughtless and brutal impact upon a billion and a half people, is more powerful than the concept of class conflict, and more universal...Perhaps you will feel that I'm devaluing the passion felt by national revolutionaries, and that I'm painting the Western white man as a brutal idiot. I'm not trying to do any such thing. I say that, upon sound reflection, if you get rid of some of your preconceptions, you will see that this concept of the void-to-be-filled can be equated to a *raison d'être*, a justification for living. (690)

The void, which in the earlier interview had seemed only a passing notion or convenient metaphor—a way to foreground the linguistic malleability of race—has now become a “dynamic concept.” Moreover, the void that “cannot be filled” has now become a void that “must be filled.” Wright’s contradictions are by no means accidental. “Race” is the name of a void, but must fall under erasure lest it seem not merely to name but also to fill that void. Meanwhile, colonialism is the force that caused the void and put whole populations under the pressure to live in it.

The void cannot be filled, but it must be filled. Colonialism cannot be disavowed and neither can racism, but still less can either one be merely accepted. Colonialism has devastated forms of life, in Wright’s terms, while racism has devastated the language that might be used to talk about life. Here, for Wright, is the dual function of black American writing in its most deeply worlded form: first, to depict forms of life that might continue in the void without ever claiming to fill it; and second, to reinvent forms of speech about the void without ever claiming to refer to it. These are the thematic and formal imperatives of Wright’s writing, brought to a degree of clarity—the clarity of a “justification for living”—quite near the end of his life, but locatable even in his earliest texts.

What could the void have been, for Wright? What sort of topography might describe the contradictions of race and responsibility, only then to come into contradiction with itself? Wright’s contradictions constitute a powerfully dialectical approach to dealing with several kinds of inequality at once, and a way of considering how blackness, poverty, and colonality all intersect, but then casting that

intersection in the paradoxical forms of literary and cinematic figures, rather than in strict or transparent political and philosophical dicta. This was a period of experimentation for Wright: in his novel about white city dwellers (*Savage Holiday*); in his highly emotional account of Cross Damon's paralyzed interior (*The Outsider*); and in his first, axiomatic efforts in axiomatic political prose (*White Man, Listen!*) and journalistic opinion (*Black Power*). This experimentalism is where literary realism and literary modernism meet: in a form of straight description that, at the same time, disavows any special capacity of language for referring to social and political reality.

Typical of the negative response to Wright's experiments was that of J. Saunders Redding who, in a review of Wright's last novel *The Long Dream*, wrote: "Severing his cruel intimacy with the American environment, [Wright] has cut the emotional umbilical cord through which his art was fed, and all that remains for it to feed on is the memory, fading, of righteous love and anger" (61). Redding wrote even more scathingly after Wright's death and posthumous publication of the story collection *Eight Men*: "[Wright's] escape is a compulsive act of self-abnegation...[through which] he begins to flag as a creative artist. He turns precious and 'arty'; honesty deserts him; dedication wilts; passion chills" (358). What is vivid in these comments is an immediate association of Americanism with realism, or at least with anti-aesthetics or anti-modernism. From this perspective, "artiness" is "dishonest" and kills authentic emotion—like Proteus, Wright lost contact with the (American) earth and instantly became vulnerable and weak. However, for his particular aesthetic experiments, Wright took inspiration from a range of sources: not just existentialism, but also the "dynamic concept of the void" with its roots not only in philosophy but also in American literature and politics.

Wright's discourse of void teaches something about the language of contingency and space as it runs through Wright's work; it maps out the relation between art production and the possibility for large-scale social and political change.

Moreover, it is the dream scene of the film that consolidates the transnational element of Wright's view of colonialism with the death-bound qualities that he assigns to black subjectivity. Still, conventional wisdom holds that the film has received so little attention—none of it from theoretical quarters—because, simply put, it is taken to be a bad movie. Yet this negative appraisal is not universally held. In a 1951 letter to Nelson Algren (it began affectionately “Dear beast...”), Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

I saw Dick's movie in a private performance and...it struck me as a wonderfully good thing. He can act, that man. Slim, looking good, a real man, not a screen puppet...The director did a good job, too: you really feel this crummy monster of a town where my heart is rotting, somewhere.

Neither simple dismissal nor rapt praise can capture the film's importance for an interdisciplinary critical theory of Wright, especially his effort to produce a literary language of emancipation that would cross media. But Beauvoir's informal note does inspire a line of questions that might help to pinpoint what had the film had going in its favor.

The film is marked by a thoroughgoing negativity—in the pessimism of its narrative, but also in a woodenness of acting style and a staginess of *mise en scène* that strip away any positive feelings of suspense or immediacy. As has recently been noted by several critics, this negativity is a characteristic not just of the film, but also of the novel that it repeats and cites. It is worth noting that the first epigraph of Wright's first novel, *Lawd Today!*, is a quotation of Van Wyck Brooks from the same essay that generated the theorization of a “usable past” and the observation that “the present is a void.” What the film does—irrespective of its aesthetic successes or failures; its good or bad qualities—is what much of Wright's postwar work does: to revise, care for, and re-present the negative aspects of race; to nourish, nurture, and continuously restore them for limited use in a void present. The film foregrounds the void as the organizing principle of raced and colonized life in the postwar black

diaspora. And it thus demands that we see the intermedial separation in terms that are always already racial and subjective.

CHAPTER 2—MEDIUM

PART I: FROM THE SOCIETY FOR CINEMATOLOGISTS TO THE ROMANTICS

I. Film and literature

What are literature and film to one another? Does each recognize the other as something very like itself, insofar as each can be said to constitute a medium of representation, perhaps even of communication? Or in the present epistemological and academic arrangement, do literature and film emerge as absolutely separate objects of knowledge, with the concept of medium arriving only late in the game, as a way to cover over this gap? From one perspective, each of these forms—literature and film—may be translated into the other, based upon a mediality that is held in common: through the so-called adaptation of a prose narrative by a film, say, or through the novelization of a film narrative or the evident adoption of cinematic cadences by a novel or poem. But in spite of these arguments about intermedial movement and transition, literature and film remain symbolic forms that are dedicated and discrete. Each one demands that it be treated to a discourse of medium specificity, just as each one continues to order the knowledge that can be generated around it and does so in a way that keeps it insulated from the other, rival medium. The term medium thus comes to describe what the two share enough so that they can even be analyzed together in the first place. Provisionally, we might say that medium is the general category to which they both belong, possibly the substance of which both are made, and certainly the condition of their comparability to multiple other media from painting to sculpture, digital photography to standard photography, newspaper to television.

And yet, from a standpoint that can separate ontological from epistemological questions however, film and literature will never be delineated as if they were simply a pair of related but distinct media. Either we define medium as

having the real capacity to order the world in exactly the ways that it says it does, by rendering distinguishable the various arts and technologies of culture, or else we define it as nothing more or less than a persistent and powerful concept: a metaphor by which to organize, not the world, but rather the language and ideas that address and describe the world. If the latter (symbolic) definition is not seen as preferable to the former (real) definition, then there is some risk that our present culture will proceed to make only those things for itself that are instantly recognizable as belonging to one medium or another.

I call this a risk because the stakes are high—where the language of medium dominates, and where it takes its object as given, there the language of technology persists, along with the supplementary languages of techno-determinism, of an unquestioned capitalism, and of a fetish for high industry and efficiency. So we might certainly continue to see as radically intermedial those novels with cinematic rhythms or those films that explore narrative possibility and character psychology. Intermediality is certainly a very deliberate component, even a tactic, of those objects. But to see literature and film only from the standpoint of their differing or intersecting media would be to naturalize what we think we already know about novels, and films—that is, that novels are formally poor, always seeking more sophisticated access to the world of images; and that film is an impersonal object of mass or pop culture, and so often draws on the novel for humane attitudes and high-cultural capital.

For as long as we take medium to signal an ontological state of being, rather than an epistemological frame, new literature and film will suffer, and so will the criticism and the culture that they inspire. What then can we still call a medium? And when does a medium or media object become political? Does it enter politics when it identifies within a tradition of art or a timeline of technological development? Is it political by virtue of its setting, its audience, or its purported

content? And what kinds of reading might still be possible in a world marked by void, where questions of medium specificity and medium ontology can be bracketed or swept aside? How does we observe, without accepting, the function of medium as a master-concept capable of producing and sorting cultural objects before vanishing back into them as the thing that they always-already are or were, and as the ideal form of communication that they will never quite attain? And how might we regard cinema and literature in their ontological distortions and indistinctions without losing track of the fact that, from the standpoints of reception and history, the hard discursive work of the concept of medium has already been done, and done with tremendous efficiency? This section of the dissertation takes up these questions first by showing cinema studies to have been founded upon an embrace of technology and a distancing from materialisms that are more manifestly political or aesthetic. I then turn to certain works of American fiction and poetry from the Romantic period, so as to demonstrate what kind of a theory might yet be drawn out to bear upon postwar cultural politics and the literature-film divide. I will argue for a theory of medium that can attune itself as much to the political demands and aesthetic effects of culture as to culture's technical substratum.

From a common-sense perspective, everybody already knows what a medium is. And everybody also knows that the making or watching of movies is a practice that is historically separable from the writing or reading of books. These common knowledges pose a problem for both the analysis of texts and the interpretation of culture. And yet the first duty of the concept of medium is to organize knowledge and to conserve the self-identity of the objects that it has organized: to produce them retroactively in a pre-given bloc or reservoir of things in the world. The postwar period was a moment in the history of thought when the category of medium had not yet secured all the language available for handling cinema and literature together. This poses a problem for the study of postwar film and literature:

either we accept the common-sense definition of medium and proceed as if there were a natural historical relation between literary and cinematic objects, or else we deny that the term has any real purchase, in which case we are left with little that would intuitively connect literature to film. Thus, medium is a kind of conceptual linchpin. It must be acknowledged on a provisional basis to carry a conceptual and institutional weight, but it must be denied any real descriptive purchase upon history or materiality.¹² Medium thus binds literature to film just as it unbinds them: together, as the category to which both belong but under which they must remain absolutely distinct; and apart, as the principle of their multiplicity and the promise of their eventual obsolescence.

As John Guillory has recently pointed out, there was no explicit place for a theory of medium at the beginnings of the theory of art and literature, in Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Guillory, that early failure to explore the concept means we should now to look back to Aristotle's poetic writings (because an equivalent term appears there tantalizingly, but only once) to find the unexplored traces of this most critical concept in the contemporary study of art. As Guillory writes of Aristotle: "After briefly commenting on the different media of imitation, he devotes the remainder of the *Poetics* to...the objects and modes of imitation...[and] sets the question of medium aside, *where it remained for two millennia*" (323, Guillory's emphasis). At present, there are two main scholarly routes by which to write about the relation of literature to film: one, through the departments and organizations of cinema and media studies; and two, through departments of literature (such as English, Comparative Literature, French, and German). But this is a fairly recent way of

¹² In this way, the category of medium is like the category of nation, as I considered the latter in Chapter 1. Both headings dominate the discourses for which they provide shelter and legitimation, and both demand a kind of transhistorical ontology: that of medium specificity on one hand and that of national identity on the other. What the aesthetics of void provide, in both cases, is a way to regard this ontology as a textual and ideological function, rather than as a description or explication of something real.

organizing knowledge. Little more than half a century ago, several of these disciplines—first American literature, then cinema studies, then communications and media studies—all gained disciplinary status over a strikingly short period, usually out of departments of English in the United States and Canada, and each of these fields regards a different medium to be its proper object. But still, the concept of medium has itself not really received a proper ground-up reconsideration. As a result, these fields are sometimes characterized by tremendous permeability but usually defined by the strict policing of disciplinary boundaries. To continue with an intermedial analysis, therefore, it would seem appropriate to consider just what notions of medium have triumphed over which others.

In an approach to have gained far more traction among scholars of media than among theorists of literature, scholars such as Friedrich Kittler have long argued that pretty much anything can be considered a medium of representation or communication in the most mechanical sense: from film to television, and from the high-technology computers to print, literature, and the very basic “technology” of the linguistic or literary signifier. If one were to take the ontological standpoint, this would seem quite reasonable: everything that can represent or communicate is a medium, and every medium constitutes an instrument or technology for altering the shape of the world. The means of culture in this way become the ends of cultural study. Yet from a perspective that foregrounds critical method—that is, on a register that is more properly epistemological and political—there must be a way to imagine what elements of culture are simply not reducible in this way. There must be a way to magnify the domain of cultural means without resolving them into static and discrete ends. Put as a question then, what elements of a cultural object are not technological at all? And what aspects might resist the descriptive, communicative, or representational functions of media? Is there, in other words, a built-in

component of cultural objects that might serve as an aesthetic, historical, or affective glitch in their mechanisms of ideology and efficiency?

2. Cinematology

In 1959 was founded the Society for Cinematologists, as the first permanent U.S. institution of academic film study, and the precursor to today's Society of Cinema & Media Studies. The Society's first president was a professor of English at NYU named Robert Gessner, whose 1939 course called "Cinema as a Literary Art" had been the first class on film appreciation to be offered for credit in the United States. Moreover, Gessner had also been also a screenwriter and a poet who had attended and reported on both the Moscow and New York Writers' Congresses in 1934 and 1935. Gessner thus embodies a transition in the U.S. study of film, from a staunchly proletarian artistic and political criticism to a highly methodical scholarly discipline. At the same time, he figures the moment of historical separation, not just between departments of English and of Cinema Studies, but also between the presumptive objects of those disciplines: literary texts and motion pictures.

In a recent discussion of film's disciplinarizing moment, historian Dana Polan has written that Gessner "formed an important link between the sporadic attempts to create film education that dotted American academia through the 1930s and the successful flourishing of programs in the new media explosions of the 1960s" (343). More important than his significance to the future of the humanities however, is what exactly he represents in the film/literature divide—a divide out of which cinema studies was born, certainly, but which was also transformative in the shifting self-definition of American literary studies. On this count, Lee Grieveson has recently noted how much Gessner had learned from literature's own disciplinarizing project, which had advanced through the previous decades. According to Grieveson, Gessner noticed "how 'New Criticism' helped the professional consolidation of English...[by]

giving it a definable object of study (the “literariness” of the text)” and how Gessner had responded by raising his own “questions of ontology...[which] could constitute the grounds of an autonomous discipline that would be properly housed in a university department and supported by a professional association” (170). This line of influence, from New Criticism to medium ontology, goes some way to explain how Gessner was inspired to co-found a new discipline around a redefined object; but it also explains why, once defined, that object provided an angle from which to reconsider the earlier objects, and literature first of all.

I take Gessner’s 1939 formulation (the course title: “cinema as a literary art”) to be instructive about the roles played by medium and intermediality in the present-day assumptions about film and literature. Gessner’s course was committed to seeing motion pictures to be newly expressive of literature’s experiments in plotting, characterization, and space. But he was not content just to see literary attributes at work in films. By 1960, in fact, Gessner would argue that it was literature that had learned, and could yet learn, its most radical formal lessons from cinema. In a *New York Times Book Review* of that year, he wrote a feature entitled “The Film: A Source of New Vitality for the Novel,” in which he posited that the very best novels had become “fascinat[ed] with cinema as an art uniquely capable of capturing the speed and complexity, the subtleties and explosions of our age.” In short, for Gessner, the cinema was to be thought in literary terms; while at the same time, literature was at its best when borrowing formal innovations from the latest films.

This is not a contradiction and does not represent a change of heart for Gessner who, at least since his 1934 trip to Moscow, had insisted that literature’s technical revolution outweighed its artfulness. “Technique” should be understood here on the side of mechanicity—taking shape as an artist’s material intervention into capitalist production, and as a corrective to what Gessner saw as literature’s “superficial aestheticism derived from bourgeois hangovers” (“Author’s Field Day”

29). What made literature “literature,” for Gessner, was the fact that it was hand-wrought, not that it was beautiful or illustrative of social phenomena. From this perspective, cinema can be literary to the degree that it manipulates the *technical* devices of narrative; and literature has the potential to be cinematic, insofar as it can mimic its *technological* devices. Technique and technology are thus the foundational aspects of the object that Gessner’s new discipline produces, and after which it names itself: cinema. But technique and technology are also the terms by which Cinema Studies re-construes the object of the earlier discipline: that is, literature. The act of naming was therefore Gessner’s top priority in his first two presidential addresses to the Society for Cinematologists, as he delineated an object (“the cinema”) that would be proper to the discipline; an object that was not literature but that could teach literature a thing or two about its *made* properties.

Disciplinarity did not come easy, for as Dudley Andrew has noted: “when the galaxy of film was gradually swirling into existence and becoming visible within the university, it wasn’t at all clear that academic oversight was pertinent or wholesome” (879). Unsurprising then, that the Society’s first meeting was mostly concerned with the discipline’s self-justification, and began with Gessner’s admission that “*Movies* and *scholarship* are words which sound strange when heard in juxtaposition” (73). So it was that his second presidential address, in 1961, oriented the society’s terminology and method by rejecting the object’s old names and marking the Society’s object proper in lucid terms:

When a teacher brought into a classroom in 1930 a circular tin can containing silver nitrate salts fixed on a cellulose nitrate base, the contents were called a motion picture. If he got the tin can from the Hays Office it was called a motion picture classic. In 1935 this circular tin under the teacher’s arm was called an audio-visual aid. By 1940, thanks to the British documentaries, our tin can was called a film. By 1945 the Sociologists began bringing the can into their classrooms, and calling it a frame of reference...By 1955, educators, repackaging curricula, called the can a communication. To the more imaginative who wished to distinguish the can from the slightly obscene phrase, mass media, it was called a communication art. Finally, in 1960, thanks in part to the existence

of The Society [for Cinematologists] the can in this country is being called cinema. (25)

With this act first of historicizing and then of claiming the name of “cinema,” Gessner upends what has since become conventional wisdom: that Cinema Studies could be born only after cinema itself had come into its own as a cultural form. Instead, Gessner shows us that cinema came into its own—that is, it became a self-identical object of historical writing and cultural critique in the United States—only once the newly-minted science of cinematology had arrived to demarcate precisely what cinema was, as distinct from all those other objects under discussion elsewhere in the university, such as literature, society, art, and even film.

It is a matter of methodological specificity that, like the question of formal specificity that had led him to mimic the debates over literariness, led Gessner to differentiate himself from literary and other styles of critique. So just as Marius Bewley in 1959 named “the Americanness of the American novel” as a way to differentiate an emergent American literary studies from all other literary approaches, Gessner here marks his territory with regard to cinema. For Gessner, the other disciplines could keep their classic motion pictures and sociological frames-of-reference, along with their films, movies, and communication arts, so long as the cinematologists could produce cinema as an object that would be all their own. But what was cinema and how was it to be talked about by its new science? For Gessner, it was not sufficient for cinematology simply to reproduce the technical language of filmmaking (the clinical-sounding names for edits, shots, camera movements, and industrial categories) as if the terms of cinema’s production could remain also the terms of its critique. Such an emphasis on mastering cinema’s specialized vocabulary was for Gessner a foreclosure of “the most elementary comprehension of cinema as a humanistic art” (27). To reconstruct a cinematic object only through its industrial terminology, he concluded, is “what happens when

the plumbers and carpenters take over architecture in the name of low-cost housing” (27).

But this impulse of Gessner’s—to downgrade the specialized vocabulary of film production and distribution—is itself contradictory. After bravely insisting that cinema’s science move beyond a mere description of mechanical processes, Gessner’s address then goes on to say by what exact procedures that science should progress. He identifies:

The 19 parts of the cinema [which] fall into the four areas of EDITING, OBJECTS, COMPOSITION, and AUDITORY with EDITING being the primary rhythms that control the whole, in accordance with concepts that describe, narrate, inform, and symbolize, singly or in combinations. For those who might wish for a more ethereal discipline, let us appreciate that cinema, more than any art, manipulates physical objects and utilizes machinery. (34)

So while Gessner does attempt to displace any single technical vocabulary of cinema, he nevertheless prioritizes the “machinery” of cinema over its aesthetics. And even the components of cinema that he would call *art* are describable largely in terms of the mechanical “manipulation of physical objects.” Thus, an ambivalence is built into the very object of Cinema Studies in the U.S. The cinema can still be considered as art object, a political problem, or a cultural expression, from this perspective, but only by first submitting to a technological order, or else by being invoked from a space outside of the discipline which gives it its name.

What this points to is a function of disciplines in general that might be seen at work beyond Cinema Studies. From Bewley’s remark and the debates on literariness, we can see it clearly at work, for example, in the various subdisciplines of literary studies. By definition, on this view, a discipline must mark its territory on the terms both of its method and of its object. And if Gessner’s second presidential address makes it difficult for anyone from outside cinema studies to produce scholarship on cinema, then it is his piece in *The New York Times Book Review* that does the inverse: incorporating non-cinematic objects into his view of the cultural

terrain, but only insofar as those objects might be thought in the primarily technical terms that “the cinema” embodies. When Gessner says that literature has been inspired by cinema’s ability to capture “the speed and complexity, the subtleties and explosions of our age,” he means not only that literary form can be submitted to technological manipulation, but also that literature must learn from studies and practices of cinema just how technological (mechanical and machinic) it already is.

Gessner’s piece in *The Book Review* produced a strongly negative response in the next issue’s “Letters to the Editor.” One of these letters preferred to see the literary adoption of cinematic style not as a necessary effect of a singular modernity, but as just one moment in a far longer history, in which literature was what provided the basic tools for film, rather than the other way around. The letter concluded simply: “the projector rests on a pile of books.” Another letter responded yet more forcefully that cinema was just a secondary effect of the previous century’s revolution in literary and philosophic technique: “The ‘cinematic’ conception of the novel—if this is the name to be used—must be traced back [before cinema]...to a milieu suddenly concerned with the problem of human identity in a fluid world of time and evolution.”

These responses show a stark awareness of the long-term implications of Gessner’s project: the regimentation of cinematic forms and methods, and the roping-in of literature, by virtue of its mediality, its inclusion in an industry of books and ideas, and its potential to be “cinematic.” Gessner’s detractors consider literature to be what had first identified a rupture that for Gessner is technological and industrial, but that for them is on the order of subjective identity. For these writers, the void or tear in modern experience—what they had called “human identity in a fluid world”—might only be mended by aesthetic means, since technology and industry had only made these matters worse. These writers do not deny the force of certain films but indeed single out films made by D.W. Griffith and Sergei

Eisenstein: filmmakers who, for Gessner's critics, are not ahead of literature by virtue of their access to the "subtleties and explosions of an age"; but are instead readily comparable to, and thus assimilable to, a disruptive literary aesthetics that had predated cinema. Both those filmmakers, say one letter-writer, shared first of all a debt to "the unrivaled visual acuity of Charles Dickens."

What Gessner's respondents provide however, are two arguments: first, that Cinema Studies might be free to regard literature as a secondary effect of technology and industry, but that thinkers outside of Cinema Studies must continue to consider literary form in primarily social and aesthetic terms; and second, that the literary disciplines are just as capable of re-defining cinema (as an object of art and culture) as Gessner thought Cinema Studies could be in appropriating literature (as an operation of technical devices). There is also another key difference between these approaches: the differing degree of separation between the critical apparatus and the object being critiqued. On one hand, the writings of Cinema Studies can remain absolutely distinct from its object, its print inscriptions having occurred in ways that are absolutely dissimilar to the inscriptions of images and sounds on a screen. But on the other hand, the writings of scholarly literary studies is ultimately made of the same stuff out of which literature itself is made: print, rhetoric, metaphor, pages, even narrative. With concrete effects upon the possibilities for knowledge, literary criticism thus begins to see cultural objects as capable of a task very like its own (i.e. description and argument) even though it may use different tools to perform it. Unlike Cinema Studies—whose object, whatever it is, must be held at a distance for observation—literary criticism now has the option of embracing its object to the point of repeating it or becoming indistinct from it. Put simply, because it is conducted through print, literary criticism can always resemble literature in a way that cinema studies will never resemble cinema. And this leads to a confusion in the

critical and epistemological procedures that are permitted to survive in a given discipline.

In this light, it becomes important that two other crucial changes occur in literary studies at around the same time as the academization of film. First is a new line of thought that pursued and explored the formal qualities and social ideals of what Bewley called U.S. literature's "Americanness"; and second is the increased prominence of a rigorous concept of medium—and of a North American scholarly subdiscipline of Media Studies—largely due to the work of Canadian scholars of literature and communications. Gessner was ambivalent about the intersection of technology and art; that much is clear. And his competing imperatives seem to have stemmed from and been worked out separately by these other new disciplines: the literary studies side with its attention to aesthetic and subjective struggles, and the media studies side with its attention to technological and institutional development. The first of these departures is exemplified by a scholar of the Nineteenth Century such as Leslie Fiedler, who broadened the concept and practice of "reading" in order to see literariness in a wide range of Twentieth-Century objects that are ostensibly non-literary. Meanwhile, as Fiedler develops methods that contribute to a nascent U.S. cultural studies, it is Marshall McLuhan (also drawing on an expertise in American literature of the Nineteenth-Century) who produces a concept of medium and who shows the historical displacement of print by electronic means of representation and communication.

In the introduction to his 1955 collection *An End to Innocence*, Fiedler both professed and exploded the ideals of New Criticism, and so outlined a persuasive method of cultural (rather than exclusively literary) critique:

I am a literary man...with a sensibility trained by the newer critical methods...[and] it is a 'close reading'...that I should like to think I have achieved, a reading that does not scant ambiguity or paradox, but tries to give to the testimony of a witness before a Senate subcommittee or the letters of the Rosenbergs the same

careful scrutiny we have learned to practice on the shorter poems
of John Donne. (xxiii)

Close reading, for Fiedler, might extend beyond poems and novels, and attend to enigmas of anticommunist politics, of race and sex, or even of what was still, at that time, called “the movies.” This method resembles one way by which cultural studies is currently performed. And it stands in stark contrast to the practices of media studies and most cinema studies—where an object’s technology and mechanicity, and not its textuality, are at stake—for which any kind of “reading” at all will only ever be metaphorical for another kind of encounter, one that is above all historical or ontological, and that emphasizes elements such as editing, content distribution, and synchronized sound.

In its transition away from literary and cultural studies, but toward the adoption of all new approaches to many of the same objects, Gessner’s cinema studies also draws on the contemporary tools of media studies, formerly a subdiscipline of Communications, but by the late 1950s an advancing set of questions across the humanities. With tools that are invented by McLuhan among others, a certain concept of medium could describe—and describe exhaustively—the objects commonly known as mass media or communications, but also those commonly known as arts. However, it was important to McLuhan that those arts be seen as obsolete in the face of quickly multiplying electronic forms, such as radio and television. As he wrote with Edmund Carpenter in an article roughly contemporary with Fiedler’s statement, there was in the recognition of mass media’s dominance over print and literature a way of pushing back against conservative social forces: “Official culture still strives to force the new languages to do the work of the old. But the horseless carriage did not do the work of the horse; it abolished the horse...Horses are fine. So are books” (51). Explaining a similar point a few years later (in an essay roughly contemporary with the founding of the Society for Cinematologists), he wrote: “A new medium bombards older media and awareness,

stripping the older forms of experience to their bare bones or basic codes” (79). As with the earlier argument, this later work does insist that “the electronic...abolishes literature” (79). But McLuhan also proceeds to say that the rigorous ambiguities of modern life are best handled by imitating those for whom ambiguity is a specialty, emulating “the artists to help us become contemporaries of ourselves (81). Rather than indulge in rigorous methods of “the new criticism, or reading in depth,” and instead of challenging those new critics “in civil feuds arising from media change,” McLuhan thinks that critics should find common cause, since what everyone can agree on is that “there is no time to adjust [as] we simply need to know, and understand, exactly what is happening” to the status of information and representation (81).

Cinema studies and literary studies in these ways come to name a pair of perspectives from which to view almost any cultural or political practice. A properly cinematic perspective may invest itself in any object, as long as it can be reproduced as a collection of sounds and images, brought to a standstill in order to be described, technically and technologically, through a critical study that D.N. Rodowick has described as: “stopping its movement” before “decomposing and transposing it into the alien modality of writing” (78). Meanwhile, a literary perspective can regard any object (including a motion picture) as long as it is potentially textual and alive, like a foil or a counter-argument in a discussion, active and unpredictable, just like critical debate itself. Crucially, while the former option belongs increasingly to film scholars and professionals, the latter option belongs not just to critics, but also to poets, novelists, and other writers of what goes, commercially or disciplinarily, by the name of literature. From this point of view, it is startling that film and literature can even be discussed on the same premises, insofar as in their obvious differences they beg the question: by what criteria are film and literature even comparable?

3. Romanticism

In the current critical language, it is tempting to declare that literature (or literariness) and film (or cinema) are both “media,” to be defined perhaps as the apparatuses of representation, vehicles of culture, or material substrates for the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. And yet the language of the “medium” brings us hard up against the technological language of media studies, which provides a thorough and necessary account of institutional changes, but which increasingly suspends the specificity of a literary—and therefore aesthetic—approach to a range of objects that includes both film and literature. But there may be a lesson left in that letter writer's claim for “a milieu suddenly concerned with the problem of human identity in a fluid world of time and evolution.” In the competing definitions that were produced by the fiction and poetry of the American Nineteenth Century, medium emerges as a term that resonates on registers that are political, spiritual, multiple, ontological, and supernatural, as well as technical.

That literary archive, and its inheritance by mid-Twentieth century U.S. literature scholars—from Gessner to Fiedler to McLuhan—might therefore fulfill the function of Aristotle's void in the evidently too-secure conception of medium that circulates in current theory and culture. It may be that these various definitions of medium, in all their multiplicity, were what McLuhan and his cohort hoped to consolidate into their singular and disciplinary term; in which case, it may be that the earlier definitions fill up the later one as its diffuse void and as the constant possibility of its semantic failure. Or it might simply be that these early texts are simultaneously concerned with voids and mediums, and that both notions were inherited at the same time by critics, as soon as the earlier texts received their due attention in the decades beginning in the 1930s and 1940s.

In any case, the fullest range of the word's meanings to have been deployed by one of these earlier writers is in Walt Whitman's "Mediums" from the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

They shall arise in the States,
They shall report Nature, laws, physiology, and happiness,
They shall illustrate Democracy and the kosmos,
They shall be alimentive, amative, perceptive,
They shall be complete women and men, their pose brawny
and supple, their drink water, their blood clean and clear,
They shall fully enjoy materialism and the sight of products,
they shall enjoy the sight of the beef, lumber, bread-stuffs,
of Chicago the great city.
They shall train themselves to go in public to become
orators and oratresses,
Strong and sweet shall their tongues be, poems and
materials of poems shall come from their lives, they shall be
makers and finders,
Of them and of their works shall emerge divine conveyers,
to convey gospels,
Characters, events, retrospections, shall be convey'd in
gospels, trees, animals, waters, shall be convey'd,
Death, the future, the invisible faith, shall all be
convey'd.

Perhaps most often cited (at least in the era of Fiedler and McLuhan) for having leant a title to a well-known five-volume literary history by Van Wyck Brooks called *Makers and Finders*, this poem describes a possible future for poets and poetry in the United States. These new American poets, for Whitman, are to be "complete men and women" capable of living and producing within an ethical mode of responsibility to nation, community, and an expansion of self. When the poem is taken up in criticism of *Leaves of Grass* (and it's only rarely ever taken up), the title word is read only to refer to spiritualist mediums—those capable of communing with the dead. This is a central meaning of the word for Whitman, as is clearly displayed in the poem's last lines, in which the poets to come will labor so that "death, the future, the invisible faith shall all be conveyed." But medium means far more for Whitman.

Whitman's emphasis on "materials," "materialism," and the "laws" of "nature" betrays an attention to the meaning intended by the science of Aristotle and the

Epicureans.¹³ And in this regard, it seems critical that Whitman's new poets do not merely exist in the world, but will also redefine its conditions of production as well as the conduct of science and knowledge. But more important even than this or the spiritual definition is the evident political weight that is granted the term in this poem. This is unsurprising, given Whitman's ongoing commitment to the new self-definitions of the United States, but also given that the political meaning of medium was one of the more common during the period of his writing. Poets then are mediators: producers of culture and meaning, but also contact points between the polis and its legislature. Thus, poets "illustrate Democracy *and* the kosmos" in the same mediating gesture, that of writing.

Elsewhere, in the prose piece *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman suggests that the most familiar of national ideals can lead to newer and less familiar possibilities, ones not dreamt of in the nation's founding but rendered possible by the creative freedom that it instituted. He writes that the world assumes that "the States are merely to achieve the equal franchise," but that in fact the "practical operatives, law-abiding, orderly and well-off...not only do not exhaust the progressive conception, but rather arise, teeming with it, as the mediums of deeper higher progress." Thus, norms and legal directives are the vehicles, or media, for political transformation that is beyond their explicitly stated purposes. It seems significant that both the "mediums" of *Leaves of Grass* and the "mediums" of *Democratic Vistas* all "arise" in the "States." Indeed, the word "States" also demands to be read along all the multiple definitions that the poem produces for "medium": "the States" signifies the United States as well as its component provinces, but it also signifies a spiritualist's trance-like "states," as well as that gaseous or liquid physical "states" that concerned the Greek scientists. One might certainly argue that while Whitman is playing with these varied

¹³ Writing in *American Literature*, Mark Noble has recently explored Whitman's debts to the ancient atomist philosophers in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, although Noble makes no mention of the poem "Mediums."

definitions, all of them were separate from (or perhaps made obsolete by) the media practices of today or of the late 1950s. But such an argument would miss how the whole poem is about the discourse and practice of poetry, precisely as both the poem and the poet constitute literary mediums. It just happens here that every literary medium, defined as such in Whitman's language, must be spiritual, substantial, and political as well as formal or institutional.

Perhaps Whitman's clearest sense of medium's political function emerges in a newspaper column for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, entitled "The Pen." There, he asks: "Where is, at this moment, the great *medium* or exponent of *power*, through which the civilized *world* is governed?" In 1846, a half century before the invention of cinema, Whitman's answer was literary writing. Yet while writing as such was what held this power for Whitman, his question should be (and has been, albeit in other forms) profitably asked by critics of media politics and aesthetics: what power do forms of media accrue or exhibit in the making—or breaking—of worlds? And by what force, innate or mechanical, do forms of medium come to affect the worlds they inhabit, as well as the "worlds" they create? These are the questions (following from Whitman's) that I see issuing from the encounter between cinema and literature, an encounter that takes place in, and in the production of, the world. To me, the technical and aesthetic histories of celluloid and print are disjunctive, even incommensurable with one another. We conjoin the two so often out of a set of institutional habits and epistemological assumptions. But the tools required to forge this connection over and over again are those same political tools deployed by a range of practitioners (poets and screenwriters, fiction-writers and directors, critics and theorists) in order to imagine aesthetics and culture as agents, as well as objects, of social processes.

I have arrived at an overly strict version of what is really an inconsistent and often-vague distinction between two fields—of course literature also has its

commercial elements and cinema also triggers its share of conceptual re-workings—but I retain it in order to emphasize what kind of synthetic act is involved in finding the real overlaps between these fields of knowledge and production. By virtue of what material “power,” then, does each of these objects—literature, cinema—enter into a “world” that, at the same time, though very differently, it also constructs, invents, and imagines? Whitman’s question of 1846, not far from this, was: “Where is, at this moment, the great medium or exponent of power, through which the civilized world is governed?” It is a question deeply concerned with the present instant of its writing (“at this moment”). Whitman was greatly concerned with what he regarded as the growth of imperial forms of domination. He did not see the work of empire in the recently terrifying annexation of Texas, which he’d in fact actively supported as providing the people of northern Mexico with a radically American form of democracy. He did see, and rail against, the imperial occupation of Ireland by Great Britain, but then again he also opposed all totalizing attempts to legislate slavery—criticizing the efforts at universal abolition as well as the efforts at universal acceptance.

As Richard Chase put it in his landmark 1955 book on the poet: “on the whole Whitman remains an old-fashioned libertarian, and the attempt to claim him for the world revolution will always be spurious.” And yet, just a couple of years later, Chase would defend Whitman yet more fiercely from the centrist liberals and conservatives who would weaken the poet by aligning him with domestic bourgeois morality: “Whitman is not an enormous middlebrow cabbage. He does not dissolve and reconcile in his succulent emotional juices the contradictions of his culture. When he makes sense as a poet or social critic he does so exactly by his ability to objectify and illustrate those very contradictions” (“Radicalism Today” 52). Unassimilable to left or center, and with nothing in common with the right wing of his own or any other era, Whitman “made sense” neither as the explicator of his political setting nor

as an advocate for a particular national politics, but rather only as the poet of the paradoxical, conflictual, and rebellious forms out of which that politics was composed.

Put another way, Whitman saw the “medium of power” to be a device that had historically been wielded on behalf of empires but that might with effort come to be wielded by a (largely undefined) popular multiplicity against empires:

The *pen* [to which we might add *print*] is that medium of power—a little crispy goose quill, which, though its point can hardly pierce your sleeve of broadcloth, is able to make gaping wounds in mighty empires—to put the power of kings in jeopardy, or even chop off their heads—to sway the energy and will of congregated masses of men, as the huge winds roll the waves of the sea, lashing them to fury and hurling destruction on every side. (246, my interpolation)

This model is one worth considering, whereby we come to see that the “world is governed” with the very tool that might if deployed differently come to destroy world institutions, governmental and otherwise. The pen is weak—it can “hardly pierce [a] sleeve”—and yet its effect is that of reordering power, of wounding empire, of inciting a “convulsion of the social or political world.” This is the specific force, not just of the literary medium, but also of a literary and textual approach to culture: the bringing forward of political, aesthetic, and critical methodological practice.

Whitman is ambivalent and often switches between extreme versions of his public and poetic persona: between Whitman the patriotic moderate and Whitman the rebellious threat to institutions; between Whitman the rhetorician (persuasive, technical, and world-making) and Whitman the artist (aesthetic, disruptive, observant but discontented). “The pen” in Whitman’s essay is thus a figure and site for these tensions: both nationalist and radical; both descriptive of the “congregated masses of men,” and destructive of the “social or political world.” Whitman’s use of the word “medium” might also catch us up short: employed with a breadth that evokes all sorts of in-between-ness, “medium” describes forms of political as well as spiritual mediation, along with the aesthetic sense and the technical senses that have

become increasingly familiar since the advent of what McLuhan called the “electric media.” It is a word—“medium”—that is of consistent concern to contemporaries of Whitman, like Hawthorne and Melville, and that for all these writers tends to encompass both a vertical arrangement of artmaking (the pen, poem, poet, and national poetry are all media) as well as a horizontal arrangement that, for these writers, ranged from states and politicians, to painting and print, to spiritualists and trains (all of them, again, media).

As long as it remains difficult to discuss film and literature together without recourse to some theory of medium, whether we avow and explore it or not, it makes sense to continue excavating the concept, as well as its ties to negative topologies (as opposed to the positive ones that mark media theory in its McLuhanite mode) and to national identities. Without so excavating the concept, how would one analyze the unresolved stress that presses both inward and outward at the point where film and literature tentatively conjoin? All too often, however, even with access to such a notion, we end our analysis at a prematurely synthetic concept such as adaptation, remediation, so-called “media bleed,” or the evidently “cinematic” styles of certain poetry or prose—a concept that always marks the end of the dynamic pair (*literature/cinema*) and marks the beginning of a new and more tractable unity. Under the currently technocratic and hyper-institutionalized order of knowledge, even to name literature and cinema as “media” can be to suggest that “media” is all that they are: objects that precede the production of knowledge about them, that are subject to a technological rather than a poetic materialism; that are political because of how and where they show what they do, rather than what they show; and that are finally submissible to an empirical discourse of digitality (involving information, communication, data, and platform) rather than a humanist discourse of textuality (involving rhetoric, subjection, meaning, reading, etc.).

I would contend that we can afford to retain the term “medium” as the meeting point for film and literature—that is, as the umbrella under which the materialisms of literature and cinema can still be compared—but only under two conditions: first, that this term “medium” not remain irreducible and total; and second, that we expand the meaning of “medium” to include such political processes as Whitman imagines. To return to “Mediums,” we might again see how Whitman directly engages with the political and the techno-aesthetic function of the poet-as-medium:

Mediums...shall arise in the States;/They shall report Nature,
laws, physiology, and happiness;/They shall illustrate
Democracy and the cosmos;/They shall be alimentive, amative,
and perceptive.../Death, the future, the invisible faith, shall all
be convey'd.

Whatever Whitman’s own professed political moderation or conservatism, the “medium of power”—the pen—is a radical conceptual object. Not merely the tool of politicians and revolutionaries, the “medium,” for Whitman, signifies the material form that all power takes on all sides. It isn’t the instrument of power; it *is* power (something like the concept of *parrhesia* in Foucault’s late work, or of “writing the body” in Irigaray’s early work). And not merely a static symbol that (like a “slash”) can connect and separate any two phenomena, “medium” for Whitman instead signifies in-between-ness, as a kinetic ontological and epistemic fact: as a zone of indistinction between art and society, between poet and poem, between aesthetics and technology, between the “great masses of men” and the “social and political *world*.” Whitman’s pen helps us to re-theorize “medium” as a libidinal, political, and aesthetic, as well as technological, form of in-between. To demonstrate how the multiplicity of definitions for “medium” persists throughout the worlds of Nineteenth Century fiction and poetry, I will close with discussion of a couple more writers of that time who were concerned with medium, as well as with one of their more acute inheritors, Waldo Frank.

In the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the word medium is simply too widespread and varied for me to cite its appearances fully. However, he achieves something much like Whitman in one of the stories from *Mosses of an Old Manse*, titled “The Celestial Rail-road.” That story is a parody of John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, but in Hawthorne’s retelling, the pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City is conducted on a devil-owned and devil-operated train. The story is very clearly an expression of anxiety over the introduction of new apparatuses of industry and transportation, but it is also a rigorous indictment, both against a culture’s fetish for technology (as distinct from technology itself) and against the rapid growth of market capitalism. When the train reaches Vanity Fair, in this version of the story, that year-long festival has been transformed into a bustling hub of commerce and religion, in which those fields often overlap and become indiscrete. In that overlap, the book trade has been rendered obsolete by a new kind of speech, a way of using what Hawthorne calls the “medium [of] the human voice” so as to obviate the hard and enigmatic work of reading.

The fair’s resident clergy keep company with “innumerable lecturers, who diffuse such a various profundity that any man may acquire an “omnigenous erudition without the trouble of even learning to read” (154). And the narrator proceeds excitedly to explain how the new technology—one that seems to have arrived in the world simultaneously with the fast train to heaven—actually works:

Literature is etherealized by assuming for its medium the human voice, and knowledge, depositing all its heavier particles, except, doubtless, its gold, becomes exhaled into a sound, which forthwith steals into the ever-open ear of the community. These ingenious methods constitute a sort of machinery, by which thought and study are done to every person’s hand without his putting himself to the slightest inconvenience in the matter. (154)

Hawthorne’s description is so lucid that his words barely warrant interpretation or reframing. Vanity Fair has become a space for political, intellectual, and religious discourse, as well as for economic progress. There, commerce relies entirely on the

success of new technologies, of which the re-deployed human voice is perhaps both the most important and (more surprisingly) the newest. Voice thus leaves text behind—the latter was too ornate and too challenging—and it communicates as if in and by a “diffuse” dispersal of knowledge in the form of “particles” which might simply be exhaled and then imbibed. What passes for new media thus becomes a demonic device whose technology is not at fault, but whose technological promise of efficiency and convenience is very much to blame. Through Hawthorne then, not only has the concept of medium been kept open (to definitions that recall politics, physics, and religion, but also speech and art) but it has also been shown to be a notion for thinking through the socially most dangerous “sorts of machinery.”

This book of Hawthorne’s was regarded with new attention throughout the 1950s, largely because of an uncovered review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* by Herman Melville, famously titled “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” In that review, Melville praised the notes of darkness and of faithful despair that would later be the focal point for analysts of his own prose. And there is an important overlap between that darkness—seen throughout Melville’s work, especially after his encounter with *Mosses*—and the emphasis on an ontological and literary void by mid-century critics such as Fiedler, Bewley, Harry Levin, and Robert Martin Adams. As for the concept of medium, it was of continuing importance to Melville, who even produced a key character, in his novel *Mardi*, with the suggestive name of “King Media.” This island chief was the communicator between his people and his visitor, the novel’s castaway narrator; but also between his people and their gods; and between his people and one another, as the “mediator” of all their disputes. Additionally, in Melville’s later novel *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, the cosmically and socially disruptive power of literature is described also using that term, after the title protagonist has reread *Hamlet*: “Utter darkness is then his [Pierre’s] light, and cat-like he distinctly sees all objects through a medium [that of literature] which is mere blindness to common vision” (169). Like

Whitman and Hawthorne, and perhaps Pierre, Melville was evidently alert to the multiple, concurrent, and combinable definitions of this concept, such that it seems surprising that most of today's available definitions of "medium" are subsumed under the technological object of "media studies" (and used, for example, to show cinema and film as ontologically as well as symbolically discrete) or else given as outdated or irrelevant affects of earlier times.

But in the end, what has the political or spiritualist definition of medium to do with the "sort of machinery" a thing is? To offer a last, tentative reference point for the concept of medium in the Nineteenth-Century world "of human identity in a fluid world of time and evolution," one might turn to *Moby Dick*, in which Melville gives his most in-depth exploration of voids, politics, and spiritual crisis. There, at the end of the chapter most explicitly concerned with void, is this comment that exposes the very "Whiteness of the Whale" to be a peculiar kind, or perhaps absence, of medium:

Nature absolutely paints like the harlot...and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper. (195)

In this novel whose implications for politics, art, religion, and science have been so thoroughly explored (starting with critics like Fiedler, and others of that same generation of literary critics which included both Gessner and McLuhan), what are the implications of a startling phrase like "without medium upon matter"?

Could Melville's phrase signify something like the concept of "mere form," which in Kant describes how a law can take on the force and authority of Law, and how a piece of art can accede to the transformative power of Art? Or could it reconfigure the early Greek atomism by discarding the medium so as to reinstitute the (falling or rising) object in the middle of a void or blankness? Or could it predict

some of the movements that McLuhan makes at the advent of North American media studies: delineating medium from medium from medium; thrusting the old ones into obsolescence and the new ones into relevance and urgent full presence; and producing technological progress as the very definition of the word “medium”? Could “without medium” suggest the failure of medium that might be imagined but never known or perceived? Perhaps, but if so, then the phrase does so with a far more varied range of knowledges behind it, insisting that a bare medium may in fact be theorizable, but only multiply so, through contradictory discourses that are as devoted to performing politics, aesthetics, ontology, cultural practice, and epistemology, as they are to describing technology, commerce, and industry.

Such a notion of unmediated materiality would seem to be counter-intuitive, and if its model is the whale’s whiteness, then it is certainly exceptional. At the very least, it does not promise anything of the direct access to historical reality that is usually implied by the term “immediacy.” However, it may be that this romantic form of immediacy announces something different: not immediacy as a form of life that would precede representation or do without medium, but instead the blankness of immediacy as a constitutive break within all mediatic representations. Such a theory of medium exists, and not only in the dreamlife of a media studies or in a cinematology that might have attended more closely to writers like Melville, Hawthorne, or Whitman. In fact, Waldo Frank announced such a theory at the same 1935 Congress of American Writers whose audience included Robert Gessner. Frank was in close collaboration with Van Wyck Brooks, as well as with other prominent political modernists including Randolph Bourne, Jean Toomer, and Charles Chaplin. He was also the presiding president at the 1935 congress because, as a non-communist, he was able to provide that organization with a “respectable” front. In his keynote at that congress, he argued:

The feeling of intimate kinship with any part of the objective world is what we mean by beauty. As this relationship expands

to an inclusive social form, it is what we mean by culture. The basic social function of art is *so to condition men that they will, as a social body, be the medium for the actions of growth and change*...No society of men or class of men is in shape for any needed action, save in so far as it has been conditioned to become the *effective medium* for that action. (270-1, Frank's emphasis)

This conception of medium is radically different than the one that obtains in the discipline-founding works of McLuhan or Gessner, and yet it is in many ways not far at all from the romantic vision, and particularly that of Whitman.

Medium, for Frank, is political in the first instance. Moreover, he concludes: "the main function of literary art...*is to create this medium*" (272, Frank's emphasis). This medium is not yet in existence. And neither is it strictly an ideal medium that could transcend the lowly media that are available to us every day. Instead, Frank's revolutionary medium is an embodied mode of collective performance—the "social body" may become the "medium for the actions of growth and change"—that persists in current media only insofar as it is what will emerge from them when they break down or apart. Literature and other media must thus cultivate those material sites where they remain incomplete. It is out any of these dynamic void sites that something different might take over—a "feeling of intimate kinship" and the self-representation of a laboring community.

PART II: WITHOUT MEDIUM UPON MATTER

The next two exempla explore how the void provides a field for what Frank called “intimate kinship,” and does so from within the site and break of medial difference. In the latter of these two, I briefly explore the mid-century experimental practice of “film poetry,” as it was theorized and practiced by figures from Viktor Shklovsky to Hans Richter, and as it is exemplified in the collaboration between Jonas Mekas and Allen Ginsberg on the film poem *Guns of the Trees*. The phenomenon of film poetry is intermedial without being synthetic. It situates a traversable void between literature and cinema, and it characterizes this void as the space of likely nuclear annihilation. The void, negative and unknown, is nevertheless the axis of any future human community that might either supplant or survive the atomic disaster. Before turning to Ginsberg and Mekas, however, I look at the films of Douglas Sirk, and locate there a lesson in the literary reading of film. In his films and his interviews, Sirk in fact produces a theory and practice of language as what goes missing in film: as film’s constitutive absence, its blindness to its own functioning. In Sirk, a film’s blindness is at the site of its literariness, and so at the site of its intermediality. It is the space in film that shows what a film can never show: the non-cinematic. What emerges in both film poetry and Sirkian blindness is a void space within a medium that also functions to demand that we depart that medium for other media that are similarly marked by void, and for a form of unmediatedness or immediacy wherein the object yields to a form of subjective life: human community.

Exemplum: Sirk’s Blind Style

In his 1970 interviews, Jon Halliday asked Douglas Sirk if there had been any “particular design” to his thematization of blindness in the films *Shockproof* and

Magnificent Obsession, or in his two unfilmed screenplays adapted from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Laughter in the Dark*. Sirk responded that he had indeed been motivated by blindness and went on to explain how blindness resides in film as its linguistic or literary limit. Blindness thus insists the work of one of the most important postwar filmmakers, as a sign of intermediality and as a disorienting and destructive void. He told Halliday:

Sure. I have always been intrigued by the problems of blindness...One of my dearest projects was to make a picture set in a blind people's home. There would just have been people ceaselessly [groping], trying to grasp things they could not see. [It] would be extremely interesting here... to confront problems of this kind via a medium—the cinema—which is only concerned with things seen. It is this contrast between a world where words have only a limited importance and another world where they are nearly everything that inspires my passionate interest. It is [Sirk concludes] a highly dramatic division. (97)

In the vivid scene he describes, Sirk draws a hard materialist line between what a film is, and what words are. This exemplum responds to this division and asks whether Sirk's "problems of blindness" might still be of relevance to the theorization of intermediality and void in the study of film and literature.

Do words really have "a limited importance" in the world of film? And is it fair to say, as Sirk does in a vague and fanciful way, that words are "nearly everything" in the lives of the blind? Historically, the likely answer to both questions is: of course not. But blindness is a theoretical trope, as well as the lived condition of those without sight. Moreover, I argue, blindness has not yet been exhausted by the theories of identification (by unseeing characters or spectators); and neither is it reducible to the reified "Unseen" or "Unsayable" that guides a subdiscipline such as trauma theory. By contrast, Sirk's divisive kind of blindness remains forceful as a way of thinking the non-intersection of film style with literary and critical styles of prose.

How might that non-intersection, in the disjunctive terms of blindness, complicate our theories of aesthetic and political practice across the film-literature divide? Sirk's statement about blindness has frequently been cited in attempts to

unfold some of the melodrama in the 1954 remake of *Magnificent Obsession* (in which Jane Wyman plays a woman who is blinded and later cured by a millionaire-playboy-turned-brain-surgeon, played by Rock Hudson). But there is more in Sirk's statement than can be contained by analysis of that film, just as there is more to that film than can be contained in any of the long-prevailing approaches to Sirk's systematically "excessive" style. Indeed, what Sirk testifies to in his comments about blindness is the very difficulty of systematizing style at all. What Sirk demands from us, I would argue, is a critical prose that is speculative and provisional, rather than properly interpretive: a prose alert to its own material and rhetorical dimensions; its multiplicity and its blindness; at that edge where film ends, and where words—as literature—proliferate.

The division falls for Sirk "between a world where words have only a limited importance [the cinema] and another world where they are nearly everything." This separation cannot be reconciled: where we find sound and image, vision and visibility, there words must fall short; where words are, there blindness is also. Here, blindness is not a disability; and neither is blindness a loss or a failure. It marks nothing that has been missed or concealed. Instead, Sirk locates blindness as the very limit of his films: both contiguous and discontinuous with them. On this view, where films speak, they speak without words; and where words can be spoken or written, they can say little about film style, except to say how little they say. Critical traditions point us in a different direction on the matter of blindness in Sirk. These traditions focus on a small number of films directed by Sirk—his melodramas only, and then principally the few made at the end of the 1950s, starting with *Magnificent Obsession*, and proceeding to *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956); occasionally to *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956) or *The Tarnished Angels* (1958); and always to *Imitation of Life* (1959). They generally either uphold or refuse the following proposition: that the proper name "Sirk" names a possibility, within

Classical Hollywood cinema, of allegorizing the turgid but secret tensions of the half-decade in which they were produced.

An emphasis on blindness will move us beyond either the affirmation or disaffirmation of this proposition, against which each Sirk film tends to be measured as if it were a kind of yardstick: either the film succeeds or fails at its covert mission to untangle the tightly-wound anxieties of the postwar period, about sexual and racial difference, technology, youth culture, and the rise of a suburban bourgeoisie. Paul Willemen, one prominent supporter of the thesis, saw that “What was shining through [in Sirk’s films]...was a whole X-ray view of American middle-class disintegration” (246). From Willemen’s somewhat-exemplary perspective, the interior of postwar culture was politically rotten, and Hollywood generated tools to look below the decade’s glossy veneer. On this view, Sirk was a superhero of sorts, whose historical wisdom took the form of “X-ray” vision, projecting hidden knowledge across a field that was nothing *but* surface, and alienating spectators from the ideological seductions of narrative. For Willemen and his allies, Sirk’s films presented more color, music, costume, voice, and gesture than they could contain: too many medium shots and not enough close-ups; too many mirrors; too many classical conventions and too much hackneyed dialogue. Thus, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith introduced the term *excess* to describe the character of a whole melodramatic mode that generates, and is troubled by, an “undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action” (117). Meanwhile, for other aligned critics, blindness would come to illustrate the failures and futility of the films’ characters, in the face of the era’s constraining rules of social or sexual conduct.

In the 1967 special issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* that first canonized Sirk’s films (and that included the blindness passage from Halliday’s interview), Jean-Louis Comolli described the Sirkian problematic: “No freedom here, and what the characters hopelessly aspire to and claim is nothing but a supplementary mirage or

lure: the vision of the blind” (14). Soon after, in the 1971 special issue of *Screen* that brought Sirk Studies into English, Fred Camper extended Comolli’s claim. “In a sense,” he observed, “all characters in Sirk are totally blind, surrounded as they are, not by real things but only by falseness...[since ‘real things’] are completely excluded by the formal qualities of Sirk’s images” (48). Refining this argument in an extended discussion of *The Tarnished Angels*, Camper admitted the possibility that, while all Sirk’s characters are blind, some might be blinder than others: and while Rock Hudson’s Devlin “may be our identification-figure,” it is Robert Stack’s Roger who is “in a sense the blindest character in the film,” and it is Dorothy Malone’s LaVernne who is “the least blind character...[insofar as] she recognizes that romanticism is a blind alley...[and] learns her own limitations” (71).

We might see limitations to the optimism of perspectives such as these, from Willemen to Camper and Comolli. Camper, especially, is largely “blind” to the limits of his method: focusing a great deal on how style expresses itself through character and mise-en-scene; very little on the historical emergence of particular technologies of film style; and not at all on the possibility that Sirk’s films are anything other than illustrative of a historical period, and resistant to its constraints. Any reading of Sirk that assigns his films their “X-ray” function (as if Sirk were a political or technical mastermind) will translate Sirk’s style from a set of enigmatic images and sounds into a positive and fully-legible *critique*—a constative statement about postwar sexual and political norms—to which our own writing can only provide endorsements or counter-arguments. This amounts to a kind of reading that could claim to locate a society’s ailment behind a series of clever directorial clues masquerading as symptoms. Thus, we might translate *The Tarnished Angels*, say, into a set of propositions that link the 1950s (when the film was made) to the 1930s (the period in which it was set): to say it is about the psycho-sexual damage and social inutility of both decades’ war veterans, through the character of Stack’s stunt pilot; about the

futile commitment to truth in the face of political indifference, here embodied by Hudson's crusading reporter; or about the contrived forms of heterosexuality, monogamy, family, and home, all undone by Malone's impetuous and wounded sexuality. What we think about the film would boil down to what we think about these propositions, the extent to which we agree with them, and the degree to which we believe they can be produced through this particular use of sets, film stocks, lighting, framing, or camera movement, in addition to acting and writing.

This way of talking about Sirk extends even to writers who are skeptical of the director's elevation. One of these writers, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has brilliantly shown that readings of Sirk films always "go beyond the film as the ostensible object of analysis" to reconstruct it as "a civic allegory," a mere doubling of political or social narratives told elsewhere (67). But then, as if extending that critique too far, Zavarzadeh must condemn Sirk's films for their "reactionary naturalization of patriarchal capitalism." Thus the critique of a common, and damaging, method of reading—the simple "allegorization" of Sirk's style—gets lost in what might be called a counter-allegorization: of Sirk's fulfillment of "reactionary" narratives, rather than resistant ones. We might have similarly mixed feelings about Robert B. Ray's assessment of Sirk criticism. Ray rightly observes that Sirk was practically invented as Hollywood's cleverest Leftist, and then only a decade after the director left Hollywood—because of an "anxious academic community's eagerness" to find something redemptive in the films they already loved. However, like Zavarzadeh, Ray goes too far—not simply in dismissing the institution of Sirk Studies, but also in concluding that "like most Hollywood product, [Sirk's films] did their job—they entertained, made money, and were forgotten" (62).

This latter claim would be true only if it were accurate, since there was virtually no lag at all between the end of Sirk's major period and the beginning of his canonization as a key filmmaker of the postwar years. Indeed, as early as 1962 Jonas

Mekas was pursuing what would become Sirk's own line—that these films possessed that “inventive artificiality” which would set them among “the best of Hollywood films...‘*made*’ in the true sense of the word...artificial from end to end.” But Ray's first point is a necessary one: the proper name of “Sirk” did acquire its political currency only after it was theorized and canonized in 1967. And I would add that Sirk's work was at that point theorized and canonized *as if it were a political or philosophical critique*: a catalogue of propositions perfectly able to speak of themselves and of the norms that the films ostensibly subverted, alienated, undid, or served. I find Sirk's films to be no less (and perhaps no more) capable than other films of provoking discussions about political or historical problems; facilitating dialogue among philosophers or fans; and inspiring manifestoes about style in literary and other arts. However, if we follow Sirk's comments on blindness, these extra-cinematic propositions must have more in common with each other than any of them has with the films—because they are all made of words, and not of what Kuleshov called the “cinematic material”: the raw stuff of the celluloid and of all that it captures (48). This, I would argue, is the definitional problem unaddressed by available studies of Sirk from skeptics and utopians alike: the likelihood that, for Sirk, the field of “cinema” might include everything to which “words” remain “blind.”

Offering an alternative approach in a 2001 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Derrida spoke in strikingly Sirkian terms about the challenge of film in its encounter with supplementary languages—with the mere words that it seems both to resist and to enfold. “One of the most interesting risks of film,” responded Derrida, is:

To avoid words, to surround words, to make the cinematographic resist the authority of discourse ...What counts in the image is not simply what is immediately visible, but also the words that inhabit the images, the invisibility that determines the logic of the images, that is to say, the interruption, the ellipsis, that whole zone of invisibility which pushes at visibility (85).

For Derrida, the visible field is tested at all times by invisibility. Moreover, this invisibility is made of words—not merely latent or hidden in the visible field, but

immanent to it, encompassing of it, residing in it—unspoken but perhaps not unspeakable. Following Derrida then, we might see Sirk's films not as attempting to adequate words to world; but as constantly circling, indirectly and non-polemically, around the inadequacy of words, around their lapses into unspokenness, their slipperiness, and their lack of authority. Sirk thus asserts a style that can be analyzed only in the absence of claims to interiority—where style can never simply be the container for the real stuff of a film: the swirling libidinal turmoil of a decade. In a 1982 interview with *Positif*, Sirk said: "The question of style preoccupies me...more than that which we call content or substance. In fact, the veritable 'content' is the style, which comes up from the bottom of yourself." Sirk admits that "this notion can sound abstract," as if the distinction and indistinction of style and content were somehow removed from the concrete reality of a film's sound- and image-tracks (25). But it is a needed observation.

When we are told that *Written on the Wind* is really about incest or the failures of masculinity; or that *The Tarnished Angels* is really about polygamy; or that the bright blues or reds or the copy of Thoreau in *All That Heaven Allows* conceal the class tensions, sexual turmoil, or covert pastoralism of the era—when anything in these films is reduced to a mere "alienating," or "distantiating," even explanatory, effect—what we miss is the grinding intimacy of Sirk's uninterpretable signifiers and inarticulable effects. Here, I read Sirk against Sirk himself, who claimed to Halliday that "art *must* establish distances" and who saw his own movies as especially illustrative of this principle (43). Distance, however, is an affective as well as a political component of film—the feeling of political remoteness is, in the same moment, a feeling that we critics love. And the moment in which the film sets itself against a reactionary or outmoded politics, is the same moment in which we feel most intimate with the Sirkian problematic of style. Sirk's stylistic excesses are difficult to read, neither because they conceal the hard truths of an era, nor because

they denaturalize the (either radical or reactionary) truth of an industry, medium, or genre. Instead, they are hard to read because our very attempt at criticism comes up short against a limit. The films provide too much cinema, where “cinema” is defined as the exclusion of words, and where content as style becomes unreadable, or at least unspeakable. And yet those blind places in the films where words are not, are also points of intense seduction, openings onto the supplementary discourse of verbal language, text, speech, and criticism.

Film theory is full of writing about such blind-spots—from Oudart’s siting of the “Absent One” in the not-yet-coherent space of the reverse-shot, to Bonitzer’s meditations on the “blind field” and Deleuze’s on the “out-of-frame.” But for all that these writers concern themselves with problems of production and spectatorship, their thoughts on blindness lead only indirectly to the practice of theory. More evocative, then, may be Derrida’s account—in a late essay released shortly before the *Cahiers* interview—of his fleeting experiences (as both a spectator *and* a theorist) of what he calls the “blind point” in the film:

Like a furtive vision, a hallucination even, it lasts one to two seconds. My experience of film: it tends to gather in this point...Now and always, it organizes itself, as in the physiology of the eye, from what was, in that which remains, a blind point...My point of view is thus assigned. That which is blind [in the film]...contemplates and arrests the image...in a turn toward the solitary inside of a secret...Of a secret about which, now and always, we know that we will know nothing. (77)

For Derrida, blindness is the “inside of a secret” of a film, the portion of the filmic field where what we do not see is that we do not see. The not-seeing is also a not-showing, moreover, an effect of the image or of the critical reading of the image. In that point, which may be accentuated or forced at the register of style, the film image shows everything except what it does not show. This is a way of thinking about what goes missing from the image, but it is a way that shuts down those assumptions about social depth or psychic interior that are commonly associated with the technique of cultural criticism called “symptomatic reading.”

Instead, and this is the lesson to be drawn from Sirk as well as from Derrida, the film's arresting secret is its demand that we read it. Its blindness is its wordless zone of possibility wherein new words might be mobilized and the word/film opposition might be tested. This is much closer to the kind of "symptomatic reading" developed by Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey (in the tender years between Mekas's defense of Sirk, and Sirk's defense of himself). Althusser famously defined it as "the divulgence of the undivulged event in the text"—that point to which we are blind because it is "*excluded* from the field of visibility, and defined as excluded by...the field of its problematic" (26). In this kind of symptomatic reading, we make no claim to find, in Sirk's films, the clue to the most dangerous postwar national truths. Rather, Sirk's stylistic excesses lie at the eventful limit, where, in the play of seduction and distance, they open a void within the set of propositions that we call Postwar America.

As Halliday observed, Sirk's films are full of real and metaphorical blindnesses. Such an instance may be found, for example, in a fleeting moment in *Written on the Wind*. Leaving a drugstore where he has just been told by a doctor that he is impotent, Stack's Kyle Hadley veers out onto the sidewalk (in a single, mobile medium shot), and looks tearfully away from a little boy who rides a mechanical horse on the sidewalk. This is, however, not the moment of not-seeing that catches me up—and neither is the shot that follows, in which a woman's bare leg extends across the screen from left to right: a leg that belongs to Dorothy Malone, playing Kyle's sister Marylee, whose naked calf fills the screen and whose hands slowly pull up a pair of silk stockings. This shot of an unseeing body (or body part) is also not the one that moves me most—rather, to me, the blindness that moves is the lap-dissolve that transitions between, and briefly merges the two images. For one brief instant, we see Kyle fail to see the child because that would mean confronting the full failure of his own body; and we see Marylee not seeing that she is seen, and

intimately seen, by a camera and an industry, committed to making of her a spectacle, piece by piece. In the moment of mid-dissolve, we also see Kyle *and* Marylee, blind to one another, across unknown space, and two strips of overlapping celluloid. What the characters do not see—and what we spectators can barely see—are the two irreconcilable dramas overlain in hefty blocks of color and emotion: the pale skins of Kyle and the boy, coated in the violet of Marylee's stocking; and the bright light of Marylee's bedroom rendered blue-grey and banal by the shop windows.

As moving as the moment is, and as illustrative as it may (or may not) be about the social drama of vision and non-vision, it will nonetheless always exceed the explanatory frames that are regularly applied in interpretations of this film—which transform it into a mere argument about impotence, incest, wealth and poverty, alcoholism, and domesticity in the mid-20th century. Such an assemblage of elements is extra-cinematic, it does not lurk within or behind the film, but can take shape only in the tentative act of a critic who knows that she or he is blind.

This is what makes writing about style literary, if we follow Macherey in seeing literature as what “establishes a real stylistics of depth, rather than a metaphysics...a stylistics...in itself a partial substitute for philosophy” (132). Here then is the site of blindness, in a film's most enigmatic moment (and Sirk's films are full of them) where there begins a reading: a verbal exercise that cannot see itself, but that can begin to see that it does not see. This is a proposition about intermediality, but it has nothing to do with the accommodation of one medium to another, such as we might see in adaptation or novelization. Instead, this is intermediality defined negatively, through the void, where each medium bears in it a subtracted relation to other media. The lesson that Sirk teaches is that film makes a demand that is verbal, indeed literary. Words are epiphenomenal to film, which can be characterized by an excess of the unspoken: a call that we can only answer with figural prose and speech.

Exemplum: Film poetry and the Beat Explosion (*Guns of the Trees*)

Another intermedial branch of postwar culture, intersecting with Beat writing while also anchoring the New York-based film movement known as the New American Cinema, was an experimental practice called “film poetry.” The central filmmaker of the New American Cinema was also its key theorist, Jonas Mekas. And it is Mekas’s first film, *Guns of the Trees* that most clearly engages the ideals of film poetry: rhythms evocative both of cinematic and of literary materiality, and productive of forms of human emotion that, at least as far as Mekas and his cohort were concerned, would not otherwise be sayable. *Guns of the Trees* also thematizes the nuclear threat and, more than this, embodies the capacity of that threat to commandeer multiple media at once, poetry as well as film. This film poem does not just show nuclear anxiety at work in its characters lives and deaths; it also responds to that anxiety. *Guns of the Trees* is more and less than film, just as it is more and less than poetry. It doesn’t so much combine media as indicate the limits within each medium of the very concept of medium. Refusing any simple merger between disparate media forms, the text shows how poetic and cinematic negativities do cohere around the void that one character calls “this beautiful, beautiful atom bomb.”

Unlike the long, meandering, non-narrative diary films for which Mekas became best known, *Guns of the Trees* (like his next film *The Brig*) was a largely scripted fiction film. Moving from scene to scene of highly confessional dialogue, *Guns of the Trees* swells with language and emotion that consolidate as an expression of the nuclear threat. Meanwhile, there are two ways in which *Guns of the Trees* tests the decided boundaries that separate cinema from literature. First, this is Mekas’s earliest attempt at a “film-poem”: an ideal lyrical and personal celluloid object, and an object that might open upon new and resonant forms of American identity by

dynamic means. Second, the ostensible story of *Guns of the Trees* is built around a voiceover narration in poetry by Allen Ginsberg. In the text that results from this collaboration, the bomb is the very rhetorical and poetic figure for crises in racial and sexual self-identity. Meanwhile, the bomb is also the presumptive object and the unmetaphorizable historical reality anchoring Mekas's and Ginsberg's postwar poetics.

Filmed in 1959 and released in 1961, the film's disjointed and episodic narrative circles around the loves and friendships of two heterosexual couples: a white couple named Gregory (Adolphus Mekas) and Barbara (Frances Stillman) who careen toward depression and suicide, and a rather more optimistic African-American couple named Ben (Benito Carruthers) and Argus (Argus Spear Juillard) who are expecting a child. The drama alternates rhythmically between the couple that is bound toward death and the couple that will have generated new life. But it is a film with the future in mind, so ultimately it is Argus, Ben, and the unborn child who bear the weight of the story and its prescriptive politics. So it is that the dialogue bears the aesthetic weight of poetry and the conceptual weight of theory, when Ben and Argus discuss their child's role in the world as a revolutionary "new man." And so it is also that the challenge of the future is imagined as an encounter with what Ben calls "that beautiful, beautiful atom bomb."

In this latter scene, Ben and Argus sit at a table in a bar, while Ben hollers at no one in particular about the dire situation of American politics. He cries:

It will probably be the last pure rain. The next rain will be full of strontium. Chessman died in the gas chamber. An atomic missile explodes in New Jersey. Eighty per cent of the budget is spent for war industries. Nixon is running, NIXON is running for president. Let us drink to this beautiful, beautiful atom bomb.

A slow folk guitar plucks beneath Ben's ranting, and a song intrudes just after Ben mentions Richard Nixon. Some of Ben's words are lost under the swell of lyrics to the traditional lullaby entitled "The Riddle Song": "I gave my love a chicken that had

no bones.” The camera drifts to the left and right of Ben’s squirming form. He is in medium shot and he peers over the back of the booth and forward toward the bartender. No one hears, as the camera continues to drift above and below him, and to either side, without exposing any of the other shadowy figures to clear view. At last, Argus looks at him wearily and says: “Stop it Benny, I can’t stand it.” The scene condenses a form of protest within an intermedial conflict, and predicates both upon the problematic of nuclear threat. This happens in its reference to consensus wherein Ben, who stands outside the consensus by virtue of his blackness, his formless poetry, and his truthful politics, could say nothing that would make any difference to those present, that is to those not listening.

Ben is reduced to raving in terms that are quite literal, nearly robbed of metaphor, invoking nothing so much as the terms of Ginsberg’s voiceover. A longer analysis would be required in order to tie this instant to Ginsberg’s style of lyric, to Gary Snyder’s and Philip Whalen’s preoccupations with the void, or to Gregory Corso’s writing on the bomb.¹⁴ But it is of a piece with these Beat concerns and texts. Their drifting rhythms are recalled by the slowly wandering camera and the irregular paradiddles of Ben’s voice. And their dependence upon sharp contrast among diverse images is recalled by the sudden intrusion of the line: “I gave my love a chicken” and by the absurdity of Ben having conducted his poetic soapbox speech to a faceless and indifferent audience. More than anything, Ben’s response to the historical moment, and Argus’s response to Ben, should be read as profoundly human without being essential or universal. There is nothing recognizable about these characters—they would remind no one of themselves. And more than this, the set is too stagy, the camera’s constant motion is a reminder of the handler behind it, and there is no effort at a naturalistic scene. Rather, the form of humanity that is

¹⁴ Key intertexts for *Guns of the Trees* might therefore include poems such as Snyder’s “This Tokyo” (1956), Whalen’s “Sourdough Mountain Lookout” (1956), and especially Corso’s “Bomb” (1958).

produced here (and that will be embodied in the child of Ben and Argus) is an unnatural form, neither the cause nor the effect nor the origin of any expression. It runs through both film and literary modes of production, and announces both, as if the human ideal were a mobile and contentless cipher that drifts from Ben to the recording on the soundtrack, to the camera, to the Beat poetic tradition, to Argus, and back to Ben.

For Mekas, the concept of film poetry is both more and less than a metaphor, and signifies a cinematic mode of production that can transform social and political space on just such ambiguously human terms, at the same time that it overturns the dominant conventions of film form. He draws the notion most explicitly from the films and writing of the dadaist Hans Richter, an émigré to New York from Germany, and a regular contributor to Mekas's journal, *Film Culture*. But Richter is hardly the only source for the notion, which had come to stand at the leading edge of political theories of film and literature, including those of Viktor Shklovsky and Pier Paolo Pasolini. For all these thinkers, the yoking of film and literature should be done with caution, lest the film object lapse into what Mekas would later deride as "bad prose" (*Movie Journal* 55).

The first clear delineation of film poetry is an essay by Shklovsky in 1927 entitled "Poetry and Prose in Cinematography." There, Shklovsky marks out a separation between those films that are poetic and films that are more like prose. One element of poetic film, Shklovsky acknowledges, would be the regular and evocative rhythms of written poetry, accomplished largely through editing, cutting the filmstrip at regular intervals and producing "rhymes" between similar or contrasting images. However, the mimicry of rhythm and rhyme in verse is not all that sets poetic film apart from prose film:

They are distinguished one from the other not by rhythm, or rather, not by rhythm alone, but by the fact that in a poetic film the technical-formal features predominate over the semantic features. The composition is resolved by

formal techniques rather than by semantic methods.
Plotless film is poetic film. (130)

As in the theories that follow, prose film here appears as merely the opposite of poetic film, where the latter is a kind of movie making that would emphasize the process of production over the production of a narrative. At its ideal, film poetry is a “plotless film,” but indeed the genre (if it is a genre) would appear to include any movie that subordinates its planned or determined meanings to the display of its “technical-formal features.”

Such a display is part and parcel with the techniques of literary estrangement that Shklovsky also advised. Indeed, it is very much in line with the political aim of producing a consciousness in the reader both to the meaning and message of a given work, and at the same time to the material conditions by which such a meaning and a message could be made, conveyed and understood. These techniques, as Shklovsky famously writes in *Theory of Prose*, “can be found almost anywhere (i.e. wherever there is an image)” (9). Moreover: “The image is not a constant subject for changing predicates. The purpose of the image is...to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a ‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition’” (10). This ideal is essentially what is at work in film poetry. Whereas a prose film might lead a viewer merely to “recognize” characters, plotlines, and diegetic spaces, a poetic film will lead that same viewer to “see” how the formal means of recognition were set in motion.

While the first, Shklovsky was by no means the only theoretician to imagine how film might be joined to poetry as the means toward a political end, revolutionary consciousness. Hans Richter had begun to make films at about the time that Shklovsky began to write on the medium, in the early 1920s. By 1939, Richter would publish the manifesto on which he had labored for nearly a decade, *The Struggle for the Film*. For Richter, unlike Shklovsky, the most important element of poetic film

really was its rhythmic elements. But not only was rhythmic film the most radical form of film—it was also the necessary outcome of the avant-garde endeavor in art:

The avant-garde emerged gradually by the extension of problems posed in the fine arts: how to represent rhythmic processes not just in space and on a flat surface, but also in time. These problems led to film. Their proponents have in common the attempt to...free the camera from the chains it had been in since Méliès ceased production, by the rhythm of sequences of images; to create a *film poetry* with all the means provided by the transposition of objective reality by the camera. (59)

Through rhythm, this avant-garde had imagined a tool that would directly connect humans to their arts. The rhythm that might be molded from the inorganic materials of art was thus continuous with the ebbs and flows of organic life. Before film, argues Richter, rhythm could be expressed only in stilled form, in the arrested twists of sculpture or architecture, say, or in the hard, angled lines of futurist graphics. But when film came along, that rhythm could unroll over time. The “objective reality” of the film’s mechanical underpinnings could go up on display.

For thinkers and practitioners such as both Richter and Shklovsky, film poetry is capable of rendering a continuous connection between the technologies of showing and the technologies of modern industry, and so are capable of exposing to individual spectators the industrial conditions of life. If one were to produce the right rhythm over time, in other words, one would have gone beyond the mere mimicry of the world and into a form of direct contact with its regimented and machinic character. There would occur a “transposition of objective reality” into the field of representation and, consequently, the spectator could attain a revolutionary, unalienated consciousness. This was Richter’s early formulation. By the time Mekas was preparing to make *Guns of the Trees*, Richter was living in the United States and had revised his conception in order to account for the avant-garde films that by that time had appeared in America, by filmmakers from Maya Deren to Kenneth Anger to Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie.

In this new setting, Richter no longer believed that the objective of film poetry was the production of revolutionary consciousness. Instead, the version of the theory that he passed on to Mekas and his cohort was a more mystical vision wherein film could rebuild a threatened external world by drawing upon the untapped creative resources of human interiority. As he told Mekas in an interview for Mekas's journal *Film Culture*, in 1957: "The task of the film poem in this new vein is to externalize inner happenings and to continue their development and evolution as if they were outer ones" (8). Film poetry can deprivatize emotions and desires, in a way that the scene of Ben and Argus makes vivid. All that which liberal discourse regards as uncivil gets entered into discourse, offered up to an audience that remains indifferent to it, goes on with its business of electing Nixon, proliferating nuclear weapons and exploding them, etc. The concept of film poetry does not explain *Guns of the Trees* in any simple sense, as if the affective or semantic content of the collaboration would depend on whether it did or did not fulfill the promise of the film poem. But, as a film poem, it does bear in it all these lines of thinking from Shklovsky to Mekas and Richter—it strives to produce revolutionary consciousness and, at the same time, it endeavors to build a world based upon the Beat ideals of improvisatory aesthetics, ambivalent but impassioned humanism, post-bomb pessimism, and intimate community. Moreover, it engenders a conceptual relationship between literature and film that has nothing to do with adequation—the goal of the industrial procedure of literary "adaptation" or the modernist procedure of "cinematic style" in literature.

What kind of film is film poetry? That answer seems clear. But what kind of poetry is it? And what fit exists between the piece's style and its presumptive object, the possibility and impossibility of emotional life after the bomb? If the historical problematic of "the bomb" is among the key motivators of form and theme in the midcentury cultural text, and it is, then it has a tendency to pull everything into its

potential blast radius, from writing, film, and photography to the politics, public rhetoric, and art of living in fear. The bomb is perhaps the negativist trope *par excellence* in the postwar period. The bomb is a structuring threat of global destruction, as well as the very form of societal deformation. Moreover, the bomb serves as the site for encounters among diverse forms of knowledge, as well as the occasion for a productive indistinction between the literary and film media.

Indeed the bomb is the void at the center of the film poem's social configuration, its community. *Guns of the Trees* is poetic because it casts the bomb as its figure. By never hoping to narrate or represent the bomb, meanwhile, it may render it metaphorical—not for something other than itself, but for something with which it is necessarily tied, the collective hope for a social future to be embodied in Ben and Argus's son, the “new man.” The void of the bomb and the void in the film-poem together operate to expand and ultimately explode the dominant forms. Specifically, what come apart is the ideal of an artist's lonely alienation from society, as perhaps too evident in the tragedy of Gregory and Barbara. Putting the burden of the future upon the characters of Ben and Argus certainly does fulfill a whole set of dominant and ideological norms. These characters are raced in a way that the white characters Gregory and Barbara are not. In resolving to give birth to the “new man,” their decision reinforces the ban on miscegenation, as well as the ideals of heteronormativity and child-rearing that Lee Edelman has named “reproductive futurism” (2). But the film-poem does manage to show the threat of an absent bomb, whose present absence is what conditions the collective social bond. In the conceptual vision of *Guns of the Trees* therefore, the community must have both the film-poem and the threat of annihilation in order to survive, in the same way that, at the same time, the bomb and the film-poem require one another.

CHAPTER 3—THE VOID AS A MEDIUM

PART I: MELVILLEAN AESTHETICS AND POSTWAR “POST-POLITICS”

“There is a chapter in *Moby-Dick* that evokes white's qualities as no painter could, except in his medium...A fresh white canvas is a void, as is the poet's sheet of blank white paper. But look for yourselves. I want to get back to my white-washed studio. If the *amounts* of black or white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling.”—Robert Motherwell, 1950 (86)

I. Post-politics

To attempt to produce a concept of medium through a tradition more in line with Hawthorne and Melville than with Gessner and McLuhan, one would need to see a medium not as constitutive of an object's identity, nor strictly determining of our knowledge about it, but rather the object's internal, epistemological form of division. Where then to find the void as the limit to knowledge about an object? Perhaps even as a medium that is contingent, social, material, and perhaps above all political? And what is to be done with a political conception of medium, in a void present, when according to some cultural theorists European and American social formations have achieved their “post-political” stage?

To arrive at the conclusion that we are all now “post-political,” such theorists often observe that a steep decline in political activism and engagement has followed the diverse successes of those feminist, queer, artistic, anti-colonial, and anti-racist movements that together constitute what have been called “the long 1960s.” And in general, they either admonish leaders of those movements to remind their constituents how many battles remain to be fought, or else they decry the movements' continued emphasis on human identities rather than on the structural position of economic class. However, a third position has opened up among theoreticians of art and democracy (among whom, one might name contemporary theorists such as Barbara Johnson, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gayatri Spivak, Jacques

Rancière) who themselves feel little need to choose between identity and economy as the primary axis of social inequality. This third position tends to privilege the categories of aesthetics and ethics, but not because these categories have anything primary about them. Instead, this third position aims to diminish the discursive power of primariness as such, by exposing how identities and structures are first of all representations, and therefore susceptible to an analysis of form as relational, situational, flexible, and multiple, rather than singular, originary, or given.

This third position is a formalism of sorts, and it is in pursuit of such formalism that this chapter puts Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or the Whale* at the center of postwar attempts by literary theorists to address contemporary political problems. I do not mean to map the whole postwar period as if it had the topology of the *Pequod*, or even to argue that a "Melvillean strategy" for art and literature constitutes the dominant one of that time. I also would not argue that critics and artists aimed deliberately at subverting those cultural trends that really were dominant: consensus, moderation, technophilia, expertise, commerce. Rather I claim that Melvillean texts—produced by both critics and artists—comprise an essential, but neglected component in the histories of media and culture. Although only one style among many, the Melvillean aesthetic enabled a distinct mode of production by which a society began dissonantly and playfully to chart out its highly political limits and fissures, just when it seemed that all options were lost. In reading the postwar body of literature, film, and theory, we have often forgotten this context: a collective insistence, by a range of postwar figures, that "post-politics" was merely an idea and a symbolic formation, that had nothing to do with real forms of life, and that might be combatted by aesthetic means.

2. The Blackness of Darkness

What is called the “Melville Revival” began in the 1920s as part of an effort by critics, mostly on the left, to develop a distinctly American canon—what Van Wyck Brooks early on had called a “usable past.” Melville was a key part of this canon, which came to cohere over the next three or four decades into the list of books on which was founded a new academic subdiscipline, alternately called “American literature studies,” “American Studies,” or “American Civilization.” Most important to the Melvilleans who helped to found this subdiscipline was the 1851 masterwork, *Moby-Dick*. By the 1940s, all the renewed attention to Melville had spread interest in the book far beyond the academy, and readers could be found both in the political sphere and, more crucially for my purposes, in the fields of the arts. Over the next couple of decades, the book’s force could be felt in works by epoch-defining painters such as Jackson Pollack, Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt; filmmakers such as John Huston and Orson Welles; poets such as W.H. Auden, Muriel Rukeyser, and Charles Olson; and novelists such as William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison and William Gaddis. In part through close readings of *Moby-Dick*, and in part through spontaneous reflections on that book’s formal experiments, postwar scholars and artists came to figure American culture as fragmented, conflicted and contradictory—to use Melville’s word: “blank”—that is, shot through with voids, and only loosely taped together by a popular public rhetoric of consensus and inclusion, and the pursuit of beautiful, destructive ideals that resembled nothing so much as Ahab’s white whale.

In a 1950 review of W.H. Auden’s *The Enchafed Flood*, Richard Chase wrote: “Mr. Auden writes in a post-political era and in a post-political frame of mind. Melville did not” (720). Regardless of his capacity to describe Auden, Chase here utters a statement that, like many others, can offer a powerful refutation of those who would separate the Melville revival from the rise of U.S. cultural and political

theory.¹⁵ In fact, the year before his review of Auden, Chase had published his own *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* to rave reviews: one of the books that would eventually be known for having shifted the terms of Melville studies, away from biography and toward a general theory of American life. Chase and the thinkers in his milieu (many of them members of the so-called “family” of New York Intellectuals) would later be criticized for this shift, and for having ignored Herman Melville’s own historical circumstances—especially during the writing of *Moby-Dick*—in order to address a complex present moment instead. Recent discussions of this period have seen Chase and his fellow Americanists as having participated in, and supported, the postwar directives of American nationalism: imperialism, capitalism, and the silencing of dissent. And yet, in 1950, it is Chase who indicts Auden for some of the same reasons that he would himself later be indicted.

As Auden had written elsewhere at around the same time: “Ishmael has no will, only consciousness; he does not act, he only knows, and what he knows is good *and* evil, i.e., possibility.” Chase would repeatedly make a similar claim—that *Moby-Dick* embodied cultural contradictions and therefore produced a dialectically pure zone of possibility—but he objected to Auden’s emphasis on contradictions that were personal and focused on the character of Ishmael. For Chase, the emphasis on personality and on the single narrator-hero signaled that Auden had undervalued the collectivist categories of politics and culture, in favor of a naïve and ahistorical identification of American identity with the timeless, post-political virtue of

¹⁵ The historian who most powerfully connects U.S. politics and culture is Michael Denning, who writes: “the avowedly cosmopolitan New York Intellectuals kept their distance from Melville, finding the sources of a critical culture in European Modernism” (173). Denning’s work has been very influential upon the present study, but this claim is belied by the deep investments in Melville among the New Yorkers—especially Chase and Alfred Kazin, but also by others in their milieu. Such a claim also (I think unfairly) isolates the New York school from scholars and non-scholars who were at work elsewhere and with whom they were often in close dialogue. Some of these latter (Harry Levin, Newton Arvin, e.g.) were at least as invested in European models of life and thought as were most of the New Yorkers.

individual morality. Chase's objection is in many ways exemplary of his generation, as he theorized Melville for purposes that were themselves contradictory: both to shore up, and to unmake, a waning form of nationalism. Literary critics and theorists are sometimes seen as agents and sometimes seen as objects of their historical moments, but I propose to treat them here in both ways, in equal parts as philosophers and as symptoms of their post-political culture. If these theorists reside within a post-political idiom at all, I argue, then they do so only restlessly. Chase, for example, pushes back against Auden. He sees individualism and moralism not as virtues, but rather as the tools by which a "post-political" logic of nationalism and consensus might reproduce itself. If for Auden, Melville's tale is an allegorical narrative of American individualism, then for Chase it is instead a dramatic formal experiment that breaks apart all of the relevant unities—"narrative," "American," "individual"—with the force of contradiction and speculation. In other words, Chase finds *Moby-Dick* to be a handbook for managing a political present (one that purported, precisely, to be something other than political) because first of all it was a testing ground for radical aesthetics during an earlier crisis of knowledge, as the United States tumbled toward civil war a century before.

On such a view, a political present is neither set nor dead, but is instead continually shaped by fluid and intersecting systems of judgment and responsibility, aesthetics and ethics. This perspective is not timeless, but is preconditioned by a range of historical developments in aesthetic theory and practice, including those that took shape in the criticism, literature, and film of the postwar period—a period that, like the present one, was dubbed "post-political." And while it accepts "post-politics" as a seductive signifier and a powerful motivator, it will not accept that "post-politics" has ever been a state of being, in the way that the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset intended in 1959, in his common-sense definition: "The characteristic pattern of the stable western democracies in the mid-20th century is that of a 'post-

politics' phase—there is relatively little difference between the democratic left and right, the socialists are moderates, and the conservatives accept the welfare state” (100). So what can be learned about the present “post-political” moment by looking at such an earlier moment?¹⁶ More narrowly, what inspiration might be drawn from that earlier time, as well as its body of texts, for the continuing work of social practices now, especially as regards the deployment of media by artists and the theorization of medium by critics? For Chase, many predecessors and contemporaries (including Auden) had adopted the “post-political frame of mind” as a too-simple response to the loss of political options that he felt pretty much everybody had experienced.

This loss of options was what Daniel Bell would soon call an “end of ideology” and what, perhaps more accurately, Jürgen Habermas would later call an “exhaustion of utopian energies.” Faced with such attempts to vacate the arena of political conflict, the word “Melvillean” (as a particular formal maneuver by certain postwar figures) can come to refer to so much more than mere interpretations of texts written by Melville. In the present moment, the word must invariably refer to a broader vision the reception of that art, and the principles that it engendered, during the early decades of disciplinary scholarship on American literature. And as for the term “post-politics,” whether it is uttered in the present or in the postwar period,

¹⁶ In a present context, Chantal Mouffe, finds post-politics to have been defined by “the negation of the dimension of the political and the belief that the aim of politics...is to establish consensus on one single model, thereby foreclosing the possibility of legitimate consent” (82). For her, an imaginary consensus means that viable political options really have been cut out of the picture. Society has in this account been provided with a self-contained set of alternatives—“one single model” made up of propositions and predictable counter-propositions—rather than the diverse plurality of sets that could conceivably exist under a different order. This perspective bears a similarity to that of Lipset, as well as that of the contemporary critics of postwar (rather than contemporary) consensus, insofar as it posits exclusion as a problem with the current system that might be superseded by any number of the potential systems that has been excluded. Yet ultimately, this renders it in some ways continuous even with a far right position like that of the current Tea Party Movement, in its cries for inclusion into the political system by which it has been made to feel “disenfranchised” and excluded.

and used either favorably or unfavorably, it must be the name of something other than a real state of being “after politics.” Rather, post-politics is a feeling or mood that all alternatives are used up or lost. The ideological formation that Melville called “a dumb blankness full of meaning” is not one of domination and subversion. Rather, historically, blankness has been deployed in opposition to binding concepts—such as patriotism or consensus—that rely on logics of totality and universality. And it has done so by showing that what those logics exclude is blankness itself, as the very principle of ideological exclusion.¹⁷ From such a perspective, a resistant text is not one that posits an alternative vision of society while remaining within the available language (here I repeat the so-called “master’s tools” argument). Instead, it is a text that can debunk the spatial metaphors of unity, by virtue of its own formal fragmentation, and its possession of a void that can dispel the positive and ahistorical legitimating tropes of myth. This is what made *Moby-Dick* such an ideal object during the postwar period for critics and theorists, poets and novelists, filmmakers, painters, and composers—for cultural workers, in other words, who had no utopian alternatives to offer, but who refused to accept conditions as they were.¹⁸

¹⁷ This claim echoes that of Ellen Rooney, who has argued that the most important thing to go missing from Cold War consensus was knowledge of the structural fact that something always will and must go missing. From her perspective, “the contradiction that threatens contemporary pluralism is its coupling of a polemic for *inclusion* with a commitment to essential *exclusions*, in particular, the exclusion of exclusion” (62). I would argue, beyond the material that I take up in this chapter, that Rooney’s description applies equally well in the present moment as it did during the Cold War, and that the present aesthetic and ethical responses to consensus find their precedent in that earlier period. The most important element of post-politics to be missed in recent claims (whether their emphasis is on identity, economy, or art and ethics) is the fact that post-politics itself is not new. But it is also extremely important that aesthetic solutions posed to post-political crisis—by theorists like Rancière, Nancy, and others—are themselves repetitions, to an extent, of earlier solutions.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson has insisted that post-politics have come about through just such a systematic refusal of Utopian visions: “it is not easy to see what positive values are available to fuel an anti-Utopian market rhetoric: the space into which a postpolitical collectivity is supposed to withdraw...is vacuous and utterly colonized by consumption and its codes and languages” (62). For Jameson, what becomes

For these workers, the exhaustion of political extremes basically meant less commitment to revolutionary change. Capitalism held little appeal, thanks to a general awareness of its devastating cost to rights and representation. But for many, state socialisms had also lost their seductiveness, thanks to the violent ends to which they had been wielded by Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. The liberal John Kenneth Galbraith famously joked about this double bind, by way of what he said was an old Polish gag: "Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism, it is just the reverse" (57). Popular agreement with this position led to the rise of a centrist movement of New Liberals who were guided by an ethic of pluralism and a culture of moderation that was lucidly and enthusiastically promoted in works by Bell, Lionel Trilling, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. By contrast, for many artists and scholars, post-politics was a disastrous condition of being. And for Melville critics, especially during the years after the war, it was a condition that might be remedied somewhat through a wholesale rereading of the previous century's literature.

So what was there in *Moby-Dick*? And what might there still be in mid-century responses to Melville that could address the overworked and often-precious conceptual convergence of aesthetics and politics? What was this "blankness" that had so accreted to avant-garde practice during the postwar period? And why might it

necessary is an imagined reconfiguration of time and space, like those that were developed in a "Soviet east" that was prepared to imagine life in "non-market, non-consumer-consumptive society" in a way that "we" in the "West" are not (74). Jameson's emphasis is principally on how the economic determinations of culture might dramatically be reshaped. But this reshaping can occur, for Jameson, through a newly alert responsiveness to artworks: film, literature, and criticism that "hold out for us the vivid lesson of what we cannot imagine...by way of the holes in the text that are our own incapacity to see beyond the epoch and its ideological closures" (75). Jameson's proposition gets us halfway to an understanding of the post-political texts under consideration here, each of which participates in a "Melvillean aesthetic." Like the texts he describes, these all also thematize or formalize a negativity that resides at the limits of a post-political imagination. But the "holes" in the texts that I consider do not contain political alternatives, as if they were telling a secret that the reader or viewer simply could not hear. Indeed, these "holes" can contain nothing at all, but instead echo as those texts' silent protest against the whole symbolic order of which they form a part. In other words (that is, in Melville's words) Jameson's holes held only "a dumb blankness full of meaning" at mid-century.

be regarded as any kind of solution to the deadlock of post-politics? In practice, it derived from a very few texts by Melville: a couple of chapters of *Moby-Dick*; a famously anonymous review (entitled “Hawthorne and his Mosses”) about Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Mosses of an Old Manse*; and a letter to Hawthorne of April, 1851. This last had long been important in studies of Melville. As Harrison Hayford noted in 1959 of one of the letter’s key phrases: “No other phrase of Melville’s was singled out more often in critical works of the 1940s than ‘the *usable* truth’” (702). The discovery that Melville had in fact written “*visible* truth”—as I mention above, the error was in Julian Hawthorne’s transcription of the original—came too late to prevent the mistaken version from founding one of the most influential formulations yet in American literary history: Van Wyck Brooks’s concept and practice of “inventing a usable past.”

Most relevant for the present discussion is instead that by the late 1940s, and well into the mid-1960s, the letter to Hawthorne remained one of the key texts in Melville studies. But rather than focus on usability (or even visibility), the later criticism focused almost entirely upon the letter’s emphasis on negativity. Of particular interest was a passage in which Melville wrote to Hawthorne in the third rather than the second person:

There is a grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes* lie; and all the men who say *no*,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious unencumbered travelers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego.

Hawthorne is associated with truth in this passage, but the postwar critics were less interested in how this truth could be “used” or “seen,” and more interested in its rootlessness, its active rejection of ideological “baggage,” and its insistence on negation for the sake of negation. This negation should not be confused with negativity or nothingness in an absolute, ontological (that is to say, Sartrean) sense. Rather, what Melville saw in Hawthorne, as far as postwar critics were concerned,

was an insistence on restless movement within and across literary discourse, and a powerful drive to speak the truth, no matter how impossibly.

Having already agreed that anything Melville said of Hawthorne he could equally have said of himself, these critics readily connected his comments in the letter to some similar remarks made in the book review. There, Melville had also been concerned with a peculiar truth that Hawthorne had learned to tell, but here Melville's metaphors were shaped more by color and light than by negative language:

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world.
(*The Piazza Tales* 243)

In this other encounter with Hawthorne's work then, Melville continues to find negativity to be a site of truth. To be certain, Hawthorne's darkness does not appear to hide anything, and no particular secret seems to have been "shrouded." Rather, Melville sees this blackness as an integral aspect of Hawthorne's work: one that runs straight "through," yet somehow also "circumnavigates" the whole of it, whatever positivity or brightness might also flicker there.

Melville goes on: "You may be witched by [Hawthorne's] sunlight—transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you; but there is the blackness of darkness beyond" (63). This final phrase, "blackness of darkness," is what captures the imagination of Melville's postwar readers. The phrase first appears in Chapter Two: "The Carpet Bag," as Ishmael enters the town of New Bedford, and stumbles accidentally into an unmarked church, whereupon: "a hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there" (101). It is from this sudden and drastic scene of absolute racial otherness that Ishmael heads off to the Spouter Inn where he will spend the night, ostensibly (but not in

fact) sheltered from that kind of cross-racial encounter with a devastating, “teeth-gnashing” darkness.

By the phrase’s second appearance, far later in the book—in Chapter Ninety-Six: “The Try-Works”—it is clear to what fate Ahab has been dragging his ship and crew. In that chapter, Melville describes the system whereby a whale’s flesh will be melted down in massive pots, heated over a flame that is fueled by bits of blubber: “Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope, once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body” (421). The smell of it, says Ishmael, “is an argument for the pit” (421). Hell arrives on board, not just because the whale is there and burning, but more precisely because it is engaged in self-sacrifice to an almost impossible extreme. The act is a lucid metaphor for Ahab’s self-destructive pursuit, but this is already apparent even to Ishmael:

The *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul. So it seemed to me, as I stood at her helm, and for long hours silently guided the way of this fire-ship on the sea. Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. (423)

Importantly, the “blackness of darkness” is not hell. The fire is not hell either, but by virtue of its stench, the fire can “argue” for the possibility of hell. The *Pequod*, like Ahab’s soul, contains the rational source of its own death by fire. And it is toward the “blackness of darkness”—an irrational negativity that resides apart from the opposition of soul and fire—toward which both the man and the ship rapidly “plunge.”

The “blackness of darkness” in *Moby-Dick* is thus opposed to comfort, contentment, and racial uniformity; but it is also opposed to both the fire and the soul. Neither divine nor diabolical nor worldly, this negativity exists in Melville as the missing alternative to systems of morality, domesticity, and race—and yet as such it exists an integral part of these systems, and acts as their constitutive limit. And it

is here where the negative figure of “blackness” converges with that of “whiteness” and “blankness,” in Chapter Forty-Two: “The Whiteness of the Whale.” As I have discussed in my Introduction, Melville in that chapter imagines blankness as a devastating force in aesthetic and juridical representation. But that force functions “without medium upon matter”: as a form of social relation that is also an aspect of image-making, both “full of meaning” and “dumb.” Functioning “without medium,” Melville’s principle in fact precedes “medium,” preconditions it, and opposes the laws by which it regulates and names common divisions of technicity, morality, and possible politics. Blankness, perhaps, is an innately literary principle—not a medium like print or film; but instead a poetic or rhetorical interruption, a caesura, an immediate intrusion into the smooth machinic functioning of those objects that *are* media, properly speaking.

Or perhaps blankness is just what it sounds like: the aspect of any text that has been left out, excluded. If so, it would remain a part of that text, in a relation of difference from that text, as the element of it that has no technical underpinning. It might be the gap in a textual or political formation that can be manipulated into providing both an opportunity for reading and a possibility of change. Or it might be the joint or axis of such a formation, holding it together as if from without. But whatever else may be true of blankness in the work of Melville and Melvilleans, it is paradoxically both singular and relational. Stanley Cavell has noted one of the functions that Melville’s blankness plays in art, as a temporal element preventing any artwork from having immediate effects: “A blind spot with no content, no object...this blankness, time...is nothing but the fact that the world is incomplete, that there is *more* than the actual world” (14). I disagree with Cavell for two reasons: first, I see blankness not as a timeless figure in all arts, but instead as a historically developed concept that took shape in the postwar critical texts and journals that simultaneously produced American Studies, American literary studies, and film and

media studies; and second, I see blankness as neither empty of content nor opposed to immediacy, but instead as quite “full” of unmediated “meaning” (to use Melville’s own words) that, because it is unmediated, must also prove unreadable.

It is counterintuitive in some ways, to conceive unmediatedness as a partial quality of mediated objects, rather than as a trait that belongs to something (a deity or truth) that transcends common language. And yet this is what comes from thinking about “medium”—in the way of Hawthorne and Whitman as well as Melville—as a textual effect, rather than a technical substrate. The currently common way of thinking about mediation and unmediatedness is in fact a historically determined mode of thought that belongs to the division of orders of knowledge in the rapidly technologizing years postwar. The postwar era was also the period when both Film Studies and American literature studies gained a measure of autonomy within U.S. universities, so it seems critical that a central common object of this period—*Moby Dick*—could have, and didn’t, inspire theorization of such a condition “without medium.” The era’s shift toward disciplinarity may appear to have occurred in ways that were independent of the national question, as well as fully confined to academic institutions. But just as fiction and film began to express the thematic and formal demands of a nation that was coming to terms with itself in a time of “peace,” they were also changing in relation to a viewing and reading public, as well as a corps of novelists and filmmakers, that was highly educated and increasingly professionalized. Within the universities, there was an increasing urge by disciplines to identify whose scholarly objects were whose. This urge was infectious, as even non-scholarly writers, filmmakers, audiences, consumers, and readers began to demand a quantity of newness and specificity in the aesthetic and technical expressions of individual media (in the forms of “pure” cinema and “contemporary” or “modern” fiction, e.g.). Cinema and literature in this way consolidated themselves in the United States during this period, with each one

measuring itself against the other, as well as against an increasingly philosophical and idealistic conception of its own specific and exclusive medial identity.

This consolidation of media was facilitated by institutional changes within the academy, as well as institutional shifts in the filmmaking and publishing industries (such as the growth of art film and the breakup of the studio system; or the new appearance and proven marketability of what Gore Vidal would later call the period's "university novels"). It also owed much to an increasingly educated consumer base, with a preference for a U.S. culture that could be unified by tropes of convenience, comfort, and ease. This preference was very much in line with the similarly unified, separate, and self-identical tropes of Communist containment and post-political consensus. That is to say, each movement—toward consensus and toward medium-specificity—entailed a process of affirmation, as well as a discursive elimination of those elements of culture that do not affirm. By contrast, and perhaps by way of protest against both, the Melville critics insist instead upon tropes of difficulty, unwieldiness, futility, absence, inversion, and obscurity. The concept of "medium" becomes the critical keystone in the analysis of film and the very separate analysis of literature, as well as in the construction and study of a cultural historical timeline. Against these consolidations, I propose that if postwar culture's reductive tendency toward medium-specificity is historically aligned with its homogenizing tendency toward consensus, and if both tendencies conceal certain eccentricities just as they exclude others, then both tendencies will become unstable when the concealed eccentricities are brought to light. This is one part of the project of Melvillean aesthetics.

3. The Inexpressible Bodies Itself Forth

In 1960, two years before his death at forty-six, Chase reviewed Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Rather than criticize Fiedler for having

failed to confront a “post-political era” with the radical aesthetics of Melville (as he had seen Auden failing to do), he instead indicts Fiedler, and not Fiedler alone, for having given into the blandly, sweetly nationalist “mood” of post-politics. Chase writes that Fiedler: “writes in a post-political and post-religious period, or at least a post-political and post-religious mood. Ideally...*Love and Death* as a literary work...would be the flawed monument that marks the end of a certain kind of immersion in the *mystique* of American culture” (16-17, Chase’s emphasis). But Chase does not exempt himself from this indictment. Naming himself along with Fiedler, Charles Feidelson, and R.W.B. Lewis, he laments having taken “too little interest in politics, history, and intellectual issues” throughout the postwar years, and so for having produced literary criticism that “is fundamentally non-historical and has a very uncomfortable similarity to the critiques by historians and sociologists which appeared in the conservative 1950s and which depict America as a basically fixed and unchangeable civilization” (17). This is the turn that we can see in the course of postwar criticism, and especially in the course of Fifties culture, from liberal attempts at inclusion to radical critiques of exclusion.

Chase here predicts and affirms the criticism that will later be leveled by others against his generation, the first in disciplinary Americanist literary theory: that it had supported American exceptionalism rather than criticizing it, and that it had sold the literary farm to buy the cow of social-scientific expertise. Yet this self-criticism, whether or not it arrived too late, was as necessary an outcome of Melvillean aesthetics as was the work that it criticized. Postwar studies of *Moby-Dick* (Chase, Auden, Fiedler, all included) join other cultural work of the period—fiction and film that was equally responsive to Melville, among others—in having been lodged, in spite of themselves, within a liberal, nationalist idiolect. But just as this body of thought and art was positively complicit in building a national “mystique” that delayed nascent political struggles, it also urged something else, something

negative that ran counter to that mystique: a drive toward dissolving national unity and identity, and an analysis of a society whose cultural artifacts were struck through with semantic fissures and tensions. To use a phrase with which Newton Arvin described Melville, the postwar critics worked to show how “the Inexpressible bodies itself forth” in the context of a New Liberalism that meant to account for, and include, every possible mode of expression.

Up until the final years before his death, Chase was best known as apprentice and heir to Lionel Trilling, the author of the groundbreaking 1950 book, *The Liberal Imagination*, and the presumed father figure of that group of New York Intellectuals that circulated around *The Partisan Review*, and included Diana Trilling, Norman Podhoretz, Alfred Kazin, Mary McCarthy, Irving Howe, Sidney Hook, among others. Trilling was perhaps the most influential literary theorist to endorse that New Liberalism, evoking a liberal “feeling” that entailed a “mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, and international cooperation...[and yet] not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas and the emotions that are consonant with them” (98). To Trilling, whose influence extended far beyond Manhattan, this meant that no single work of fiction or poetry had been willing to endorse the liberal values that also included: an active moderation of political extremes; a willingness to enter dialogue and achieve détente with political opponents; and an eagerness to incorporate a full range of counter-arguments when advancing an argument of one’s own. If no writer had “dealt with these ideas” directly, Trilling concluded, then a liberal reader must search the history of U.S. literature for those exceptional writers who had dealt with them indirectly. This latter group, he insisted, could manifest liberal ideals by embodying the paradoxes of nationalism in (what he insisted was) a kind of dialectic. Writers with “meaning and power lying within their contradictions” could thus be recognized

by the fact “that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency” (9).

Because Trilling’s vision was so attractive, political pluralism crept into much scholarly study of nineteenth-century fiction and poetry, wherein any text exhibiting a unified political perspective could be declared useful for inspiring a functioning liberal society, based on harmony among disparate viewpoints and identity groups. Yet as Trilling at last explained, this did not mean an elimination of polemic. Instead it meant submerging polemic under a layer of dense formal maneuvers. Dialectic, on this view, “is just another word for form, and has for its purpose, in philosophy or in art, the leading of the mind to some conclusion” that could be predetermined, as well as “a quality of personal being which may be judged by the action it can be thought ultimately to lead to” (283). In an important way, Trilling here falls into a contradiction of his own—the same contradiction into which all liberalism could be said to fall—whereby a text that refuses to serve any particular end, must ultimately lead its reader to an end that is in fact very specific: liberal plurality and moderation. Rather than Arvin’s “inexpressible” in other words, one would look to literature in order to siphon off its hidden but legible reservoirs of “meaning and power.”

What I am calling Melvillean aesthetics is quite different from this—that is, it resembles Arvin and Chase rather than Trilling—precisely because it refuses to let dialectical tensions resolve into any concrete form, even into the form of a dialectical theory. For Chase, a Melvillean turn would express itself through a very public and personal falling out with Trilling, as well as a public repudiation of liberal values. In short, Chase’s last encounters with *Moby Dick* led to something for which liberalism could not account. Podhoretz, who was a colleague of Chase’s before moving far to his political right, once wrote: “Chase’s work of that period...was one of the first harbingers of the new radicalism, and like some of my own pieces of the late fifties, the case it made inevitably depended on a repudiation of certain basic assumptions

behind the prevalent liberal temper of the day” (299). Chase himself would argue that it was *Moby Dick*, and this book specifically, that had predicated his move toward what Podhoretz calls “new radicalism.” So it could be said for all the Melvillean thinkers who chafed at the Liberal bit. For them, *Moby Dick* repudiated liberalism, but not because it narrated a radically non-liberal struggle, or because it conditioned a particular non-liberal response. In fact, rather than claim that a dialectic of form will necessarily resolve into any definitive end (whether liberal or radical “conclusions” or “actions”), they had been aided by Melville in thinking about literary form as an ongoing process whose effects upon social form were still unknown. Emphasizing aesthetic means over political ends, they aimed to map and overturn the whole problematic of post-politics, through a new attention to local literary and cultural figures of multiplicity, irony, and conflict.

Many of the Melville critics saw *Moby-Dick* as a discontinuous narration about power, and about the illusion of authority on which power depends. In this way, *Moby-Dick* became a kind of tutor text that could teach its readers how to think around and against the presumptive unities underpinning race, class, sexuality, religion, and desire.¹⁹ R.W.B. Lewis, for instance, wrote that “*Moby-Dick* is an

¹⁹ One comment that might be taken as a concise gloss of this latter position can be found in an unpublished fragment written some time in the 1950s by the theorist and book historian William Charvat. Refuting the claim that Melville had alienated his “common reader” with *Moby-Dick*, Charvat argued that in fact Melville had never had such a reader, but actually taught all his readers to be, so to speak, “uncommon.” On this view, all of Melville’s books, and especially *Moby-Dick* had “worked out a system to train the reader in imaginative, exploratory thinking” with the objective of teaching that reader “to entertain the *possibility*—not the certainty—that behind the immensities of the universe there is a blank void of nothingness” (246). But how could such an education be accomplished? Charvat continued:

Melville began to generate ideas out of contradictions within himself...a kind of internal dialectic which gave the reader no choice. He involved him in the very processes of thought, made him collaborate in exploratory, speculative thinking which is concerned not with commitment but with possibility” (268).

The contrast with Trilling here seems slight. Both critics, after all, claim that readers will be fairly helpless if ever they expose themselves to the contradictions contained

elaborate pattern of countercommentaries, the supreme instance of the dialectical novel—a novel of tension without resolution” (*American Adam* 144). And he regretted that the story of Ishmael and Ahab would never approach the “transcendent and victorious” qualities of Melville’s final book, *Billy Budd*. Similar conclusions are arrived at in Fiedelson’s *Symbolism and American Literature* and in Marius Bewley’s *The Eccentric Design*, both of which also pose blankness as the result of a dialectical process by which a reader might ultimately arrive at an unknown, negative, or essential figure. Feidelson, for example, saw Melville as having produced a “full-blown doctrine of aesthetic impersonality” that not “bound by a theory” but was “so to speak, involved with a principle” that invoked the basic unity of “deeper meanings” (175-6). Meanwhile, Bewley insisted on the need to understand the baroque formal qualities of American democracy, with Ahab proving that “the democratic aspiration that would deny the hieratic element in creation ends in a monstrous negation. It is the very essence of formlessness” (207). All of these approaches ascribe an innate and often-political value to what the critic and historian William Charvat saw as Melville’s “exploratory, speculative thinking” rather than to what Trilling called an accessible “meaning and power.” Moreover, many of them insist upon seeing a restless negativity in all aspects of life, and read *Moby-Dick* not for explications or definitions, but instead as an incitement to a transformative kind of thought, art, or action.

In the beginning of the 1950s, “post-politics” was a rare buzzword rather than a common or rigorously delineated concept. Late in the decade, sociologists like Lipset could at last define the term, but by then, Chase had become unsatisfied with

“within” an exceptional writer. But Charvat points to something quite different, with the words “exploratory,” “speculative,” and “possibility.” Whereas Trilling’s reader needs the text to find new balance between political extremes, Charvat’s reader needs the text in order to achieve extremes that have not yet been dreamt, purely because Trilling’s post-political vision is only a “blank void of nothingness.”

post-politics as a thing or moment in itself, and could no longer regard it as anything but a conceptual error masquerading as a set, unavoidable paradigm. And he had begun to see in it an orientation that was seductive, voluntary, and wrong: a way of engaging in the world without engaging in it, by avoiding contradiction and foreclosing anything that might be unimaginable in public discourse. At this point, he took up a mid-century vision of cultural radicalism that I see underlying all of the work in this chapter. Such radicalism, rather than aim at bringing closure to national and international conflict, instead aspired: to push against closure as such; to insist on all kinds of irresolvability and the violence of aesthetic discord; and to wield that discord against hierarchy on behalf of unrepresented groups.

So it was that in both 1950 and 1960, “post-political” was an unusual word for Chase to use. When others used it, it was usually in the service of that same sociology (as represented by Lipset and Bell, say) from which Chase, Fiedler, and others would try to distance themselves at decade’s end. As I suggested at the outset, it is a far less unusual word today, in a current era that is again marked by disillusionment. But the postwar texts with which I am concerned take an importantly different tack than the ones taken in recent years. Melville criticism shows the post-political “mood” to be an emotional illusion of consensus, at the border of which lies a far more abject and negative range of feelings. But much of that criticism will also insist that consensus is simply one kind of exclusion, and that some variety of exclusion, in fact, must belong to any order or institution. What these texts negate is not politics as such, but rather the constitutive role that negativity takes up in any political or aesthetic form. For any identity, institution, argument, or artwork to be sustained, on this view, something must be left out or destroyed—if only because that argument or artwork is one thing, rather than another thing. What these texts affirm is the precipitous limit of affirmation: blankness, as the absent sign of sovereignty; the unrepresentability of class, race, or

gender difference (and even perhaps the literariness of film or and the cinematicity of literature).

I take seriously the common claim that postwar Melvilleans were more concerned with the 1950s than the 1850s. But rather than regard their ahistoricism as a failure of scholarship or art, I see it as a various, wide-ranging, and intimately felt response to real crisis. To make any claim for variety during a period generally known for the invention and espousal of a broad-based consensus, is to raise the historical stakes somewhat. And since that “consensus” usually describes the period’s strategic exclusion of class, race, and gender critique, the political stakes could not in fact be any higher. But what I see in these objects is a disjointed and uncoordinated attempt to figure out how historically impossible tendencies—communal consensus, the death of politics—had taken such ideological hold. Thus what they constitute is an attempt to shift the ground from a stalemated war of doctrine and position to a mobile and unresolved struggle of form and perception.

The proper name of “Cold War Consensus” most immediately describes the alliance between two wings of American politics, left and right, in the common cause of what George Kennan had called “containment”: the U.S. restrictions on the growth of Communist philosophy and organization both domestically and internationally. The chief documents of consensus are the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, and its major players range from Richard Nixon, Joseph McCarthy, and the John Birch Society on the farthest Right to Kennan, Bell, and Schlesinger on the intellectual, and purportedly post-ideological, center-Left. Since the 1980s and 1990s, we have also generally supposed that consensus was not restricted to the sectors of diplomacy and party politics. This view, held most strongly by the so-called New Americanists in literary studies (and among them, most vocally Donald E. Pease, Russell Reising, and Geraldine Murphy) maintains that a degree of consensus extended all the way into the Iviéd tower, and that art, literature, and scholarship—

most pressingly for the current discussion, in the changing departments of literature and in the brand new departments of cinema studies—was practiced in the direct service of popular anti-Communist policies.

According to that latter narrative, postwar writers, thinkers, and filmmakers were stuck in a political and conceptual deadlock, at least until the Sixties when they were all set free by European experiments in the arts—such as the French *nouveau roman*, or the new models of non-literary analysis (advanced in the first place largely by German political philosophers, French psychoanalysts, linguists, and anthropologists, and Canadian media scholars)—and by activist groups, closer to home, that had organized around feminism, anti-racism, queer advocacy, wealth distribution, nuclear disarmament, and peace. These later aesthetic, philosophical and political movements, according to the familiar narrative, are what radicalized theory, film, and literature in the United States, by giving them their sharpest tools and most pressing objectives. There is validity to this storyline, but I would hope to complicate the received idea that theory—as well as literature itself, and film, as well as other arts, especially in the 1950s—had been somehow uniformly complicit in the imperialisms and the prejudices of the American national identity. I would follow Podhoretz in seeing certain literary theory late in the decade as having contributed to a “new radicalism.” And I would see this theory as only tangentially inspired by European philosophy or American political movements, and as far more directly derived from powerful personal responses to writing by Melville and others.

Any national project, from the moment that it organizes itself under a signifier of “nation”—American cinema, the American novel, and “American Studies,” in all its phases and orientations—has already admitted for all nations a measure of permanence, historical necessity, and metaphysical hardness.²⁰ And it

²⁰ In this I would agree with David R. Shumway’s claim with regard to this same opposition between New Americanists and postwar criticism: “American literature

may well be that the postwar period was when all this national “exceptionalism” entered into cultural forms such as film and literature, as well as into scholarly approaches to those objects. In short, it might be that there was a tremendous indulgence in narratives of “Americanness,” or of a “national mystique.” But as a result of this indulgence, and the new regimes of art and scholarship that it produced, those narratives also quickly wore thin—or were seen to have been always already thin—enough to be tested through an experimental literary and cultural practice.

4. The Willful Submission to Non-Experience

Ahab declares of the whale, *Moby-Dick*: “he tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with inscrutable malice sinewing in it.” And so, as has often been noted, Melville heaps his readers, with the pages and mismatched chapters of the very book *Moby-Dick*. As Richard Poirier put it in his 1966 book *A World Elsewhere*, Melville had himself produced something inscrutable, in his “voracious accumulations of material...[and] vast allusiveness to the literary, technological, philosophical authorities that cripple the free articulation of individual consciousness.” Poirier, like the others (perhaps especially Chase, Bewley, and Lewis), was responding to his own period—a postwar period that was “heaped” with signs of insufficiency, thinness, disunity, contradiction, delinquency, lack of purpose, injustice and alienation, gaps between “what is” and “what ought to be,” and protest for the sake of protest.²¹

will...continue to serve an ideological function, even if the details of the ideology differ...The future of American literature will likely not exist in writing only, but it will continue to serve the interests of the state” (359).

²¹ While I argue theories of negativity would take on special force in the postwar readings of Melville, metaphors such as decay or of rot had in fact long been part of the cultural and theoretical response to Melville and *Moby-Dick*. For D.H. Lawrence, in 1923, the evident decay in Melville’s language was the result of his naïve commitment to decrepit ideals of a perfect God and a perfectible love: “After a

Robert Martin Adams would write that same year, in his book *Nil*, about the Nineteenth-Century literary origins for the “voids” that he had similarly noted among the dominant themes and forms of postwar culture. With reference to the “weightlessness, silence, [and] interruption of the sense continuum” by cultural workers from Kenneth Burke and John Cage to the comic strip *Pogo* and the significantly-named Zero Mostel, Adams wrote: “Nothing is closer to the supreme commonplace of our commonplace age than its preoccupation with Nothing—that is, with the...willful submission of oneself to non-experience as an active form of experience” (3). For Adams, such voids had lived wild and ripe for theorization in the

certain point, the ideal goes dead and rotten. The old, pure ideal becomes in itself an impure thing of evil...Look at Melville’s eighty long years of writhing. And to the end he writhed on the ideal pin” (151). Many Americans followed Lawrence in re-evaluating and promoting a previously ignored “classic American literature,” but for many of them, it was Melville’s faithlessness, rather than the reverse, that made him unique. So just as “rotteness” could characterize Melville’s innocent attraction to the ideals of God, love, family, science, and state, it could also describe his disillusionment with those same ideals. Thus, in 1929, Lewis Mumford could use these terms to explain why Melville had sided been so attracted to Hawthorne without having found much of value in Emerson: the latter having fixed upon “the blandness, the sunniness, the mildness, the absence of curses, shadows, shipwrecks” in the world; and Hawthorne having instead employed “an eye for the dankness and decay and for the inscrutable malevolence of the universe” (95). Kenneth Burke, in a 1937 letter to Malcolm Cowley, would perceive pretty much the same thing as a generic principle that would place *Moby-Dick* in his “black mass, sprout-out-of-rot category” of literary works (220).

In the book that was exerted the most influence on the postwar Melvilleans—1941’s *American Renaissance*—F.O. Matthiessen would say of Ahab that: “the length to which the captain carried his belief in the fixity of Fate makes a searching comment on the theological decay that conditioned Melville’s thought” (458). And it is this emphasis on a loss of belief that likely ties together the most diverse of prewar writings on Melville. It also underlies much of the postwar work, such as that of Charles Olson, for whom agnostic despair had led Melville into a thematic of death: “He looked for solace in the Resurrection. He got nothing...The dimensions of life as he had felt them merely dwindled. Objects lost their gravity as they bulk in space” (100). However, after World War II, the most important movement was in fact away from an attention to Melville’s thematics, and toward a unique theory of Melvillean form. Those critics and artists would agree with Olson that disintegration was an essential concern of *Moby-Dick*: but they would use “loss of gravity” to describe the book’s grandly loose and unanchored metaphors; and “bulk in space” as a way of describing the shear largeness of the book and the scale of its philosophical ambition.

negativist literature of the Nineteenth Century, but had been fully tamed in post-war culture. And yet, while postwar culture offers Adams little more than a foothold for his analyses of Flaubert, Melville, and others, his “void” continues to be apt for describing that culture, as well as the critics within that culture who had already flocked to *Moby-Dick*.

A variety of postwar critics and artists found, in *Moby-Dick*, a way to describe both the inscrutability and the outrage of their (only apparently) “post-political” time.²² Symptomatic of the imperative toward consensus, these texts were nonetheless able to conceptualize how such any such unity might be regarded as artificial, failed, or fragile. Speaking of the well-known 1966 conference on “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” at The Johns Hopkins University, Wallace Martin has written of 1966 that it saw a point of strain or stagnation in American theory, in the same instant that it invited in new theoretical models from France (which that year saw the publication of major books by Barthes and Foucault, as well as Lacan’s *Écrits*). As Martin writes, while 1966 was the year of massive methodological change in U.S. studies of literature and culture, it “was also the year in which Robert Martin Adams’s *Nil* and Richard Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere* appeared—books that, however memorable, offered no new theoretical prospects” (xviii). One reason that the new models were welcome was that so few of the American critics, even those on the very far Left, had been engaged in the explicit

²² While I find an advanced critical apparatus to operate in the work of Ellison and the Fifties critics, I would not imply that this work applies to the present moment, in any immediate or unvarnished way. To do so might only hope to short-circuit the important influence of continental philosophy and critical theory in the United States, and so to repeat the effort of certain American cultural studies (such as Daniel T. O’Hara’s *Lionel Trilling: The Work of Liberation* or Frank Lentricchia’s book on Kenneth Burke *Criticism and Social Change*). Instead, I hope to expand the available means of criticism and reading, by articulating the Fifties work with the social and political thought of intervening years. If there is any yet-practicable method to be found in this material, then I believe that it is only through this articulation —perhaps as much of my present moment as the Fifties work is of its own—that it becomes so.

critiques of U.S. capitalism and imperialism that began to appear quite necessary. And pre-Sixties re-readings of Freud and Marx had only rarely moved beyond symbolic interpretations that were too schematic, and too apolitical, to inspire new work, either critical or artistic.²³

Meanwhile, the postwar critics had developed only a miniscule canon of fiction and poetry—excluding women writers as well as writers of color, and paying little or no attention to writing that in fact sold well or was widely read—and had therefore failed as historians, as well. The imported models were oriented toward history, politics, and subjectivity, by contrast, and this made them far more responsive than the American ones to the emerging needs of anti-colonialist, feminist, anti-racist, and political-economic critique. But the themes that preoccupied Adams and Poirier were not only those same themes that had dominated for the previous two decades in the U.S., especially in literary studies by the academic Left. They were also aligned in startling ways with the themes advanced in the newly arrived French work. And their work, like that which preceded them, was importantly symptomatic of its moment—exploring the same cultural fissures as did much of the period’s most enigmatic literature and film, often through analyses of Melville.

At that conference in Baltimore, Lacan would explore what he saw as a contemporary subjectivity based in “lack, loss, or void” and which he defined as “the sliding and the difficulty of seizing, the never-here [that] is not nothing.” Lacan’s concept of “the never-here,” while fairly independent in its theoretical lineage from Poirier’s “elsewhere” or Adams’s “non-experience,” is in other ways continuous with it. Both they and he theorize a kind of negativity that is elusive and relational rather than ideal or absolute. While, Lacan saw subjectivity to have been marred by a

²³ Exceptions to this include Freudian Marxists who got their start prewar, such as Brooks, Burke, and Arvin.

traumatic “loss,” for example, Adams found contemporary experience to have been burdened by the freight of “non-experience.” I do not want to over-determine these conceptual convergences by claiming a kind of proto-post-structuralist impulse for the critics, filmmakers, and literary writers of postwar America. Instead, I would emphasize a desire among certain American critics and artists to find political possibility in stylistic innovation. And I would argue that one reason so many U.S. critics got excited by continental models of negativity—in deconstruction and Frankfurt School critical theory—is that negativity had been the dominant concern of at least one strain of indigenous American theory.

Adams provides what might be the clearest postwar interpretation of the negative phenomenon in Melville. It may also be the last of such interpretations, coming at the tail end of an American idiom in literary theory that would be wholly changed, starting with the conference at Johns Hopkins. For Adams, Melville is “a fabricator of translucent screens and anti-actions for delaying an inevitable confrontation” (243). Yet when this confrontation emerges from behind those screens—in, say, the *Pequod’s* encounter with the white whale—it does so as the very symbol of what Adams calls “Nothing.” As a result: “The screen itself is felt not to exist anymore; it is penetrable, soluble, it lets one fall through into a void...[in which] the shell of personal identity collapses” (244). Adams’s book is one end product of a dying idiom, but that idiom must be seen as having contained a dramatic theory of negation, a critique of individual and national identity, and a politics of aesthetics and culture. Of the “voids” of blankness and whiteness in *Moby-Dick*, Adams insists that they are not merely symbols of a singular and external phenomenon, such as God or evil. Indeed, if the book is an allegory at all, then it is a “clogged allegory” that has been hampered quite deliberately in its production of a “conscious verbal insufficiency” (147).

Concerned with the “heaps” that plague Ahab (much as his contemporary Poirier also was), Adams insists on a conception of negativity that is the opposite of absolute. Neither good nor evil, the Nothing is simply what weighs against the heaps, as the “clogging,” impersonal force of language. This blankness, he writes: “can be described under the image of a balance, on one side of which the author ostentatiously heaps Everything...What can be on the other side? and how much does it weigh? The burden of reconciling these suggested answers is laid on the reader; multiple unexplained imbalance becomes a literary principle” (148). With the arrival of post-structuralist theory, these opposing elements would receive new and now-familiar names: the “slippage” that introduces arbitrariness into a “signifying practice”; the “imaginary” loss that displaces the authoritative element in a “symbolic” order; the rhetorical or poetic “figures” that distort narratives of cultural “discourse”; the “break” in a historical or epistemological “problematic,” etc. But even before the official dawn of what is now called “theory,” American institutions were cultivating active investments in analogous visions of cultural and political tension. And for a reading of Melville like that of Adams, these included the irresolvable movement between Everything and Nothing, and the consequent “collapse” of identity through “multiple unexplained imbalance.”²⁴

²⁴ As is clear from his overlaps with Chase, Lewis, and others, Adams was not alone among postwar critics in recruiting *Moby-Dick* to do the work of cultural critique. Sallie Sears, for example, also found the whale’s “suggestive blankness” to be a model for all the figures of “horror” and the “dread of annihilation” that were to follow, explaining (in a discussion of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*) that out of the whale’s color arises a “terror [that] is not only the thought of personal death, but of some disguised principle of decay and sickness and paralysis at the very center of the universe,” as well (196). Critical to Sears’s account, and to nearly all the period’s accounts of Melville’s negativity, is how blankness and whiteness are deployed not simply as metaphors or symbols, but as formal and aesthetic “principles.” In other words, Melville had produced the theoretical and formal devices (rather than the master narratives) by which to map (rather than to explicate) the cultural procedures of catastrophe and exclusion. And the effort of his postwar respondents was to figure these procedures out—not to solve them or attempt to them from discourse, but instead to imagine what new formations might grow out of the “decay” at the “center of the universe.”

The Melvillean line of thinking may, in some vague way, have begun to pave the way for “Theory.” But the scholars who produced the line of thought were nonetheless people of their moment and have attracted scrutiny and stern criticism for their limited conceptions of racial and sexual difference. Crucial feminist analyses of the postwar critics first surfaced in the 1970s, when feminist critics began to note a distinct masculinism permeating the study of American literature, both of those texts selected for canonization—an argument advanced in Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, e.g.—and in the very titles of the critical works themselves (such as Henry Nash Smith’s *The Virgin Land*, Lewis’s *The American Adam*, and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*). By ultimately reducing both the canon and its texts to mere narratives of male interiority, Nina Baym later observed, the postwar critics ended up building from “useful and true observations to a restriction of literary creation to a sort of therapeutic act that can only be performed by men” (139). Baym’s observation is frequently understood as a condemnation of postwar critical texts. But far more forceful was her critique of the way in which these texts were themselves canonized, and their masculinist assumptions institutionalized, by critics in the 1970s, who “in pursuit of the uniquely American...have arrived at a place where Americanness has vanished into the depths of what is alleged to be the universal male psyche” (139). This de-historicizing gesture is, even for Baym, a crime more seriously committed by her contemporaries (she names Harold Bloom and Edward Said) than by their postwar forebears.²⁵

²⁵ One might readily respond to these charges by returning to the work of a thinker like Charvat who, as a theoretical historian of books, never really relinquished his Marxist dedication to literary materialism. This dedication persists even that philosophical essay on Melville’s “common reader,” in which he argued for *Moby-Dick* as a kind of tutor text. In that article’s final, published version, Charvat decides that the objective of the author of “The Whiteness of the Whale” had been “to get the reader to entertain the *possibility*—not the certainty—that behind the immensities of the universe there is a blank void of nothingness, of No-God, from which emanate terrors beyond our comprehension” (276). Critics who were more influential and less

Still, perhaps the most famous advocate of Melville's negativism was Leslie Fiedler, also the scholar with the most desire to map it onto the sexual and racial dynamics of his supposedly "post-political" moment. In Melville's letter to Hawthorne, Fiedler had found a title for his second book—1960's *No! in Thunder*—a book that intended, very deliberately, to think about its own time through Melville. Why? Because, as Fiedler claimed: "Demonic, terrible, and negative: this is the Modern Muse" (226). For Fiedler, who saw in *Moby Dick* forms of racial and sexual alterity, the book was worth rereading for its strong note of protest against, very precisely, the prevailing culture of consensus: "The 'No! in thunder' is never partisan; it infuriates Our Side as well as Theirs, reveals that all Sides are one, insofar as they are all yea-sayers and hence all liars" (227). Here is as strong an expression of the period's widely-felt frustrations with the moderation of available political options, but here also is a demand for something else, a denial of the authority by which any one of the options, even the most desirable, could hold sway. The ideal attitude, then, is "when the writer says of precisely the cause that is dearest to him what is always and everywhere the truth about all causes—that it has been imperfectly conceived and inadequately represented, and that it is bound be betrayed, consciously or unconsciously, by its leading spokesmen" (227). It is possible to see in Fiedler the extreme expression of what Chase had criticized as the "post-political mood." One theorist, Russell Reising, has even referred to Fiedler as an expositor of an "apolitical unconscious" who, in deriving any timeless attitude from Melville, was guilty of a "devaluation of literature as a social document" of Melville's own time (132).

radical than Charvat were arriving at conclusions that were strikingly similar to his, in their own efforts to survive the political and spiritual "death of the gods." But a minor critic like Charvat, whose materialism marked him as nearly unique, is more than worth recalling.

Surely, it is true that Fiedler does not conduct a social history of the mid-nineteenth century. And it is also true that Fiedler makes no attempt to treat either *Moby-Dick* or the letter to Melville as “documentary” of mid-Nineteenth Century New England life. But to claim that Fiedler writes “apolitically” is, tellingly, to miss the range of reasons why critical prose shifted away from treating literature as a social document: not just because that criticism had to struggle within a politically impoverished arena, but also because, in addition to its historical documentary qualities, Melville’s work had philosophical qualities that were less easy to pin down. Indeed, these latter qualities so often manifested in the poetic and rhetorical (rather than the descriptive) registers of Melville’s text, that it was also necessary to read their less historical effects: those that materialized in the moment of reading rather than in that of composition.

Fiedler’s was not, after all, such a “peculiar stance for a critic so self-professedly ‘cultural’” (132). To the contrary, as a critic of his own contemporary culture, Fiedler’s reading of Melville’s “No! in Thunder” was very much in line with his growing understanding of the danger inherent in what Chase would call his “post-political mood.” To Fiedler, the crises that needed addressing were those that had troubled the years since World War II, and most especially those crises of community that followed the newest formations of gender, sexuality, and race. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, these concerns come together around another analysis of the “darkness” that fills *Moby-Dick*, a novel that turns out to be “perhaps the greatest love story in our fiction, cast in the peculiar American form of innocent homosexuality” (370). That love story tells of the bond between the white Ishmael and the Pacific Islander Queequeg: a man who is not only non-white, but densely and darkly tattooed as well, making of him such an intense symbol of “darkness,” in fact, that his mere proximity “betrays a doubt about the angelic companion” (370). Fiedler’s formulation is not new, but he does tie it directly both to Melville’s

chiaroscuro imagery and to his protestatory efforts “to expose the blackness of life most men try deliberately to ignore” (432).

Fundamentally, this repeats similar claims that Fiedler had made regarding the love between Huck and Jim, in his well-known 1948 *Partisan Review* essay on Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey.” But it had also been preceded by one of the most respected Melville books of the decade, Newton Arvin’s 1950 book, *Herman Melville*. There, Arvin casts *Moby-Dick* as a presentation of “one dominating oneiric image, the image of self-destruction” along with “its counterpart and equivalent, the image of murderous destructiveness directed outward against the Other” (170). Arvin claims that:

The death-wish has met with a check and a corrective; Thanatos has entered into a contest with Eros, and Ishmael, in his deathful loneliness, encountering the savage Queequeg, has formed a solemn friendship with him, formed what he calls a marriage; the longing to love and be loved has evoked its own oneiric symbol, and from this point forward Ishmael gradually ceases to be the man committed wholly to death. (171)

Here, Arvin is applying the ostensibly ahistorical observations of Sigmund Freud in the ostensibly historical project of a literary biography. But I would argue that this is about more than what Baym saw as the “beset” male psyche. Really, as with Fiedler (albeit with greater precision), it is Arvin’s way of pointing up the politically salutary effects, for his present moment, of racial integration, gently affectionate masculinity, and freely-expressed homosexuality.

As such, the criticism of a Fiedler or an Arvin can be considered “apolitical” (to use Reising’s term for it) only if the politics of race, gender, and masculinity are not regarded as any kind of politics at all. Similarly, they can be dismissed for ignoring *Moby-Dick*’s function as social documentation, only if aesthetics and form are to be considered in no way social. But Arvin’s analysis of the novel is “formal” only insofar as it is social: in its matching of thematic concerns (the Ishmael/Queequeg relationship) with extended metaphors of “Otherness” on board

the *Pequod*, involving the racial difference of Queequeg and the other harpooners, the spatial and ontological difference of the white whale and the abyssally black sea, and a host of other differential image-systems that are “openly and obviously contradictory” (173).

5. Mere Shells of Men

In its intervention into and against postwar post-politics, blankness became a sign of political possibility. It offered a way out of the apparent impasse of consensus, and a vision of otherness that would be considered not as separate from culture or representation, but as an integral part of both. Combating the rhetoric of inclusion, blankness did not signify those parts of U.S. culture that could have been, but were not, represented. Instead, it announced loudly from within each text: this is not all there is.²⁶ In the longest book-length treatment of this principle, appropriately entitled *The Power of Blackness*, Harry Levin wrote that: “What every man seeks in the water is what he may find in his narcissistic reflection, ‘the ungraspable phantom of life.’ But few men seek the visage of reality by striking through the pasteboard masks of appearance; and fewer still would dare to fulfil that impulse if they suspected that whiteness was blankness, possibly nothingness” (224). For Levin (and really for all of the philosophically and psychoanalytically inclined Melvilleans), blankness was thus a principle of self-identification and, thus, essence. But because blankness was an contradictory component of all forms of recognizable representation, and neither recognizable nor represented itself, it could be readily

²⁶ Blankness resembles *partage*, to use the term that both Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy have recently proposed in theorizing the present moment in post-politics. A word that in French can mean either “sharing,” “distribution,” or “partition,” *partage* describes a primary state of aesthetics or politics that is always-already relational and diffuse. Blankness also resembles *coupure*, a term that arises in the theories of knowledge generated by Louis Althusser and then Michel Foucault. For both of these writers, in different ways, *coupure* denotes the “break” or “cut” that divides each historical regime of knowledge from the next, as well as the cultural or textual space where that division becomes legible.

imagined in all regions of U.S. culture during that time: the critique of political economy; or race and gender; and of the forms of sovereignty that lead to domination by totalitarianisms or capitalism.

This brings me back to my original epigraph, by Robert Motherwell in 1950, that *Moby-Dick* had taught him: “If the *amounts* of black or white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling.” Such an attempt to “condense” blackness and whiteness in their proper amounts is rather the principle of blankness, or of blackness, in process—as is visible in Motherwell’s 1953 painting, *The Tomb of Captain Ahab*. That painting builds out into the gallery space even as it seems to drift, or swim, leftward. It is skeletal, but in a feat of inversion, its bones are black rather than white. As another painter, Ad Reinhardt, wrote at around the same time, Melville was a “master of voidness” (106). What this voidness was, and what it may still be, is an uneasiness in reading, or an aesthetic practice of difficulty, possibility, and the commitment to commitment.

Blankness is the name of a certain mobile medium, one that perhaps engages or negates other media forms but that will never transcend them. In the following exempla, I explore the consequences for such a void medium, as it bursts through the screen of Orson Welles’s productions in film and theater, and as it ruptures the framing narrative and the protagonist’s body of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. First, however, a brief return to Richard Chase, out of whose Melvillean aesthetics emerges a conception of “cultural radicalism.” Intended to short-circuit the post-political mood by appealing to cultural spaces, rather than those zones of politics most thoroughly compromised by national consensus, cultural radicalism is an open attitude toward the futures of nation and identity.

PART II: A DUMB BLANKNESS FULL OF MEANING

Exemplum: Intellectual Bogartism (“Radicalism Today”)

Influential arguments over the past three decades have turned Richard Chase into the most controversial of Melvilleans. Chase, the argument goes, was too much the liberal consensus-builder, and his *Moby Dick* was built around Ishmael as an exceptional American hero. In fact, Chase did see Ishmael as having been pitted against Ahab the totalitarian, the embodiment of a grand totalizing violence that must be associated with Stalin as well as Hitler. But he also thought that Ahab was a capitalist, whose authoritarian hunger for wealth and efficiency made him “the nineteenth century type of the manager of an absentee-owned plant” (101). Here Chase stands against capitalism as well as against totalitarianism, on the site of an ambivalence that marks him as difficult to recognize within the contemporary thinking about the American left in its failures to confront postwar consensus.

Indeed, Chase demands exactly such a confrontation, by calling upon his reader to cease celebrating Ahab for having suspended the profit motive (which would have made him continue the routine pursuit of safer whales) in favor of a deeper desire, separate from potential earnings. In fact, Chase argues, no matter what Ahab’s demurrals, “there is no doubt that the voyage is an industrial enterprise”:

All the facts are there: the wage of the sailor, the occupational hazards, the deployment of personnel in the field, the precautions to be taken, and the risks...that a man might be killed: if so, [each man’s] death was at once the murder of an industrial worker and the ritual sacrifice of a hero. The hunt for the White Whale is anything but an abandonment of the capitalist myth. Ahab may hoot at the Nantucket market, but he never hoots at capitalism. Quite the contrary, he accepts its full disastrous implications. Ahab is the epic transmutation of the American free enterpriser. (101)

Such an argument does not constitute a historical analysis of Melville’s attitudes toward his century’s modes of production. But as an attempt to exert a Melvillean

politics on his own post-political moment, it is emotionally deep and polemically strong. Chase's liberalism puts him at the center of consensus-building efforts, but it also enables him to see in the textual Ahab an oscillation between totalitarianism and capitalism. And it is out of this oscillation that he can produce a prescription for a range of culturally radical practices.

Chase's words contain a forceful, meta-textual argument about his present moment: that the ambitions of mid-Twentieth Century "free enterprisers" resemble those of the totalitarian Ahab. (There are even shades of so-called "crisis theory" in the claim that free enterprise knowingly develops in pursuit its own destruction.) In this, they prefigure the perspective of C.L.R. James who, as a Marxist rather than a Liberal, was far more openly committed to extending this principle into an explicit critique of his present moment. James saw the *Pequod* as populated by an assortment of "mariners, renegades, and castaways" who represented an American proletariat that was otherwise suppressed at all levels of culture and politics. As such, he argued, the crew figured a structuring outside to Melville's discourse. James had very little interest in the book's aesthetics, beyond this topology of representability. But although he turns most of his attention to speculations about character archetypes—where Ahab embodies the crushing hand of totalitarianism onboard, and Ishmael "wavers constantly between totalitarianism and the crew"—his topology does provide an important way of mapping the terms of representation that were adopted by his ostensibly non-Marxist contemporaries (40). If they offer a sense of dialectical negativity in all things, then what James exposes about the *Pequod* seems similar. He writes: "Equality is an illusion. No equality of knowledge can get rid of the inbred servility of mortal to mortal. Men inevitably are divided into brigades and battalions, with captains at their head" (74). James thus prescribes a way of thinking the postwar period by way of a power structure that cannot be avoided, but can be mapped and then resisted. In this, he is largely in agreement with the Melville critics around him,

who see American identity not as fixed but as contingent upon a range of formal determinations: some of which are social and tangible, and some of which are aesthetic and more elusive.

Donald E. Pease argues that C.L.R. James provided a corrective to contemporary Melvilleans, who were otherwise irredeemable. Listing Chase as chief among the “conservative” elements in U.S. literature departments, Pease argues that “Americanist interpretations of *Moby-Dick* like Chase’s corroborated the emergency powers of the national security state” (61). Moreover, says Pease: “in their readings of it as a prototypical national narrative, these critics deployed the United States’ opposition to the Soviet Union to justify neocolonialist policies...[and] to colonise life-worlds—at home and abroad” (61). This claim is very clearly rooted in an allegiance to James’s anti-colonialist project, rather than in a close reading of postwar Melville scholarship. Pease’s argument does remain one of the most important sources of self-critique still ongoing in the field of American literature studies, and retrieving James’s rich work has been a necessary part of that theoretical work. Motivated by the observation that U.S. imperialism and “post-political” complacency were necessary outgrowths of the New Liberalism, Pease and others have ably noted that consensus won out through support not just by those writing liberal theories (Trilling, Chase, and others), but also by those allowing liberalism to grow unchecked.²⁷ However, this work rests upon a drastic simplification of the range and scope of Melvillean cultural politics.

Nearly all of the literary Americanists of the period—even those calling themselves Liberal—tended to associate the structures of domination and exclusion with forces in society and culture that called themselves “conservative.” And many of

²⁷ Pease has found even Matthiessen to have been guilty of conservative reading practices, in spite of the latter’s vocal activism on behalf of labor unions; his endorsement of Henry A. Wallace, the Progressive candidate for president; and his virtual invention of an American literary canon.

them, as the postwar period wore on, also began to see how the moderation and consensus of New Liberalism were guilty of endorsing such structures. Chase was indicative of this last tendency, but still he has borne the brunt of criticism (by Pease, Reising, Murphy, Robert J. Corber, and others), and is taken to have promoted the conservation of an old nationalism and the moderation of political extremes. Yet Chase was the one who most thoroughly formulated a strategy for a cultural radicalism.

Cultural radicalism was a strategy for positioning art and literature against post-politics, privileging paradox and irony in a style that Chase saw as emulating Randolph Bourne and “the early Van Wyck Brooks.” Above all, cultural radicalism emulated Melville and other prose writers of the Nineteenth Century, for whom “contradictions are to be resolved only by death, the ceaseless brooding presence of which endows with an unspeakable beauty every irreconcilable of experience and all irrationalities of life” (*The American Novel and its Tradition* 7). For Chase, what Melville embodied was not commitment but possibility—or rather, the possibility of commitment: a new and as yet unimagined kind of commitment, by which one would move ceaselessly through a world of images, pushing toward dissolution and away from resolution. Chase followed Melville in refusing to offer political prescriptions in the form of either utopian or dystopian narrative, and opted instead to focus on the emotional and formal maneuvers by which such narratives were written. Instructively, he compared Melville to Matthiessen, who in 1950 had famously hurled himself from a hotel window:

In literature, Melville; in real life, F.O. Matthiessen. These two very different men were alike in this - in their inner being they were finally exhausted and neutralized by the contradictions they contained. Contradiction, which in the healthy organism results in wit, vital versatility, and a strategy for dealing successfully with the confusing assault of reality upon the ego, produced in them a deep fatigue that left them mere shells of men. The first thing one noticed about Matthiessen in his last

years, fine scholar and friend that he was, was the uncanny lack of self, of inner resiliency, of interior hum and buzz.²⁸ In less extreme form many Americans are like that. Few have the final power, or desperation to emulate Matthiessen's symbolic leap from the hotel window. (42)

For Chase, the commitment that both men embodied was not to a determined ideal or a clearly envisioned political alternative. Instead, both men were committed inasmuch as both men felt their contradictions deeply. The “final power” that Chase saw in Matthiessen was nothing less than the capacity to commit to commitment itself. In Melville, by contrast, it was nothing less than the irresolution that I have been calling blankness.

Chase would repeatedly criticize Matthiessen for his support of the Progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace and claim that “if one had read and understood Melville one would not vote for Henry Wallace...because Melville presents his reader with a vision of life so complexly true that it exposes the ideas of Henry Wallace as hopelessly childish and superficial” (591). Chase’s stinging words have often been seen as aimed directly at Matthiessen, who would thus have been insulted twice: once as childish; and again, as one who truly did not “understand Melville.” This seems likely, as does the possibility that Chase was expressing a sincere allegiance to the Liberalism that Wallace opposed. But Chase was also expressing an intellectual indignation and a resistance to what he and many others perceived as Wallace’s weak-willed endorsement of “one-worldism” and his weak-minded appeasement strategy with regard to the Soviet Union. Wallace’s fiercest and most vocal opponent on the “non-Stalinist left” was *Politics* editor Dwight

²⁸ This phrase, importantly it seems to me, recalls a passage early on in Melville’s 1849 novel, *Mardi*. In pointing at this passage, Chase speaks blank volumes about his feelings about Matthiessen and, perhaps, about himself during this difficult period: “The stillness of the calm is awful. His voice begins to grow strange and portentous. He feels it in him like something swallowed too big for the esophagus. It keeps up a sort of involuntary interior humming in him, like a live beetle. His cranium is a dome full of reverberations. The hollows of his very bones are as whispering galleries. He is afraid to speak loud, lest he be stunned; like the man in the bass drum” (21).

MacDonald, who would regularly tell a story in which Wallace visited Irkutsk in 1948 and spoke in support of the USSR's detention of dissidents, and ultimately in support of the gulag, by somehow concluding that "men born in wide free spaces will not brook injustice...[and] will not even temporarily live in slavery" (*Henry Wallace* 103) But Chase's claim about Melville and intellectual complexity was probably best corroborated by MacDonald's claim that "Wallace never analyzes a problem; he barges around inside it, throwing out vague exhortations" (*Memoirs of a Revolutionist* 300).

Daniel T. O'Hara has made a claim about Chase (oddly without mention of the previous passage or of Matthiessen) that is very similar to the claim that Chase makes about Matthiessen. Of Chase's own surprising and suspicious death, drowning in a shallow pool of water, O'Hara writes: "Richard Chase at least had the decency to end a life he believed to be intolerable. The rest of us just say it is, and, when rewarded for doing so, buy a new Car." Leaving aside the real possibility that Chase's death was not a suicide, one feels that all of the postwar texts are characterized by a deep commitment to commitment and to contradiction. They ask: how can one go on in a world in which extant political options are seen as exhausted? And how can one continue to make politically relevant art, when there is no utopian alternative worth mimicking or emulating? What Chase sees in Matthiessen is what O'Hara sees in Chase: a bodily investment in taking a critical conclusion as far as it will go. Perhaps more practical, however, is the question of where Melville's literary investment can take us: can it, as Chase suggests, deliver us into the midst of metaphysical contradictions and arresting ironies, and beyond them, not toward physical death, but toward new and different configurations of culture and politics?

Chase has usually been read as wholehearted Liberal, and certainly he was this at first. He made this latter claim himself, in a much-quoted passage in the introduction to his monograph on Melville. There, he writes of his intention "to

contribute a book on Melville to...the new liberalism—that newly invigorated secular thought at the dark center of the twentieth century which, whatever our cultural wreckage and disappointment, now begins to ransom liberalism from the ruinous sellouts, failures, and defeats of the thirties” (vii). By attempting to retrieve some revelations about Melville, in Chase and in others, I do not intend to “ransom” liberalism in either its new or its older forms. But I do hope to ventriloquize Alfred Kazin, who wrote to Chase about the Melville book in a 1951 letter: “Criticism [should be] founded on the immortal saying of Augustine—I want you to be; or it is hateful. I want you to be. I want Melville to be—outside the New Liberalism” (quoted in Spark 534). In other words, I attempt to follow Kazin in pushing his contemporaries’ conclusions about Melville as far as they will go: beyond their disappointments and compromises; beyond Liberalism; beyond their suicides, real and metaphorical; and, with Chase, beyond the urge to resolve Melville’s contradictions into post-political prescriptions.

How is one to understand or even make use of Chase’s condemnation of the Thirties as a decade of “ruinous sellouts”? It seems evident that he devalues the simultaneous rise of Marxist theory and proletarian fiction in the U.S., and that this devaluation might well equal an endorsement of the “post-political frame of mind” that he would later criticize. Certainly, this is the conclusion that one would have to draw if one were to find that a politics of aesthetics—that is, a politics of art or identity rather than of economics—is in fact no politics at all.²⁹ Yet Chase’s words

²⁹ Perhaps the best-known advocate of this position is Slavoj Žižek, who has leveled a critique at those writers whom he has named “the post-Althusserian partisans of ‘pure politics’”: Mouffe, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, and others (75). He writes: “The ‘political’ [I would add ‘aesthetic’] critique of Marxism (the claim that, when one reduces politics to a ‘formal’ expression of some underlying ‘objective’ socio-economic process, one loses the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper) should thus be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is IN ITS VERY FORM irreducible to politics—this level of FORM of economy (of economy as the determining FORM of the social) is what French ‘political post-Marxists’ miss when they reduce economy to one of the positive social

can also be read otherwise: as an endorsement of literary formalism and a radical perspective on unresolved contradiction in both its literary and nonliterary effects.

Chase's work can be seen as similarly contradictory, and not just by accident. Two of the works he produced were in fact works of cultural theory in the form of dialogues conducted in pairs of opposed voices. These were not works of philosophy, as a Platonic dialogue might be (although Plato is clearly one of their key reference points). Rather, they take the form of fictions: one, a short dialogue in *The Partisan Review* between a professor and an undergraduate student, entitled "Radicalism Today"; and the other, entitled *The Democratic Vista*, a book-length conversation among a similar professor, his family members, his neighbors, and a pair of graduate students. These two texts expose a tension in postwar political and cultural life, between the drive toward moderation, on one hand, and the drive to revolutionize basic conditions, on the other. It is commonly accepted that Chase followed Trilling very closely, in his perspective on political philosophy and literary history. And because Chase himself is seen as so influential on his generation of scholars in American literature, that whole generation is frequently seen to have followed more or less in Trilling's footsteps.

But in the first of these two pieces, Chase actually upbraids his mentor for clinging too tightly to moderation, sincerity, and authenticity. Within the community to which both men belonged, it was well known that "Silverman," the undergraduate, was actually a proxy for Trilling.³⁰ When Silverman arrives at the

spheres" (75-6). I would add to this, however, that when Žižek says "economy," he means what Freud meant by that term—the violent conflict between the libido and death drive—as well as what was meant by Marx, Smith, Ricardo, et al. In other words, through a coincidence of language by which "economy" takes on multiple meanings, Žižek (much like Mouffe, Rancière, etc.) starts from the primarily formal diagram of a pure dialectic and only then, secondarily, applies it to all areas of political life, including what Marxists call "political economy."

³⁰ On the interpersonal drama that erupted from Chase's article, see Trilling's letter to Chase of March 21, 1957 (reprinted in Clare Spark's voluminous and baffling *Hunting Captain Ahab*): "I think it would have been more enlightening, more graceful,

door of his English professor—named “Professor Chase”—he pleads for a more moral, rational, and conclusive approach to the course material. He asks his professor: “Have you abandoned the moral level of literature?” and proceeds, “the fact is, Professor Chase, we think you have become a radical in your old—er, middle age—no offense. Would you explain what it means to be a radical today?” (45). The professor takes the student’s question seriously and prescribes a version of cultural radicalism that would be based on Bourne’s principles of irony and malcontentedness, rather than on revolution or stern moral admonition.

In the most important exchange of the essay, the teacher attempts to loosen his student’s desire for morality in cultural theory. In the view of the character of “Professor Chase,” such morality can be applied equally, and dangerously, to pretty much any political ideal, left or right. So he counters:

—Radicalism today is not directly political or economic.
—Well, I am glad to hear that. Those things don’t interest me.
—They should. But the point is that radicalism is a method, a polemical attitude, an attack. It does not pretend to be timeless truth...A revolutionary politics or economics makes no sense as applied to contemporary America. What does make sense, in improving our economic and political life, is the liberal virtues: moderation, compromise, countervailing forces, the vital center, the mixed economy—plus the usual cynicism...[but] the virtues just referred to are those we do *not* want to invoke in our criticism of the general culture—that large complex of arts and letters, aesthetic attitudes, manners and morals, public poses and gestures, opinions, tastes, shared fantasies, humor, slang, folk tradition—in short, the vital medium in which we live when we are doing something more than merely existing. (48)

Criticism of Chase generally does not emphasize that these two texts (this one, and *The Democratic Vista*) take the forms of dramatic dialogue and of fiction. But it also does not make room for this difficult separation that Chase attempts to make:

and (best of all) more interesting, if you had indicated that your former self was one object of the attack you make...It is very wrong and strange that I should not have known, except in a vague way, in what direction you have been tending the last few years, and you should [not] have expressed your radical disagreement with me by implication, and suddenly, and publicly, instead of directly, and over the time in which it was developing, and personally” (551-2).

between a political radicalism that aims at the immediate revolutionary exchange of one established order for another; and a cultural radicalism whose whole objective would be the inevitable overturning of present conditions in favor of new conditions that remain unknown.

This sort of radicalism is immanentist, and neither moderate nor incrementalist. Separating himself from the groups with which he had previously been associated, Chase's proxy argues: "The liberal critics, the philistine critics, the academic critics—these perennially look for a middle ground of taste and opinion whereon tensions and oppositions can be ignored or, in fantasy, reconciled" (49). By contrast, he insists: "The radical's chief task is to bring both ends against the middle. Even if temperamentally, he would like to be a middlebrow, he finds himself unable to breathe in that musty atmosphere of turgid emotions and irritable, shapeless ideas" (50). And when Silverman asks if such a radical "must use irony, must seem to contradict himself," the teacher responds that "yes, unhappily, he must" (50). All this is a tremendously baroque way to make a point. It is especially so, because *The Democratic Vista* continues this largely identical dialogue for nearly two hundred pages, and because the book's narrator also repeatedly proclaims a love for Trilling and Schlesinger. Still, the main points of these texts remain quite clear. First, political formations are to be changed not by those with the most ornate visions for revolution or compromise, but instead by those with the ability to read culture closely, with the willingness to speak and write in contradictions. And second, such a technique of reading is specifically literary, and so then should critical writing mimic literature (in the form, say, of Chase's contradictory little dramas). The cultural radical "is someone with enough detachment and receptivity to roam over the cultural spectrum at will. His thought is the intellectual equivalent of Faulkner's imagination—or Melville's" (49).

Irving Howe, who had previously been very hard on Chase for his attachment to Liberalism (resembling Kazin in this and other ways), lent *The Democratic Vista* his full support, in spite of the attacks it inspired from all sides. Importantly, he took Chase to task for his unwillingness to tackle political formations directly and for his attack on Trilling. But he very much admired the notion of “cultural radicalism,” which he saw as “less a task than an emotion, a vague ache of the heart,” that could be inspired by “a continued loyalty to *avant-garde* experimentation, a willingness to think of human existence in extreme terms, [and] an adherence to democratic secularism” (63). Such a position infuriated conservatives. In *The National Review* in 1958, for instance, Garry Wills decried what he called Chase’s “intellectual Bogartism.” Impersonating Humphrey Bogart’s public persona as a gruff, jetsetting radical, Chase therefore also imitated Bogart’s onscreen roles: “The trench-coat collar goes up, the hat down; cryptic remarks, delivered from the side of his mouth, fade into knowing silence” (105). This indictment serves as a right-wing denunciation of the whole generation, however, when Wills proceeds to align these liberals-turned-radicals with the Stalinists they had long criticized: “we should study the criminal mind—or the Marxist ideology—and talk their language; see what honor there is among thieves...Until society learns to sympathize with the outcast ones, the tough guy must make it his vocation to protect them” (107). Given that Chase’s cultural radicalism was paired with an acquiescence to liberal politics, it is difficult to follow Wills into this territory. According to what measure, we might ask, might Chase and his cohort be recognized either as Marxists or as thieves? But to a conservative in that postwar moment, any point of departure from norms would in fact be identified with a departure from consensus as such, and therefore with the very Marxism that Americans had learned, ostensibly in common, to reject.

Cultural radicalism thus remains a forceful and pragmatic investment in Melvillean blankness—counter-revolutionary and even conservative in some

important ways, it nonetheless maintains a revolutionary commitment to literary form as what Adams had called “a willful submission of oneself to non-experience as an active form of experience.” This kind of radicalism infuses the texts of the postwar period, even many of those that appear to sustain the liberal consensus. That era’s cultural radicals embraced a double bind: a rejection of false “post-politics,” coupled with a refusal to settle on a single, available utopia. The most influential thesis of Chase’s most influential book—*The American Novel and its Tradition*—held that properly American fictions were *romances*, quite unlike the British *novels*, insofar as they “achieve their very being, their energy and their form from the perception and acceptance not of unities, but of radical disunities” (7). Part of the contemporary critique of Chase’s generation involves the dismissal of this as a proper history of Nineteenth-Century fiction. But whether or not it tells an accurate story about Melville and his contemporaries, Chase certainly seems to describe a certain objective in the cultural work of blankness in the Twentieth Century. He also produces a very definite prescription for social conduct. To explain the perspective on “human solidarity” shared by Melville with Hawthorne and Whitman, Chase explains: “means not a settled social order, but a more or less unstable idyllic relationship, a personal and ideal sharing of the human fate among people temporarily brought together by chance or by a common purpose” (106).

This “unstable idyll,” moreover, was not one that could be represented by narrative means. Rather, it was the very substance, substrate, or medium of any art that might be permitted to waver between light and darkness: “The political structure of society cannot countenance this extreme polarity. But this polarity may, nevertheless, be the very substance of the aesthetic imagination” (115). Here Chase concludes his critique of liberal principles, even as he continues to profess an adherence to liberal values. Rather than claim that any currently imaginable system can be inclusive of political diversity, he claims that there is no such system.

Furthermore, only an aesthetics of contradiction and blankness can begin to signal the unstable social relations and limited imaginations upon which it is based. Chase might never have succeeded in moving beyond liberalism, but he engendered a cultural radicalism that would continue to resist the national “mystique” through the era of post-politics.

Exemplum: Welles’s Blank Verse

It has become accepted that a distinction exists between representation in the sense of “artistic depiction” and representation in the sense of “political delegation.” Arguing that discrete critical apparatuses are required for addressing discrete questions, scholars from Slavoj Žižek to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have parsed the various German words (used by Marx or Freud to designate a host of concepts) for which “representation” is the commonest available word in both English and French.³¹ As a result of this parsing, certain questions—on the one hand,

³¹ The four common German words for representation, those over which much theoretical ink has spilled, are *Vorstellung*, *Darstellung*, *Vertretung*, and *Repräsentanz*. In Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Kant, for example, *Vorstellung* describes an empirical object of aesthetic representation (such as an artwork), while *Darstellung* is defined as the presentation of a noumenal thing-in-itself (*Sublime Object of Ideology* 202). In Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Marx, meanwhile, *Darstellung* describes all aesthetic efforts, and must be seen as distinct from *Vertretung*, which she defines as the popular participation in political process: a “proxy” rather than a “portrait” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 276).

In their reading of Freud, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche see that, while *Vorstellung* is translated by English-language philosophers as “idea,” *Repräsentanz* should be thought more in terms of “delegation” (a consideration which leads Lacan to translate *Repräsentanz* as “*représentant de la représentation*”: very crudely, “delegate of the portrayal”). They also see Freud as having used *Repräsentanz* and *Vertretung* as if they were interchangeable, and as having emphasized *Repräsentanz* rather than another common word (*Repräsentant*) because it was “closer to the Latin, and no doubt more abstract” (*Language of Psychoanalysis* 205).

All these distinctions and indistinctions seem crucial to me, but I also agree with Jean-Louis Baudry who finds a common definition to the collection of terms: “whether it is called *Repräsentanz*, *Vertretung*, *Vorstellung*, *Darstellung*...whatever ‘object’ comes into play and whatever the particular functioning of its representation, it is always the making present of something other that is understood by these

“which elements are included in a given image or work?” and on the other hand, “which individuals or groups are included in a given process of deliberation or collaboration?”—are thus becoming increasingly separate. I don’t object to this distinction, but I do hope to push at it a little (from a textual and political, rather than philological perspective) by finding it to have been tested in some of the “culturally radical” film and fiction of the period.

Orson Welles was one of many figures in this period who aspired to be thought a “cultural radical,” as well as a “Melvillean” and an “intellectual” all at once. In various ways, Welles pursued Melvillean blankness as a material investment in the unseen as an actively structuring aspect of visual experience. Through frame composition and theatrical staging, Welles deployed blankness in order to explore the kinds of authority that structure class, gender, and race as well as authorship and artistry. To say that Welles’s work played in lights and darks is to say very little—this is a claim that is almost always made not only of Welles’s films, but of postwar crime films in general (and I do take Welles to be primarily a maker of crime films, even when their criminal-protagonists are named Macbeth or Falstaff) as well as of postwar low-budget independent films in general.³² It is perhaps more telling to say, as Dudley Andrew has, that with 1941’s *Citizen Kane*, Welles “evokes our astonishment only to leave us with a feeling of emptiness and fraud” (154). This, for

terms” (“Freud and Literary Creation” 89). While such a definition may be too general to be of precise use, it is nonetheless a powerful claim to make, given that both English and French have so often condensed these concepts into the single term, “representation.”

³² Indeed, so the standard literature claims, there are few traits that characterize *films noirs* so much as the play of light and dark through the use of night-for-night shooting and very low key lighting. On this, see the essays by Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, Raymond Durgnat, Paul Schrader and others that are compiled in the still-standard collection *The Film Noir Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini. Among more recent works, see *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship* by Jonathan Auerbach. As these texts illustrate, Welles’s films are as central to the secondary work on *noir* as is the problematic of chiaroscuro lighting.

Andrew, is the accomplishment of a first film that “collapses under its own success, leaving us to meditate on the unrepresentable, on the mystery of life” (153).

Andrew sees Welles as meditating on “the vapidity of paradox from Zeno to Nietzsche,” and “only too proud to extend this tradition, adding to it the specifically illusory dimension of moving pictures” (154). However, to consider Welles as a philosopher of paradox may be less pressing in this context than to see him as a symptom of cultural contradiction (in the way that one might see the Melville critics as doing work that is both philosophical and symptomatic). Welles’s paradox, as Andrew sees it, is a form of double address, as if the spectator were invited to enter a home that appears lavish, but is in fact dangerously falling apart—in Van Wyck Brooks’s words, “unfinished and already half in ruin.” However, no less interesting than the doubleness of the films are the gaps with which they are riddled. Some of those gaps are accidental: scenes or whole films that go missing as the result of slim budgets that restricted materials or shooting time. The most famous gaps are certainly institutional in origin, at those mystifying instants of the films (especially in *Touch of Evil*, *Magnificent Ambersons*, and *Mr. Arkadin*) where something seems have gone missing in fact because it *has* gone missing—where Welles had included famous or infamous footage, but studio bosses had demanded it removed.³³ Yet perhaps most pertinent gaps are those that were produced through elaborate lighting and staging—the striking black silhouettes of human figures—that mark the screen at least once in most of Welles’s pictures. This last kind of gap is a Melvillean

³³ This narrative, while familiar, should be treated with suspicion. The story of Welles as embattled victim is not entirely untrue, but does produce a desire among fans to see the “master’s” true achievement, in its whole form. For in the same years during which Welles’s career supposedly dwindled because of studio disinterest or intrusion, the studios themselves were disintegrating, closing, or reconfiguring. In other words, the studios floundered right along with Welles, during those years before a range of forces (newly independent theaters and distributors, smaller studios, film schools, the rising market for so-named “*auteurs*”) began to make life easier for smaller production companies and relatively independent filmmakers,

blankness, a material investment in the unseen as a structuring aspect of visual experience.

To begin with, nearly all of Welles's films contain scenes in which a single figure appears in silhouette. This often occurs in front of a projecting screen, and occasionally it occurs as the result of careful lighting. And such silhouettes can be found even in Welles's first film. There, in *Citizen Kane*, figures are often cast entirely in shadow. This can occur when a light shines into a room from outside a high window, as it does when the newspaper editor Rawlston orders the reporter Thompson to research the meaning of the word "Rosebud," and as it does again when Thompson begins that research at a long table in the dim vault of the Thatcher Library. It can occur as a shadow, as it does when Charles Kane entertains Susan Alexander with his shadow puppetry or when Jedediah Leland begins his recollections of Kane, and his image enters into a slow dissolve with an image of wet cobblestones. And it can occur as a result of extremely low key lighting, as it does when Thompson visits Alexander—by now the widowed Susan Alexander Kane—in her Atlantic City nightclub. These images are non-referential. They point neither to the believable body of a character, nor really to any particular metaphorical meaning. They are unsystematic. In fact, if they signal anything in the film's formal register (aside from mood), it is the inevitable effacement of everything, and everybody, that can be represented. They point, in other words, toward the film's penultimate image, in which the painting on Kane's sled—the very name of "Rosebud"—burns into blackness and finally into blankness.

For Andrew, this is one way among many by which the film "points to the hollowness of the cinema, that medium made up of image and tale, of metaphor and metonymy intermixed" (153). Indeed, this is a very important part of the work that all of Welles's silhouettes perform. They produce a gesture that references the void, and that would be nearly impossible in any other medium. The tricks of lighting would be

possible in either photography or theater, but a film is capable of combining elements of both: bringing the flatness of the first in contact with the narrativity of the second. If what a film does best is *show*, then there would seem to be something uncinematic in *not showing*, by imposing a blank space on screen. Yet if film is the only medium that can produce such a trick of light, dimension, and texture, then such blankness would seem to be purely cinematic. This paradox is (by reference to the use of silhouette) the same one that Andrew sees: a hollowness or emptiness, a kind of absence or nothingness that is nonetheless formal and material.

Film historians and theorists generally start Welles's story in an analysis of *Citizen Kane*, but this is because they restrict their discussions to objects that are strictly cinematic. This limits the extent to which one might understand a film's cultural implications. It thus makes sense to begin the story far earlier, showing Welles's use of blankness to start with his participation in what Michael Denning has called the "cultural front," a populist movement among artists and activists that took root in the 1930s. Welles had long been active in anti-fascist struggles. He had produced myriad radio broadcasts that attended to the risks of nuclear proliferation and especially of racism. He founded the radically innovative Mercury Theater with John Houseman and produced a famous stage production of *Native Son*, starring Canada Lee, as well as one of *Macbeth*, which starred an all-black cast. While not a Communist, Welles "along with...F.O. Matthiessen, led a committee to protest the deportation of the radical ILWU leader Harry Bridges" (Denning 373). And also with Matthiessen, he wrote and gave speeches on behalf of Henry Wallace.

As a politically engaged intellectual, Welles became known mostly through a wartime radio show and a column in *The New York Post*, both entitled the *Orson Welles Almanac*. As he boasted to Peter Bogdanovich in Paris, some time in the 1960s: "I'm a complete maverick in the intellectual establishment. And they only like me more now because there's even less communication between me and them...I am

an intellectual but I don't belong to that particular establishment...They want one clear character. And they don't want you to be two things" (244). He became an intimate of Franklin Roosevelt, as well as Wallace. And in 1946, he almost campaigned to represent Wisconsin in the U.S. Senate, and for years afterward overperformed his regret at not having done so, telling Bogdanovich, for instance: "I quit everything to go into...politics and world government. I was quite ready to stop...My opponent would have been Joe McCarthy—so I've got him on my conscience—but that's another story" (185). In fact, much of Welles's public life was spent announcing his relation to keystone events in U.S. history, only to make light of these involvements in performances of sham modesty. That said, his political positions really do manifest themselves in tangible ways throughout the films that followed.

In an anti-racist 1943 speech that was reprinted in *The Chicago Defender*, Welles claimed that: "to be born free is to be born in debt; to live in freedom without fighting slavery is to profiteer" (6). Welles's cultural radicalism was thus oriented toward liberation—usually the liberation from formal constraints—as an ongoing process: "When all the fascist armies have formally surrendered, the end of fascism will still be out of sight. This world fight is no melodrama. An armistice is no happy ending. The people know well that Peace is harder than war" (6). This struggle for freedom, against racism, fascism, and imperialism, had been manifest in his 1939 screenplay for *Heart of Darkness*. There, Marlow's first encounter with Kurtz in the dark jungle becomes a play of black and white silhouettes on a blank screen:

The door, in far corner of the room, opens now, throwing a dim angled pattern of light across the corrugated iron wall at the back, seen through the silhouette of Kurtz. This washes out the last impressions of the jungle and the campfires, but the silhouette of Kurtz's head remains, although it appears more faintly in the composition. Elsa comes out of the door and stops there...the light of the lamp showing her face and rendering the silhouette of Kurtz very pale so that as she moves in, it almost vanishes from the screen and only its outlines can be made out, framing her face. The appearance of the light, however, and its intensification is synonymous with the appearance in their proper proportions of the shadow of

Kurtz's eyes, which gleam luminously into the lens. (Cited in Heylin 26)

There is a clear emphasis here on “angled patterns” and “outlines,” “paleness,” “faintness,” and “luminosity.” Even without the benefit of a camera (since he lost funding for the film for the first but not last time in his career), Welles here attempts to imagine an encounter with otherness that is coded in terms of race and morality, but also that renders those codes “faint” to the point of indistinction. And he does this not through any clichéd “play of light and dark” but through a meticulously choreographed dance of silhouette.

As a Melvillean, Welles had long struggled to produce theatrical and film adaptations of the novel, but was hampered in his cinematic ambitions since he did not own the rights. As he explained to gossip columnist Hedda Hopper as early as 1947, “John Huston has got the property tied up at Warners.” Huston did not finally make the film until 1956, and when he did it was a production notable in the history of adaptations for the formal efforts that it made to seem “literary.” As George Bluestone wrote in his landmark 1957 book *Novels into Film*: “the film, as a separate artistic entity [that is, separate from the book], continues its war against thematic and technical limits...Huston and his technicians have developed a new silvering process which tones down and softens technicolor images to make them resemble nineteenth-century steel engravings” (217). Through these and other efforts, the film was particularly well received. And Welles, in his bellowing performance of Mapple’s sermon, attracted much of the positive press. In his reception, then, Welles would be bound indissolubly with the tale of *Moby-Dick*.

At the register of production, Welles was occupied with the project, in varying degrees of intensity, for most of his adult life, beginning as early as that 1947 interview with Hopper, whom he told: “I’m going to do *Moby-Dick* on the London stage for a limited period. This will be done without scenery. Music will take the place of it. You know out of all the characters in literature, I’d rather do the role of

Capt. Ahab on the screen" (C2). The London stage production was finally produced in 1955, under the title, *Moby Dick—Rehearsed*. In a kind of meta-adaptation, Welles's stage held a squad of actors who were rehearsing an experimental adaptation of Melville's novel. As the play proceeds, the cast members disappear further and further into their roles. Welles himself plays the "Actor Manager" before becoming Ahab himself, as the bare stage rushes into abstract high drama. The stage remains largely bare, dark, and blank. And the dialogue is conducted, not accidentally, in *blank* verse. In fact, the whole production aims to show, by way of blankness, both the fatedness of Ahab's ambitious hunt and the futility of the company's ambitious attempt to stage it. Through a manipulation of blankness, in other words, the play means to diagram the very limits of theatrical representation.

Moby Dick—Rehearsed opened to mixed reviews. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote: "With no props except a few packing cases and a tangle of fly ropes...Ahab's fatal battle [was] fought out standing on a table set down from the stage among the seats. The whale didn't show" ("Welles Does 'Moby Dick'" B9). *The New York Times* largely agreed, announcing that: "passage after passage that on the printed page has the stamp of genius becomes mere windy and incomprehensible rhetoric when it is spoken; and just where the book rises to its climax of power, the stage version tumbles into bathos" (Darlington XI). The harshest criticism, however, may have come from Mary McCarthy, who wrote that Welles's production was "a fair example of 'American style' productions...where there is only a tormented Caravaggist scene, of dangling ropes and shadows and sweat and staring eyes: toiling amateurism brought to a pitch of frenzy" (164). For Welles however, in his long-held efforts to visualize Melvillean aesthetics, frenzy was the whole point. Put another way, the reason for there being "only a tormented Caravaggist scene" is that Welles tried to pare everything else away, until nothing remained but the barest signifiers of torment and chiaroscuro.

As with *Heart of Darkness*, and as with Welles's frenzied declarations in *The Chicago Defender*, the central motivation for Welles is an analysis of race. In the middle of the play, the black cabin-boy Pip has fallen overboard and been returned to the deck of the *Pequod*. But he has been driven mad by his near drowning, and cannot imagine why the white foam of the ocean has not bleached the black skin of his hand. In lines that recall Lady Macbeth ("My hands are of your color; but I shame / To wear a heart so white."), Pip looks at his hand and speaks:

PIP: I found it, and how black it is—
how black for all its washing...
AHAB: Blackness...whiteness...as though a man
who's white is anything more dignified
than a white-washed negro.
PIP: My bones, my bones are white, sir. (51)

To Pip's terror, Ahab responds with the story of the white whale—Welles's paraphrase of the "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter—so as to reassure him that there is nothing desirable in whiteness.

He asks: "Dost thou know aught, lad, of the whiteness of the whale?" And when Pip replies that he knows the whale's name, Ahab insists that it is the whale's white color, and not its name, by which it is defined:

AHAB: Whiteness, lad, enhances many things.
[...]Yet something lurks
in whiteness strikes panic to the soul!
PIP: The waves was foaming white
when I was drowning, master;
I was terrible afraid...
AHAB: Whiteness, terror...
Even the King of Terror
rides his pallid horses.

Ahab continues through a litany of white objects and symbols from life and literature, until at last Pip cries: "Death to whiteness!" (52)

Here is a shift in the social conception of blankness. Whereas for some of the literary critics, for whom anti-racist critique was a sideline or fancy, for Welles as for Ellison, there is no doubt that blackness and whiteness do not amount to the same thing. Welles also here takes his distance from the metaphorical lighting tricks of

the *Heart of Darkness* screenplay, in which “paleness” and “faintness” were philosophical categories only. Here, there is urgency in Ahab’s dual insistence that whiteness destroys the body and evokes terror. Blackness, in the discourse of Welles’s Ahab, becomes mere blankness: blankness *qua* blankness without the ideological weight of whiteness. Welles lacks the rigorous conception of blackness and dermal exteriority (as well as the senses of humor and play) that define Ellison’s novel. But he does provide an interpretive frame by which to read the black silhouettes that are not so clearly racialized, but that fill nearly all of the films he made while considering *Moby-Dick*, which is really the same as saying his whole career, after *Kane*.

Blankness becomes (by way of this quasi-racialized concept of blackness) not just an aspect of Welles’s practice, but also a tool by which to interpret Welles. The silhouettes are neither “terrible” nor the opposite of that. Instead, they offer an absent position from which Welles can voice resistance Pip’s terrible cry: “Death to whiteness!” Most famously, the silhouette appears in the “aquarium scene” of 1947’s *The Lady from Shanghai*—where Rita Hayworth’s character Elsa stands in front of a projection screen while her face cutting a face-shaped gap into an image of a massive conger eel. And yet these silhouettes, and the principle of blankness, figure far more strategically in the films that follow: *Macbeth*, *Chimes at Midnight*, *Mr. Arkadin* and *F for Fake*, each of which thematizes the problem of authenticity and identity; as well as *Othello* and *Touch of Evil*, which add to this the difficulty of racial identification, in particular. As he told Juan Cobos in 1966, while filming the never-finished *Don Quixote*, there is a tremendous challenge in capturing in frame and narrative: “a great figure of myth like Quixote, even like Falstaff, a silhouette against the sky of all time. These are people who have more life in them than any human being ever had” (156).

Welles thus pursues blankness in a way that seems very much of a piece “cultural radicalism.” He strives for that same kind of aesthetic unity that would be

prized by some of the Melvillean dialecticians (Lewis, Trilling) and very deliberately avoided by others (Chase, Ellison). This preference for aesthetic perfection is what ultimately leads Welles to see himself among those mythic “silhouettes against the sky of all time.” As he told Cobos:

What I am trying to discover now in films is not technical surprises or shocks, but a more complete unity of forms, of shapes. The true form, the interior...a shape which is immediately recognizable, so that you see the whole thing as a shape, just as the image does. And the interior conception of the author, above all, must have a single shape. (157-8)

Welles’s struggle is, in this way, to embody the “single shape” of his authorial signature, even though it may “have more life in [it] than any human.” Welles’s bulky, often hammy, performances in his films might thus be chalked up as effortful reminders to his spectator that, at all times, the film’s author is on the scene. It puts one in mind of the novelization of *Mr. Arkadin* (which bore Welles’s signature but which is known to have been ghostwritten by Maurice Bessy). There, the title character, portrayed by Welles in his film, is first described as follows: “He was completely motionless. A black and faceless mass” (58).

Yet there is more in the blank silhouettes than just the self-aggrandizement of a narcissistic author. The author is not merely the figure of the master-artist, for Welles, but also that of the authoritarian. And the authoritarian, as he sees it, rules not by “terror” (as does the principle of “whiteness” in *Moby Dick—Rehearsed*) but instead by inventiveness, charisma, and a semantically slippery claim on truth. This vision of sovereignty manifests throughout Welles’s work, wherever one of the great mythic figures dominates: the Shakespearean hero/villain/rulers as well as Arkadin, Kane, Quinlan.³⁴ Most instructive may be the silhouettes in two of Welles’s least

³⁴ A longer discussion of this principle in Welles would need to account for the provocative statements made in France, by Georges Bataille, during this time. There, he wrote of sovereignty as a principle of class difference, of aristocratic privilege *qua* social inutility and the right to enjoyment. He wrote repeatedly, and in a way that

loved films: 1946's *The Stranger* and 1962's *The Trial*. In the latter of these, an adaptation of Kafka's novel, a long sequence brings K. (played by Anthony Perkins) together with his lawyer, The Advocate (played by Welles). In a long relay of shots, The Advocate projects still images from a slide projector—drawings of a medieval prison—while he and K. exchange Kafka's famous "Before the Law" dialogue. The editing moves us between shots of K. and The Advocate silhouetted in front of the projection screen and shots of one or the other man, half-lit, in-frame with the projector.

A similar strategy appears a decade and a half earlier, in *The Stranger*, in which Welles plays the Professor Charles Rankin: the brilliant and charismatic architect of the Jewish extermination by Nazi Germany, now hidden in a small New England college town. About halfway through the film, as he senses the imminent approach of a Nazi hunter named Wilson (played by Edward G. Robinson) he can be seen in silhouette leaving a church, nervously clutching the arm of his character's young wife Mary (Loretta Young). Wilson soon summons Mary and her father to his office and, in order to convince them of Rankin's guilt, he shows them a film that depicts the closing of a concentration camp. This marks the first time that such documentary footage would be included in a film, and its intention is obviously to shock and convince the viewer, just as it shocks and convinces Mary. As the film plays, Wilson repeatedly crosses between the projector and the screen while lecturing Mary and her father about Nazi atrocity. Mary leaps in fear, at one point when Wilson shifts the position of the projector—as if the projector, rather than Rankin, were responsible for the images.

Both of these films shows a crucial ambivalence between a silhouetted villain, played by Welles the actor, and a light-generating projector, serving as proxy for

places some pressure on the political interpretation of blankness, that: "Sovereignty is NOTHING" (256).

Welles the director. In the earlier film, Rankin had been responsible for millions of deaths, but those all occurred far from the small town where Mary and her father cloister themselves. The projector casts the more immediate threat and causes Mary to leap in fear because the projector is responsible not just for the horrific images that Mary sees (and shares with the film's 1946 audience) but also for the silhouettes cast by Wilson's body upon those images. The immediate source of terror is therefore the projector, while an entirely other kind of threat—the possibility that evil is not remote from Mary but in fact intimate to her—must appear in the black, silhouetted form of Welles's body. Likewise, in *The Trial*, the projector illuminates the scene but also produces its darkest spaces, in the shape of Welles's and Perkins's bodies. It promises to provide what The Advocate calls “visual aids,” but in fact only terrifies with a series of virtually meaningless, Piranesian diagrams. Meanwhile, what The Advocate symbolizes is similarly opaque. He serves as an agent of the law, but K. has just fired him. One would think that he has therefore been stripped him of any immediate authority, but yet he pursues K. and imposes upon him a problematic of blankness that, rather than evoke terror, merely drives K. from the room in frustration and confusion.³⁵

Adorno was suspicious of Welles's avant-gardism, observing that whatever he did had a place in the cinema's industrial mode of production: “Orson Welles is forgiven all his offences against the usages of the craft because, as calculated rudeness, they confirm the validity of the system all the more zealously” (102). Other critics, most notably Howe in *The Nation*, have been skeptical of Ellison's evident aestheticism, as well as his emphasis on the continued force of the individual in society:

Nor am I persuaded by the hero's...refusal to be the invisible man whose body is manipulated by various social groups.

³⁵ The same could be said of some of his later fragments, which seemed far too narcissistic (but were “blankly” so) for any audience to take interest in them.

Though the unqualified assertion of individuality is at the moment a favorite notion of literary people, it is also a vapid one, for the unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble over social fences that do not allow one 'infinite possibilities.' (454)

What becomes possible through the lens of a Melvillean cultural politics however, is a re-reading of both Ellison's and Welles's texts that sees these moments—what really amounts to individualism in both bodies of work—as those in which the gap, or blank, is filled.

In moments that are less narrativized and more formal, however, there really are “possibilities” that open up: in the collision of black and white in Welles, for example, where the drama and terror of sovereignty are mapped onto a historically specific crisis in race relations. As Motherwell had said: “If the *amounts* of black or white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling” (61). Such an attempt to “condense” blackness and whiteness in their proper amounts is not the same as Welles's “complete unity of forms.” It is rather the principle of blankness in process, the articulation of a form of sovereignty, defined (as in the description of Welles's title character in the novelization of *Mr. Arkadin*, ostensibly penned by Welles) as: “completely motionless. A black and faceless mass” (58). This is Welles's take on cultural radicalism: the imagining of forms of power or of art that might disrupt visual or political space, like silhouettes, without making any claim to inclusion within it. What Welles's silhouettes insist, I would argue, is that something is always left out of the picture—what critics of Liberalism such as Samuel Weber and Ellen Rooney, following Garry Wills, have named its “exclusion of exclusion.” And it attempts to make a fertile, political medium out of something that might render blankness into something noncinematic, stagy, or unbeautiful, but that might at the same time salvage it from an attachment to blandly destructive ideals; something that, at registers both aesthetic and political, can communicate of nothing, or else so thickly layered as to overdetermine all possible meaning; or to cite

Melville again: “a dumb blankness, full of meaning...operating without medium upon matter...[to] touch all objects...with its own blank tinge.”

Exemplum: Human Skin of Narrative (*Invisible Man*)

Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* shows the post-political “mood” to be an emotional illusion of consensus, at the border of which lies a far more abject and negative range of feelings. No less a Melvillean than R.W.B. Lewis wrote of Ralph Ellison’s novel, upon its first publication, that it had been “fattened on Melville” (“Eccentrics’ Pilgrimage” 147). What Lewis presumably meant by his comment was that Ellison’s book that was tremendously large, both in length and in its aspiration to grand allegory. But in claiming that “Melville is Mr. Ellison’s major ally,” Lewis also argued that:

Like *Moby-Dick*, *Invisible Man* contains sermons and songs and meditations and prayers, dreams and jokes and reminiscent anecdotes; it has fights and funerals and political meetings; it enters colleges, offices, bars, brothels, factories, private homes and star-chambers. The artistic ambition, like Melville’s, is to suggest by a circus-vision of the world that reality is to be sought for everywhere and only everywhere, by multiplication rather than by reduction. (It is such a notion, I take it, that led Mr. Ellison back to the widely-ranging novel of the nineteenth century, for comfort and guidance, as against the sparse reductiveness of the Hemingway school.) (148)

These are surely the novels’ most evident similarities. Ellison extends the contradictory aesthetics of Melville into a paradoxical politics of race, by instituting a radical play with the novel’s framing narrative, and then extending this formal play into a distortion of the racialized form of its protagonist’s body.

But Ellison’s relation to *Moby-Dick* is direct, as well as indirect. In the novel’s “Prologue,” the novel’s narrator hears music and “not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths” (9). There, at the hellish center of the music, he says: “I heard someone shout: ‘Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness.’” And a congregation of voices answered: ‘That blackness is

most black, brother, most black...” Here is not only a “circus-vision” as Lewis would have it, but beyond that, a deeply Melvillean vision of blankness that is concordant with Chase’s vision for cultural radicalism.

This moment in the novel points vividly to the scene in Chapter 2 of *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael accidentally stumbles into the black church where the minister preaches “about the Blackness of Darkness.” In *Moby-Dick*, of course, that sermon cannot be represented. It might be argued that the sermon occurs in a setting and in an idiom that a character like Ishmael would have no capacity to translate. But whether or not that is the case, the novel moves on and beyond the church, after having introduced this phrase—“the Blackness of Darkness”—so that when the phrase reappears later, it will retain both its racial and its infernal meanings. What is striking about the passage’s appearance in *Invisible Man* is that, in Ellison’s version, the sermon is in fact represented. The narrator stands and listens to it, as the preacher and his congregation speak in a paratactic exchange of fragmentary phrases: “...It’ll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE’S BELLY.” “Preach it, dear brother...” “...an’ make you tempt...” “Good God a-mighty!” “Old Aunt Nelly!” “Black will make you...” “Black...” “...or black will un-make you” (10). Thus, Ellison offers the sermon as it had not been offered in Melville’s novel. It is the missing equivalent of Father Mapple’s sermon to the white sailors. But here, when modern literary conditions permit the production and distribution of that missing speech, Ellison has reduced it to a series of short phrases that are full of emotional meaning and rhetorical effect—even of spiritual cohesion—but empty of any attempt at directly referential language. It is an irony that falls perfectly in line with the contradictions comprising a “culturally radical” perspective (and also recalls the partial speech of the character Lothario in Paul Goodman’s story “Our Meeting, 1948”).

Ellison’s cultural radicalism is, in turn, what motivates his extremely complex take on the spatialization of racial difference. Conversely, Ellison’s re-

conceptualization of “blackness” is also what constitutes his own contribution to cultural radicalism, insofar as *Moby Dick*’s implications for a reconsideration of race had escaped nearly all of the critical approaches to Melville during that time. For Ellison’s novel, blackness exceeds all possibility of containment. Even the book, and the nation that it represents, seems to rupture in the process of the title character’s self-identification. The narrative bursts at its seams as the prose overflows with florid metaphor. The framing narrative entirely fails to frame, since it is itself broken into pieces, in part by its blank references to other literary texts, such as *Moby-Dick*, and in part because it appears partial, even unconvincing. Furthermore, blackness also seems to break the bounds of the human body, the confines of the urban landscape, and the even political opposition that would seem to have separated Communism from anti-Communism. Most important, blackness becomes invisible, and thereby eludes even visual apprehension. In its consistent mapping of a blackness that exceeds all identity or political containment, but that also eludes the field of visibility, *Invisible Man* offers a complex topography and so poses an aesthetic strategy in opposition to available politics. It does not simply allow its ambivalences to go unresolved, as they might in novels of sentimentalism or rebellion. And neither does it simply suggest ways in which racial difference can be simultaneously liberatory and repressive.

In *Invisible Man*, racial identity is an institutional form of culture and power, and blackness undercuts identity while sabotaging the institution. In the novel’s “Prologue,” the black narrator shows himself to be exactly this: a saboteur and thief who squats in a liminal “border area” of New York City and siphons electricity from Monopolated Light & Power (5). He confesses to having found himself once in a bloody street fight with a “tall blond man” (4). Not coincidentally, this remembered scene is also the moment when the narrator realized his invisibility. In the story, he comes to his senses just as he is about to kill the stranger with a knife:

It occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. (4)

At this moment, the narrator learns the conditions of his own visibility not through a mirror that might reflect him with some kind of truth, but instead through another person's failure to respond. He is the effect of a white man's nightmare. He is the projection, into real space, of another's fear. Yet he is capable of seeing ("I stared at him hard") without being seen.

As the passage proceeds, it is increasingly interested in mapping out the space of this encounter. The narrator appears from outside of the stranger's body, as if he was a psychic (or psychotic) projection. But his incursion back into the stranger's space is not merely psychic. He emerges from the white man's skull only to return upon it violently, thus shattering the wholeness of both bodies: "I was amused: Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery...I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself" (5). This final comment illustrates the reciprocal quality of racial violence in Ellison. Not only does the narrator nearly destroy the other's body but, in the satisfaction he takes from the act, he also comes close to destroying himself.

For *Invisible Man*, meanwhile, there is no discrete assignment of self or other—only of black and white. The black body and the white body are mutually implicated in the violent encounter. The black body is capable of emerging from the white body, while that emergence is itself a cause for the black body to "rupture." Thus, the possibility of internalizing something external remains a key to understanding Ellison's novel. In a tale that reappears throughout the novel, the narrator's grandfather calls his son (the narrator's father) to his side and confesses to having spent his life as "a spy in the enemy's country" (16). This phrase appears

crucial because it unites the language of international espionage—the incursion in the U.S. by Soviet agents, in particular—with the language of black resistance. It thus conflates the external threat of uncontained Communism with the internal threat of racial division. (It also inflects the narrator’s later flirtation with Communism, along with his rejection of it, in the scenes with the leftist Brotherhood.)

This conflation, in turn, might put the weight of International Relations on the rest of the grandfather’s injunction: “Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (16). The grandfather thus enjoins his son to occupy the most sympathetic of black stereotypes and to live like a covert agent “in the enemy’s country.” And this, according to the narrator, is what “caused the trouble” (16). Inside and outside remain distinct here although, strictly speaking, they become impossible positions to occupy. The father is not only asked to “agree ‘em to death” but also to “undermine” and “overcome” from *inside* the “lion’s mouth.” This contradictory gesture—of residing inside while attacking as if from without—can be seen to repeat the dynamic of the earlier streetfight, in which the narrator “springs out” from inside the stranger’s “thick head.” But it is the final line that, again, disturbs the coherency of both bodies. When the white body takes in the black body, it can only “vomit or bust wide open.”

In *Invisible Man*, liberation does not seem to be an option (stealing from the power company hardly seems to emancipate the narrator) and neither does some preexisting bondage by the nation. Rather, the narrator’s father is told to adopt a fictional stance. He is urged to take up the stereotypical “yeses” and “grins,” until both the swallower and the swallowed have ceased to exist. The book never rejects this pattern of internalization, rejection, and disintegration, as the narrator does damage to (and is damaged by) institution after institution: a university, the Brotherhood, and a nationalist group led by Ras the Exhorter. In a final diagnosis of

this pathological cycle, the narrator writes: “You carry part of your sickness with you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me” (575). At last, although writing is the only practice that can help the narrator manage his ailment, it does not appear to have any fully curative powers. Writing is instead the process through which the sickness is put in order and turned into an object of knowledge. If the sickness is the narrator’s invisibility and “at least half of it lay within” himself, then the other half must then indeed belong “in the outside world”—on the side of those who fail to see him. This other half of the sickness seems to be what makes the other permeable, as well as what makes him vomit.

The narrator’s insistence on writing should be seen as incomplete. The “attempt to write [the sickness] down” may mean some critical realizations, but it does not resolve the lived tensions of the racial spy. At the book’s conclusion, just as the narrative should be summing up in its pithiest and most allegorical terms, it instead tends toward incoherence and excess: “Before I’ve finished I’ve failed (maybe my anger is too heavy; perhaps, being a talker, I’ve used too many words). But I’ve failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me” (579). If the “act of trying to put it all down” will inevitably lead to the use of “too many words,” then any attempt at the total schematization of race relations will reduce their complexity to something that is too tidy and too peaceful.

In Ellison’s novel, liberation is shown to be impossible—the university, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter all fail to deliver on their emancipatory promises. The book is full of resistance, but this comes off either as futile (the theft of electrical power) or as pathetic (the “yeses” and “grins”). To explain this kind of resistance, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown the phrase “blackness of blackness” to be significant of a kind of verbal play and recourse to black idiom. He writes that in

his reference to *Moby-Dick*, “Ellison parodies here the notion of essence, of the supposedly natural relation between the symbol and the symbolized. The vast and terrible Text of Blackness, we realize, has no essence; rather it is signified into being by a signifier. In literature, blackness is *produced* in the text only through a complex process of signification. There can be no transcendental blackness” (721). Gates’s perspective is fully in line with the one I have presented here, but it has met with resistance from critics who see his reading as ahistorical. For these critics, Gates’s theory of identity depends less on Ellison’s fiction or centuries-old vernacular, than on Derridean notions of semantic “play.” Whether or not this is the case, one does not need Derrida to find “play” in Ellison’s reference to Melville. As Ellison wrote to Albert Murray a few years after the publication of *Invisible Man*:

Been rereading *Moby-Dick* again and appreciating for the first time what a truly good time Melville was having when he wrote it. Some of it is quite funny and all of it is pervaded by the spirit of play, like real jazz sounds when a master is manipulating it. The thing’s full of riffs, man; no wonder the book wasn’t understood in its own time, not enough moses were able to read it! (170).

“Play” is thus not simply a word that Gates imports from Derrida to talk about Ellison, as if the latter would only be subject to philosophical examination by way of Gates’s focus on vernacular. Rather, it is Ellison’s own claim about Melville, one of his book’s major reference points.

In playing with Melville, Ellison is not so much appropriating as emulating him. In other words, Ellison aims to show how much about racial difference *Moby-Dick* always really was, even though not “enough moses were able to read it.” So just as Ellison produces this blank version of *Moby-Dick*’s missing sermon, and just as it combines a black idiom with a Melvillean idiom, he also remarks on the conceptual fun and the political project that were at work in the original text. As Chase wrote in his own review of *Invisible Man*, the book “shows far more knowledge of mystery, suffering, transcendent reality, and the ultimate contradictions of life than most of

the modern novels which...declare themselves for a vitalist philosophy shading off at the edges into a theology” (679). Promoting contradiction and opposing vitalism in line with the loose project of cultural radicalism, Ellison’s version of blankness—of blackness—is a playful and tortuous drama of form.

Moreover, Ellison’s drama of form is also a drama of the nation-form. In the inversion of the body of its protagonist, as well as in the telling (as if it were a secret) of the sermon about the “blackness of blackness,” Ellison situates the void at the center of national identity. And before surrendering this central position, disregarding it as a secondary effect of the problematic of inside-outside, he gives the void a name: the blackness of African-American experience. It is this emphasis on indistinction between racial and national interiors and exteriors that houses a powerful rebuttal to the spatial metaphors of nation that have recently gained traction in the study of U.S. literature and culture. Among those Americanist approaches to have taken up such metaphors are the participants in the debate over so-called “containment culture.” This debate has mapped how cultural objects have manifested the political opposition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. And in its search for a single topological frame for reading Cold War texts, this approach sees public policies of containment (of the Communist threat, in particular) to be recapitulated in U.S. literature and film, where social alterity—attached to the bodies of women, young people, homosexuals, and people of color—is similarly contained.³⁶

³⁶ The current form of this discussion was initiated in 2002, by a section in *The Minnesota Review* dedicated to the topic of “Fifties Culture.” Edited by Andrew Hoberek, this section was meant as a corrective or reconciliation of two seemingly opposed perspectives on the first decades of the Cold War: that of “containment culture” and that of “the other fifties.” The first of these perspectives theorizes the link between the anti-Communist governmental policies of containment and the domestic practices of sexual and racial restriction. Developed in work as diverse as Elaine Tyler May’s 1988 *Homeward Bound* and Alan Nadel’s 1995 *Containment Culture*, theories of containment attempt to name the complex dynamic whereby the American nation defines itself, and its people, by incorporating or appropriating the excesses of the others that constitute it: women, people of color, homosexuals, and the threat of nuclear war. Meanwhile, the second perspective—named after a 1997

The most interesting variations of the approach try to see the Third World as the missing term in the U.S./Soviet binary, and thus as disruptive both of the inside/outside metaphor that binary encourages. But this trap remains too seductive to avoid entirely, as does the temptation to see an easy continuity between political policies and cultural tropes. This seduction can be seen in the work of Christina Klein, for example, who sees Eisenhower as having shoehorned the Third World into Truman's doctrine of containment, in the same way that 1950s culture makes room for racial integration in the public sphere. Meanwhile, Leerom Medovoi suggests that a deep division manifests both in the cultural attitude toward the Third World, and the political ambivalence that ultimately leads to the Kennedy presidency (in its espousal of social progressivism, but also of military and economic expansion). For Medovoi, this division leads not to containment narratives, but to a displacement whereby the culture replaces political contradiction and unassimilable cultural difference with popular images of the iconic, white, male rebel: an other (like Holden Caulfield or Jim Stark) whom the nation might safely manage, and, to follow Medovoi, that it might melancholically "introject."

Both Klein and Medovoi regard their approaches as "transnational" insofar as they mean to unseat the disciplinary dominance of "America." But, like the theories of containment to which they respond, both critics also cling to variations of the

collection called *The Other Fifties*—offers an explicit departure from the first. Rather than see only how containment worked, this latter perspective exposed a tradition of subversive practices and identities running behind or beneath the veneer of Fifties conservatism. It further aimed to show how those practices and identities transformed themselves into Sixties radicalism, once the conservative veneer had given way. Put simply, both schools of thought saw the Fifties as a container for sociopolitical difference. But while the first showed ways in which cultural containment succeeded, the second showed ways in which it failed. The wager of Hoberek's special section in *The Minnesota Review* was to show that those two models had in fact shared a vision of the era—as repressive, intolerant, and authoritarian—while stalling the study of Cold War America in the terms of that single decade. In its negativism, the present dissertation takes a perspective that is different still in ways that I hope to suggest. But still, I remain influenced and inspired by the generative move of Hoberek's editorial project.

inside/outside metaphor (integration and introjection) just as they assume that literature and film echo, in an immediate sense, the dictates of politicians. The problem with these supposedly transnational approaches is that they really do not depart from the nation as the guiding concept, and so do not take the denaturalization of that category very far at all. A useful corrective to this approach comes from William V. Spanos, a critic who sees even the most experimental Americanists to have spent too little time on the functionality of the textual apparatuses that all nations are. From this point of view—one that asks “What is America?” rather than taking America as a given—one must dispense entirely with the inside-outside map of cultural and political containment. Rather than hypothesize an encounter between the U.S. and its external others, then, Spanos proceeds from the assumption that American modes of thinking have spread globally and therefore have no outside. In a way that resonates with my own approach, “America” is thus legibly marked by the perspectives it has occluded, and by the voices that, like that Melville’s *Bartleby*, can affect only recalcitrance and utter only refusal. What Spanos sees Melville to have accomplished—and other writers including Wright, Ginsberg, and Ellison to have inherited—is in this way “to think this negative unsayable positively” by announcing the resistance of a “spectral silence” as constitutive of U.S. nationhood (394).

Ultimately, it is this spectral silence that marks the intervention of Ellison’s text in Melvillean cultural politics. This topological approach to textual negativity, the framing of unframing and the unframing of framing, is very precisely a national form of thinking the “negative unsayable positively.” As such, Ellison brings metaphors of the void into far closer alignment with Spanos’s recent interventions than with the recent interventions of the containment critics, even though it is the latter who more explicitly concern themselves with the postwar period. Through

those metaphors, *Invisible Man* opens up space for reading the framing narratives of the postwar period itself.

CHAPTER 4—THE MEDIUM AS A VOID

THE TERROR THAT MAKES ONE WHATEVER ONE IS: STERLING HAYDEN'S EMOTIONAL TESTIMONY

"I went into the [Communist Party] voluntarily. Certainly
I think it was the stupidest, most ignorant thing I have
ever done, and I have done a good many such things."
(Sterling Hayden to HUAC, 1951)

"That fucking, awful day that I testified [to HUAC], it's
still the only day in my life I'm ashamed of."
(Hayden to publicist Dennis Brown, 1982)

"The memory fades...The hollow man outstretched, more
or less asleep. Inside, nothing but callow fear"
(Hayden, *Wanderer* 23)

In this final chapter, I want to explore a single instance: a life that could be seen through biography or through a conventional study of multimedia authorship, but that I would like to see instead as a multiform textual engagement with void, as against the ahistorical and strict differentiation of media. Instead, what is at issue in the life of the movie star Sterling Hayden is an attempt at the revolutionary new medium that, following Waldo Frank, would lend itself to a "feeling of intimate kinship with any part of the objective world." The feeling, however, is nothing so comforting as love. It is terror, toward the state, toward non-state political elements, and principally toward the self, that drove Hayden's production of film, writing, and public performance. This feeling of his is part of cultural history, as well as of the sociology and psychology of emotion that took root during these years. Most important, its sole purpose is to make legible a form of postwar cultural politics that would tarry in the void between media, while deconstructing the liberal identities and conservative institutions that otherwise thrived in that period.

I. Out of the Conflict

Late in his life, Hayden was asked by a French interviewer why he had been acting in fewer and fewer movies, but had devoted himself more and more to the writing of non-fiction and fiction. Memoirs and novel manuscripts, Hayden responded, had arisen “out of the conflict, out of the pain, out of the tears and the agony and the terror that makes one whatever one is.” This chapter inquires into Hayden’s terror, as a political form of emotion that combines fear with shame. Not simply anger, and not just guilt or regret, this terror forms a key part both of Hayden’s film work and of his writing, beginning in the 1950s—the first decade or so following Hayden’s friendly testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee—and not ending until Hayden’s death three decades later. Moreover, this terror achieves its expressiveness across a range of texts—literary as well as cinematic—and therefore demonstrates how a strong emotion can turn the boundary between ostensibly discrete media into something that is indistinct or unimportant.

Variations of void and medium, I have shown, shaped the sociopolitical impact of postwar texts upon their era. As literature and film face off against one another throughout that period, each one consolidates itself by producing a void with which to cordon itself off from the other. Each guards itself with a discursive gap that both opposes and links the two regimes. In preceding chapters, I have characterized the postwar decades in the U.S. as having marked by several forms of cultural and political negativity. By 1966, Robert Martin Adams could argue that the “void”—which he defined as “the willful submission of oneself to non-experience as an active form of experience”—had been the very central preoccupation of the period just passed (3). That same year, on a visit to the U.S., Jacques Lacan likewise theorized a contemporary subjectivity that might be based on “lack, loss, or void,” which he specified as “the sliding and the difficulty of seizing, the never here” (196). Thus at the same time that U.S. culture began inexorably to separate its knowledge

about film from its knowledge about literature, there also appeared multiple attempts to conceptualize an experiencing subject who was also split by a void, and fundamentally so.

By means of Hayden's example, I ask: what kind of practice can account for a negativity that so splits, not just the objects about which one might speak, but also the position from which one speaks and the media through which one speaks? Hayden's "tears and agony and terror" constitute a performed investment in the emotional side of political non-experience: the terror that arises when one constantly questions the value of one's actions, as well as one's failure to act. I do not mean the currently fashionable topic of *affect*, by way of which one might describe something pre-emotional, the "pure energetics" of the Freudian transference. Rather, what Hayden expresses is *emotion* in all its ornate classicism and messy legibility. Emotion manifests itself mutely—inasmuch as it always exceeds the language used to talk about it—but remains always fully symbolic, as a demand that we read a text, describe and characterize it, produce a working narrative about it, found an understanding of that narrative, and then fumble with what exceeds it. Emotion is the evanescent or unassimilable excess of this process, which remains nonetheless palpable. This chapter explains how Hayden's terror constitutes a historically specific kind of emotion, insofar as it was politically charged, socially dangerous, and difficult to articulate in terms that are either strictly literary or strictly cinematic. Terror emerges as a medium of void that, in ways not unlike blankness, may also actively void all the media that it traverses. To tell Hayden's story is to expose a set of meanings that is irreducible to biography (because it is too wrapped up in procedures of textual dissemination and interpretation) but that is also too wide-ranging and multiform to be derived from the analysis of a single work. To narrate Hayden's emotion, in other words, is to make use of an analysis structured by void

and medium, but also to insist that these terms carry a historical rather than a hermeneutic charge.

In 1965, students at Northwestern University convened a three-day symposium whose theme was “Reflections on Rebellion.” Special guests included SNCC leader Bob Moses and sex-advice columnist Gael Greene. But it was the literary critic Leslie Fiedler and the actor Sterling Hayden whose panel produced the most animated debate, on the role of U.S. universities in the encouragement or sponsorship of political resistance. Fiedler saw that “rebellion is a lonely thing,” and that educators must respect their students’ solitary struggles, and so stay nearly passive within a university that should only exist “to reveal to you a handful of dangerous and difficult books and to give you the techniques to read them properly” (81). It might certainly be argued that Fiedler’s supposedly radical passivity was somehow belied by his simultaneous demand for students to read “properly,” in a way that probably was held to be more or less correct, and more or less secret. But to Hayden, Fiedler was simply a lazy member of a complacent group of scholars on the political left: scholars “who have every opportunity to exert their influence and contribute their support to make this a better world, yet remain silent and inactive” (80). Hayden observed that Fiedler’s hands-off pedagogy would do nothing to prepare students to engage in a world defined by racism, institutional power, and “the amazing, frightening, and terrifying problems of social commitment” (76).

What such preparation would look like is unclear, but Hayden’s note of protest was sounded in a tone identical to the one he used to describe his move from acting into writing, by way of the “terror that makes one whatever one is.” Indeed, the genre of Hayden’s own writing would seem to suit the revised teaching program that he imagines for Fiedler: a writing that is confessional, conciliatory, and openly terrified of the risks that it runs. It is difficult to describe both Hayden’s emotion and his texts, in part because the postwar decades were a time of peak intensity for

thought about emotion in the U.S., in general. While long a concern among artists, critics and philosophers, it was not until the early 1950s that emotion would become a serious concern, simultaneously, to a wide range of cultural workers and a diversity of American thinkers, from the humanities to the social sciences. Emotion became, during that time, a new and different sort of object. Between the late 1940s and the middle 1960s, many major works appeared to revise the available theories of feeling: by philosophers of aesthetics (Susanne K. Langer, Norman Kemp Smith, e.g.); literary critics (W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, e.g.); psychoanalysts and psychologists (Silvan Tomkins, David Rapaport, e.g.); and sociologists (Talcott Parsons, Helen Merrell Lynd, Erving Goffman, e.g.).

The revolution was not limited to scholarship either, as the period became a laboratory for emergent genres of film and literature, as well. One need only acknowledge the horror and melodrama films of that period—as well as the crime and Western films of the previous decades—since those genres are wholly defined by their ability to make certain emotions recognizable and even marketable, including fear, pride, yearning, disgust, passion, concern, and hate. It seems no coincidence that Hayden's star rose and fell with these genres, through which and after which he so frequently described his characteristic emotion, terror. To an extent then, Hayden ought to be regarded as a contributor to this line of thought about emotion in the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century, and not just as a potential object of analysis by it. His peculiar way of speaking about terror, in other words, is evidence that new language was both needed and being developed to describe feelings and emotions.

In recent theoretical approaches to such matters, scholars have dealt the increasingly common proposition that all emotion is ideologically freighted, insofar as it asserts itself as a narrative that is highly conventional, and even generic, in its recounting. In thus drawing on Raymond Williams's concept of a society's particular

and organizing “structure of feeling,” writers such as Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg have proposed that we step back to what precedes the narrative regimens of feeling or emotion, and emphasize instead the unnarratable affect on which those regimens are founded. Grossberg argues: “Our emotional states are always elicited from within the affective states in which we already find ourselves. Unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations” (81). In Grossberg’s attractive account, we can avoid the ideologies of generic self-description, and so short-circuit the whole transcendent discourse of the unified subject. If only we can leave emotion to the side, in other words, we can focus instead on something that prefigures (rather than describing and securing) that discourse. Massumi has offered a parallel insight. First reducing emotion to a mere “subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of an experience...as personal,” Massumi reveals affect, by contrast, to be “unqualified” by such social, personal, and subjective narratives: “as such,” unlike emotion, “it is not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique” (28). With no narrative and no fixed descriptive language, in other words, affect is difficult to read, as well perhaps as counter-ideological.

But in spite of their different approaches, both Grossberg and Massumi assume that only a subject can exhibit emotion, and so that whatever feelings occur outside a subject (in a text, say, or in a society) must indeed do so as affects. In thus dispensing with emotion and clinging to affect, Grossberg and Massumi end up instating a new, sturdy, and mystical point of origin—one that does not appear in lieu of a subject, but only before it; and one that is unnarratable, by definition, and so exists in a place where all language is compromised and little can be said. If the foregoing critique is correct, then we might as well return to emotion, with all its ideological and narrative baggage: not because emotions give us the truth of a

subject, but because in all their textuality and flux, emotions show us the patterns by which the effect of a subject can persist in culture.

In brief, it is emotion rather than affect that can give us something to talk about, if only because emotion is manifested all the time, everywhere, and in enigmatic ways, while affect must remain latent by definition. Emotion certainly does impose itself in narrative form. But to argue this, as Grossberg and Massumi both do, is to show emotion also to be an intensely readable form of writing: qualified by culture and compromised by ideology, but nonetheless available to be analyzed and critiqued as a text. Rei Terada has recently shown how, “unrepresentable by any individual sign, emotion is represented by traces in a differential network” (45). Far from upholding the analysis of a unified subject then, emotion supports a subject’s social fantasies, while dissolving all of the subject’s given social and aesthetic forms. Emotion thus both binds and unbinds such forms, in constant motion, as an expressiveness of texts that “offers an alternative to expression”³⁷ in its most conservative and determined forms. Emotion moves in and across the bodies of texts, as Terada argues, so as to “consolidate an outside, a face, an inside, and a precarious means for getting back and forth between them” (55). As Terada argues, and as I think Hayden’s narratives attest, the analysis of emotion does not require an acceptance of any subject whatever, except insofar as subjectivity is the secondary effect of a performance of emotional narrative.

For present purposes, I would argue that emotion also does not require that we accept the ahistorical and positivistic (i.e. ontological) assumptions about what film and literature are to one another. The peculiar emotional faculty that wrecks and moves through the work and life of Sterling Hayden does so not as an secondary

³⁷ She clarifies the relation of her argument not only to that of Massumi and Gilles Deleuze, but also to that of Grossberg: “my argument, unlike Grossberg’s, is not that criticism of the subject requires a reconception of emotion-like states; it is that...emotion already contraindicates the idea of the subject” (7).

expression of a primary form but as a form without primariness; as a diversity of textual traces; and so as a form, perhaps even as a medium, that incites other forms. Hayden's terror is far from unnarratable and so very unlike Massumi's or Grossberg's "affect." Indeed, it demands multiple narrations, story upon story, as each narration reiterates the one before in a series of declamations and apologies that show also a desperate hope both to "get it right" and to "make it right." A reader is left with a pile of barely-related materials—interviews, movies, second-hand and third-hand accounts—that produced "Hayden" as a main character and a textual effect, just as much as Hayden the author ever produced them. Whether or not Massumi is correct that affect "is resistant to critique," this emotion certainly is not. Indeed, like many emotional narratives, this one is rarely restricted to expression in one medium or cultural form, but instead manages to traverse a range of forms. It is guided not by the agent or subject who feels the emotion, but by the range of texts that puts it on display. Curiously, at its roots, work like Terada's (and Grossberg's as well, if not Massumi's) must be seen to owe a debt to shifts in thought that coincide historically with Hayden's own text, at a moment in this country when emotion is being reconsidered both as a break in sturdy forms and as a disruption in author-reader (or author-viewer) communications. This conceptual co-emergence—of Hayden's terror, and of "emotion" as both aesthetic and anti-formal—takes place just after WWII. And it returns now as a way to disrupt the most convenient distinctions between cinematic and literary expressiveness.

The most famous thing Hayden ever did was testifying as a friendly witness of the House Un-American Activities Committee, naming names and so making of himself, in the words of actor Robert Vaughan, "the first Hollywood pigeon of the genus 'stoolie' [to have] sung publicly" (133).³⁸ But Hayden also, in the words of

³⁸ This quotation comes from the USC doctoral thesis written by Vaughan some years after his starring roles in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

blacklisted screenwriter Alvah Bessie, “did something no other show-business informer had ever done before or since: he recanted his ‘recantation’ of radical ideas and associations” (19). In Hayden’s own words: “That fucking, awful day I testified, it’s still the only day in my life I’m ashamed of” (in Brown 114). Hayden’s performance on screen and off—in his acting, in his literary production, and in his public persona—bears traces of this desperate feeling: terror as a mix of other negative emotions, including fear, awe, shame, and embarrassment. Terror is a hybrid emotion that comes both to secure and to disable the discrete forms of his performances: delimiting those forms as either cinematic or literary or political objects; but also shuttling “precariously” (to use Terada’s word) back and forth among film, fiction, and public life.³⁹ Moreover, this emotion is so mobile that it goes places where a conceptual and discursive “Hayden” can go, but a biographical and historical Hayden will never follow.

From biographical details, Hayden would appear to have been a man otherwise uniquely independent and unafraid. Born in New Jersey in 1916, he skippered his first schooner at twenty-one, but abandoned that pursuit two years later, when he was cast in a pair of films (*Virginia* and *Bahama Passage*, both directed by Edward H. Griffith and released in 1941) and branded by publicists as “the most beautiful man in Hollywood” and “the beautiful blonde Viking god.” He briefly shed that career too, when the Second World War began and a feeling of helplessness led

(1964-67), and many other films and television programs. Vaughn’s dissertation, later published as *Only Victims: A Study of Show Business Blacklisting*, is a significant early book on the topic.

³⁹ In the context of this dissertation, I feel I must claim Hayden’s terror as separate from the very different but similarly both historical and textual terror that has permeated culture since September 11, 2001. This has been explored amply, in theoretical texts from Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror* to Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Terror: a Speech after 9-11.” An earlier text with a more direct relevance to present concerns is Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, especially Part I of that book. In none of these powerful texts could terror seem even remotely to be “a good thing.” Doubtless, in conversation with any of them, Hayden’s emotion would become infinitely more complex.

him to join the OSS, running guns to Marshall Tito's partisans from a port on the Italian coast. It was these partisans who inspired Hayden to become a Communist. As he told the notoriously anti-Communist gossip columnist Hedda Hopper in 1954: "I was thrilled by their heroism and bravery. They were dedicated Marxists and would boast of their jail terms and show the marks of torture...[so] I went a step further and signed a party card." When he returned to northern California, Hayden not only joined but also actively promoted the Party, lecturing widely on the partisans' "heroism and bravery." But he soon rejected Communism as well, telling Hopper: "I was appalled by the significance of what I had done, but it was too late." In 1950 (the same year that he starred in John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*), Hayden risked ostracism by testifying behind closed doors to FBI agents working with the HUAC.

Reentering the movie business, he spoke up once again a year later, this time to the full committee, and offered more of the names that he knew belonged to Communists in Hollywood.⁴⁰ He told the committee what he would later tell Hopper: that he'd returned from the war with "something boiling inside," and an urgent desire "to do something about the condition of the world" (quoted in Bentley 356). It was from this "very emotional and very unsound approach," Hayden confessed before HUAC, that he had become "susceptible to and, in a sense perhaps, a victim of the idea that [the Communists] had a form of democracy in mind" (364). Had Hayden really experienced a change of heart? Perhaps. He did tell Hopper that U.S. Communists "think they have the key to everything by some occult power; that they alone know what's best for everybody [and] when I learned that, I wanted out." But this revelation would only explain why he stopped being a Communist, and not

⁴⁰ Hayden would continue to work as an actor from that point until his death in the 1980s. But he would frequently claim that he was quitting for good, in ways that suggest his feelings about Hollywood in certain ways resembled his feelings about both Communism and anti-Communism. As he stated about movie acting to a crowd in 1959: "I have no one but myself to blame for not getting away from it sooner."

at all why he finally decided to collaborate with an agency that was actively destroying his friends' careers. So what had frightened Hayden so much that he would suspend his actively held sympathies and beliefs? How did he convince himself that this was the appropriate response to having been deceived, or led into self-deception?

2. Affirming the void

For all his evident disagreement with Hayden over the politics of pedagogy, it may be Leslie Fiedler who gives us the language for Hayden's characteristic emotion. For Fiedler, in the introduction to his 1960 collection *No! In Thunder*, the schismatic culture of that time required critical responses that would not hope to mend its political wounds. He wrote: "The negativist is no nihilist, for he affirms the void...[and knows that] to give form is to provide the possibility of delight—a delight which does not deny horror but lives at its intolerable heart" (18). If Fiedler thus calls for the critic to inhabit the very brokenness of her or his object, and so to occupy rather than to mend or deny it, then we may begin to see Hayden's speech and performance as a kind of embodied cultural theory. With each note of terror, on this view, Hayden played out a key critical perspective on the conduct of postwar politics. By contrast to this kind of practice, most critics demands that their objects conform to a certain self-identity. These objects, and the world to which they belong, must remain compatible with a priori categories (belonging to one medium *or* another; as reactionary *or* potentially liberating) even if they finally appear to complicate them. To such criticism, voids must be "intolerable" or "horrible." By his response to the challenge of engagement, Hayden demands that we ask what the implications are for a "negativist" reading in the political domain. A negativism like either Hayden's or Fiedler's might initiate a reading strategy that indeed destabilizes, at their outset, the still under-interrogated political identities that reside in national,

medial, racial and disciplinary formations. But if terror and intimate engagement with the world were what drove Hayden's polemic at the Northwestern conference with Fiedler, then what was it that led him to testify before HUAC to begin with, given that such an act embodies not terror but cowardice, not engagement but extreme isolation?

Political scientist Corey Robin poses the question of Hayden's motivation in his book, *Fear: A History of a Political Idea*:

Sorting out the motives behind Hayden's capitulation [with HUAC] presents something of a puzzle. True he and his wife had entered into divorce proceedings and Hayden feared that unfavorable publicity might cost him custody of his children. He worried about losing his job, particularly since he had just begun an expensive psychoanalysis, and he feared going to jail. Yet this was the man who a decade earlier had abandoned a promising Hollywood career to help lead a guerilla campaign in Yugoslavia...Much had happened in the intervening years to persuade Hayden of the virtues of being afraid and acting in accordance with that fear. (174)

Robin holds the now-common view that political fear is an effect of governance and a technique of control that can be imposed upon subjects, as if from the top down. And he is doubtless correct to recognize that Hayden saw himself acting primarily out of fear and self-preservation. But with a notion of fear that is imposed from above as a mechanism by which a state can manage its otherwise too-independent citizenry, Robin can only conclude that Hayden was forced by HUAC to feel afraid. For Robin, Hayden was guided by intimate advisors who themselves functioned as state agents, with fear working not only as a tool of an identifiably repressive state, but also by "everyday connections" that function as "packages of covert political transmission [to] echo or amplify our inner counsels of fear" (176).

Yet HUAC was not all that frightened Hayden. He was also struck with terror by his stint as a Communist. As he told Hopper: "There was no freedom in the set-up, and I was always chafing for freedom. I was all mixed up." With this in mind, fear cannot be seen to function just as a kind of antenna for remote state control, but

must be seen, for Hayden at least, to originate in the encounter with any static political or social system. In other words, Hayden's terror must be seen as originating with Hayden and, to an extent, also as definitive of the texts that he produced. Terror thus functions for Hayden as a constitutive aspect of political life: the shame and dread of engagement that comes with the daily difficulty of participating in a community. As he told Fiedler, it is also an eminently teachable response to "the amazing, frightening, and terrifying problems of social commitment" and a trait to be emulated.

A philosophical model for this kind of fear also emerged in the 1950s, from the Scottish thinker and translator, Norman Kemp Smith, whose view on the topic seems very closely to predict Hayden's comments to Fiedler at *Northwester* in 1965: "Fear, as I have tried to show, is the inevitable companion of all great and difficult enterprises. They require both tenacity and caution; and these fear is supremely fitted to supply" (19). Around the same time, sociologist Erving Goffman was arguing a similarly constitutive function for the feeling of embarrassment. And yet another perspective of the period would link these two emotions, fear to shame, and insist that both must be seen as formative of any social identity, rather than disruptive of it. This latter position comes from the psychoanalytically-informed sociologist Helen Merrell Lynd, for whom:

Apprehension that one's own life may be cut off from others, empty, void of significance, is a terrifying thing; but fear that this same isolation is true for others, and that the world itself may hold no meaning is infinitely worse. Experience of shame may call into question, not only one's own adequacy and the validity of the codes of one's immediate society, but the meaning of the universe itself.
(57)

It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate way than this of describing the intimacy, painful empathy, and profound social responsibility that characterize Hayden's own fear and shame.

Hayden described his terror as a force in everything from his involvements with drugs, alcohol and psychoanalysis; to his long career as a “male starlet”; to his three marriages and his first sexual encounters (273). Of his nostalgia for the latter, for example, he wrote in his memoir: “The memory fades...The hollow man outstretched, more or less asleep. Inside, nothing but callow fear” (*Wanderer* 23). The memoir takes its name from the wooden schooner—*Wanderer*—that Hayden had lovingly repaired and later rented out for such features as *Wolf Larsen* (1958). And the terror that extends through the memoir thus seems tied to the vessel on which it was written. Indeed it seems tied to the voyage on which it was begun: an illegal journey that Hayden took to Tahiti with his four children, early in 1959, when a custody battle with his second wife went sour. From that moment (which was sympathetically reported and fully illustrated in *LIFE*, as well as half a dozen newspapers, although it nonetheless looked a lot like kidnapping to some people) the term “wandering” took on a totemic quality for Hayden, as an ethic by which he would increasingly judge himself and his loyalty to family and friends. Hayden also described this wandering as “lostness”: as a responsibility to ideals of lawlessness and physical dislocation. He wrote: “Don’t talk to me about finding yourself. Only as you are lost is there any hope for you” and then asked:

Who knows about these things? Better we should kick over the traces and take up drifting or wandering, secure in the irrefragable knowledge that if only there were enough enlightened wanderers around, this world would be a far better place, if not for the wanderer himself then for the compact majority. (x-xi)

Hayden is openly discontented, wracked by “frustration and failure (call it ‘lostness’ if you will)” (xi). But he justifies his discontentment by claiming that he submits to it for a greater good. He offers no specifics here but only, as he told even HUAC, the vague desire “to do something about the condition of the world.” And there is no exemplary site across which Hayden will drift, wander, and eventually get lost. Instead, with an almost painful earnestness, Hayden models himself on freewheeling

mariner-intellectuals like Herman Melville or Ernest Hemingway, and on unaccountable road-poets like Jack Kerouac, traveling absolutely anywhere albeit with less of their love and talent for literary writing.

The self-fashioning had evidently had an impact, at least by 1966, when Hayden's image appeared on the cover of an Airmont Books edition of Melville's *Billy Budd*. And a little later, it was aptly described by John Huston in a 1979 interview: "In recent years, Sterling's personality has become richer. There is a kind of kingliness or priestliness about him now. I can see him conducting a pagan rite, his beard blowing in all directions" (95-6). Thoroughly documented by such publications as *Life*, *Time*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, Hayden's illicit voyage to Tahiti was an ultimate act of fear and flight, but it was also the invention of a new character on the model of those earlier writers: a character named "Sterling Hayden" who would always be "a stalwart man on a constant quest of danger" (*Wanderer* 303). On this trip, and in this frame of mind, Hayden began to pen his book, an autobiography that was also a portrait of the pseudo-fictional character that he would come to portray in his public life.

Throughout the book, as elsewhere, concepts of shame and fear would describe his thorough discomfort in the world and his conviction that one day, inevitably, he would be unmasked as a fraud. Hayden admits that his main preoccupation had long been "to prevent this fear from showing [since] the fear itself is nothing compared to being exposed" as a liar, a pseudo-seafarer, a bad actor and father, and a dilettante (303). He asked:

When did this fear set in? Isn't it true that I've been living a lie for years? Wasn't I a fo'c'sle dweller who was not a fo'c'sle dweller? A student who was not a student...[or] a kid on the road who never was on the road at all?...When is an actor not an actor? When the bulk of his acting is done offstage. (303)

What kind of acting can be "done offstage"? For Hayden, such acting occurred everywhere, wherever he went, compulsively: throughout the memoir, *Wanderer*, but

also in the novel that followed it, and in the innumerable interviews and public appearances.

Hayden's statement might be read glibly to suggest ways in which his identity was performed, as in Judith Butler's oft-quoted position (following J.L. Austin) that any self-representation is a performative act, and "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519). As with almost any speech, but for reasons having nothing to do with his profession as a performer, Hayden's speech does lend itself to this sort of reading. But shame and fear are not just qualities of Hayden's identity and performance—they are the defining characteristics of his self-description. Denise Riley has shown that, in all cases, "there's a particular guilt associated both with writing and with taking on an identification" (75). From this point of view, Hayden may claim in his memoir and interviews to be ashamed of having been "living a lie for years," but this is an all-too-common experience of self-identification as such. Echoing Hayden, Riley writes: "when I write *I* and follow up the pronoun with a self-description, feelings of fraud grip me" (78). Hayden's acting style frequently seems awkward in exactly this way.

Hayden's performances in fact seem highly demanding, nearly always coming off as at once tremulous and hyper-masculine. But as his own writing suggests, the front he puts up might not stop or start on the movie set. If we can think of Hayden's public life in terms of "offstage" acting, then it can be regarded not just as an object of biography or of a merely literary or merely cinematic course of study. Hayden's terror will become entirely literary, insofar as it is a poetic trope that recurs not only in the strictly literary texts (memoir, novel) but just as forcefully in the films and interviews. And paradoxically, it will also become entirely cinematic, insofar as it all relies on a key category of industrial Hollywood (the star system) that transports the technique of film acting to a space off screen—to newspapers, magazines, and TV advertisements all sold for the market value of the star image. Since they are

equal parts cinema and literature, the medium (forms, platforms, substrates) of Hayden's works must remain undecidable. But the content of their common message is nevertheless fairly consistent: a repeated enactment of something called terror, which is intimate rather than imposed; constitutive rather than curable; teachable; and, in any case, the only thing that is shared by the various works, the movies, books, etc.

Hayden's terror has not been universally celebrated (either as a confession or as an apology) even by those who have taken note of it. One notable skeptic has been Scott McConnell: an historian and public intellectual, McConnell is also the editor of *The American Conservative*, and the first son of Hayden's third wife. In a vitriolic article written shortly after Hayden's death, the stepson asks why Hayden's supposed convictions never led him to a more active political engagement in the 1960s:

Certainly it was not fear—no more than fear was the issue in 1946-47. It had more to do with the fact that Sterling didn't hate America in quite the deep visceral way that was necessary in order to feel comfortable on the Left. Although he sometimes signed letters 'yours for the revolution, and the liquidation of the bisnik class'...we who lived in the Hayden household somehow absorbed the feeling that all of this was really more of a show than a conviction...Radicalism was thus a pose. (10)

In an important sense, McConnell's statement is unreadable. It must be cited in any discussion of Hayden's politics but, in spite of its author's scholarly background, it speaks in a strange register that is too intimate and too hostile to be read as analysis. (How can one avoid naming Oedipus here?) Still, it seems crucial that even Hayden's key detractor can acknowledge the "show" and the "pose" in which Hayden himself tells us he was always engaged. And while McConnell denies that this pose originates in fear, he can nonetheless admit that his stepfather was guided by an evident discomfort, a naïve pranksterism, and a latent, raffish patriotism.

Hayden's claim that he knew how to "act offstage" seems thus to accord with the statements of both enemy and friend. It makes sense then to read the body of

films as a component of his body of writing (which should probably also include the political text of his HUAC testimony) and therefore as an object that is properly literary and aesthetic as well as political. But it also makes sense to enact a symmetrical but reversed procedure, whereby the offscreen performances of speech and writing can be considered in terms that are cinematic. If the acting can be considered literary, then the prose can be acting, and therefore the product of an operation that is industrial and technical as well as aesthetic. Put another way, if stardom and acting are a big part of how Hollywood cinema circulates, and if they need not occur in a theater but can appear in the publication of interviews, memoirs, and fiction, then the circulation of these latter kinds of text are necessarily tied to the ideological and commercial imperatives of Hollywood. So even as Hayden's speech attempts to stifle those imperatives, it simultaneously relies on them in order to reach its audience—of movie-goers, industry people, activists, and scholars.

But to what do those writings profess, in their politics of fear and terror? Hayden's work after the Fifties in fact suggests a sustained investment in a recognizable Hayden myth, not just by Hayden himself, but by producers and directors of narrative art films in the U.S. and Europe. The best-known example of this is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), in which Hayden plays General Jack Ripper, a man so terrified of the world—and convinced that the Soviets had used fluoride to co-opt his "precious bodily fluids"—that he single-handedly triggers a thermo-nuclear war in order to destroy it all. But this tendency continued for decades and amounts to a strange sort of typecasting in which Hayden was hired to play "Hayden" over and over again: in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), he plays a drunk and suicidally depressed man of the sea; in Ruy Guerra's *The Sweet Hunters* (1969), he plays a scholar-poet who is again a man of the sea; in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), he is the hot-tempered and traitorous police captain; in Bernardo Bertolucci *Novecento* (1976),

he is a radical Communist peasant; and in Frank Pierson's *King of the Gypsies* (1978), he is a nomadic philosopher-king. This trend culminates in his role as the martyr-to-freedom John Brown in the TV series *The Blue and the Grey* (1982), and in a pair of films directed by Wolf-Ekart Bühler just before Hayden's death: an experimental biopic called *The Wanderer* (1984), in which Hayden is portrayed by four separate actors; and a long interview film called *Pharos of Chaos* (1983), in which he essentially plays himself.

With each of these films, Hayden's beard grows longer, his voice grows wilder and deeper, and his costumes grow more flamboyant. In his last decades, he isolates himself to write when he's not acting, but he invites strangers aboard the home he has made, first in an antique railway car, and then in a barge on the Seine. His frequent television interviews become more eccentric and more practiced in self-castigation, concluding in a series of three interviews with Tom Snyder between 1979 and 1983. And his endeavors become more ambitious, perhaps reaching their peak in a return to Belgrade to cover Tito's funeral for *Rolling Stone*, for an article that he never got around to writing.

3. Testimony

Like any self-description, Hayden's is also a form of testimony. In Victor Navasky's now-standard *Naming Names*, Hayden is shown to have spent his life in constant apology during the years following his guilty moments in front of HUAC. As a result, Hayden "ended up as a hero to the public but a coward to himself," yet still was not content to keep his cowardice private (101). Instead, he projected his fear and self-loathing into the open in a prolonged effort to convince a world that his betrayal had been a great mistake. For this reason, the multiplicity of texts from those years in fact form a single text made of numerous components—a long third testimony (following those of 1950 and 1951) that extends across three decades of

film, writing, and speech: what Hayden called “acting done offstage” as well as on screen. He told the *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin* in 1963, “I was a rat, a stoolie, and...it would be a different story between me and the Committee now,” but his guilty profession did not belong solely to one cathartic interview (36). Rather, it persists everywhere. He was still apologizing years later, in a 1977 appearance on the Tom Snyder Show, to whom he admitted: “It was madness, it was madness. A tragic time too, a lot of people got hurt. My god, a lot of people got hurt! I hurt a couple of people, because when I named names, people got fired.” He explained further: “It’s the one thing in my life that I’m categorically ashamed of...And I did it because I was weak, you know?”

From one perspective, Hayden’s multi-media apology would prove entirely successful. As Navasky concluded, several years before Hayden’s death in 1986: “Hayden, who renounced and denounced his own informing from coast to coast, speaking on demand at meetings organized by the Committee to Abolish HUAC/HISC, has won a measure of forgiveness...but he is the exception that proves the rule” (401). Forgiveness was won, but that alone was not enough for Hayden, who felt more than just the need for embrace by every Leftist director, actor, and screenwriter whose career he’d diminished. Instead, there seemed to be a motivation that was wrapped up in the social risks of political commitment. Indeed, if Hayden’s constant apology does constitute a form of committed testimony, then it will do little good to begin with the absent (although perhaps no less material) sources of his pain or shame: stemming from his betrayal perhaps, or from his tenures as sailor and spy. Rather, his testimony would begin and end with the fearful and shameful speech that began with the secrets he told the FBI and ending with the last apology rendered before his death. Once everything Hayden ever did can be assimilated to this testimony—and once what brings it together is the consistent emotional tenor embodied not in their author, but in his character “Sterling Hayden”—then the

various unspoken details in the life of an historical Sterling Hayden may begin to disappear.

In 1952's *The Star* (dir. Stuart Heisler), Sterling Hayden plays a character who very much resembles himself: Jim Johansson, a former laborer turned movie star, who later abandons his film career in order to work at a wharf and dispense wisdom from his yacht, about living minimally and loving genuinely. Not long after, Hayden played a rare supporting role in *Prince Valiant* (dir. Henry Hathaway, 1954) in which a villain comes just short of asking the title prince if he is, or has ever been, a Communist—the film tempts us to replace the word “Viking” with the word “Communist,” when that villain demands: “We know we have Viking traitors in our midst...Who are they? Name them! Name them!” Such alertness to Hayden’s personal and political reputation marks many of his films during the decade: often enigmatically but also, as illustrated by these two films, often in the form of a fairly direct citation.

In 1952's *Flat Top*, Hayden plays a tough-as-nails commander who must teach his naval air squadron how to be more responsible. Castigating a pilot for violating a direct order, in a particularly allegorical moment, Hayden’s Captain Collier rants:

I guess he wanted to prove that he was an individualist. Well that’s one thing we’re not going to have in this squadron. An individualist is dangerous to the group and to himself. In fiction, he’s invariably the hero...In reality, nine times out of ten, he’s killed for his efforts and he’s left the squadron one plane and one pilot short.

This speech can certainly be read as *allegory*, in the sense that Paul de Man intends: as a “totality displaced in time,” and as the “narration of a totality which never takes place” (118). Captain Collier’s speech points obliquely toward Hayden’s own biography in two divergent but equally complete ways: on one hand, as a description of the individualism that Hayden himself embodied, until it was reined in for the good of a non-communist nation; and on the other hand, as an ironization of the Communists’ own reputed dependence on a dis-individuated proletariat. Hayden’s

testimony clearly supports both anxieties. And both whole stories are produced at the margins of the film text, from which an emotionally full and largely mythological personal narrative would fuel future performances—on screen, in print, and in public—as a criterion for interpretation, as well as for the material decisions involved in film casting and book publication. Thus allegory, rather than provide semantic security to the narrative or to Hayden’s performance, instead renders meaning insecure. As Stephen Greenblatt’s extrapolates upon de Man: “Allegory may dream of presenting the thing itself...but its deeper purpose and its actual effect is to acknowledge the darkness, the arbitrariness, and the void that underlie...all representation” (vii). By allegorizing himself, ambiguously redoubling the public perceptions of his star persona, Hayden “acknowledges the void that underlies” the emotional economy of stardom.

The film, like all industrial films, is both too enigmatic and too literal to be read in the simplistic terms of single authorship or easy metaphor. In spite of the fact that Hayden’s films are so thoroughly marked by clues to his biography, it is insufficient just to unravel those clues. The effect of such allegory is to render a life—and a narrative—of strong political emotion in terms that are far more puzzling. As its title might suggest, it is the film *Terror in a Texas Town* that most vividly ties a parable of Hayden’s public life to an explicit thematic investment in his negative emotion. Filmed in 1958 by director Joseph H. Lewis, the film was written under a pseudonym by the blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo. Also still blacklisted at the time was Nedrick Young, but only as a writer—he was still allowed to act in the film under his own name, portraying a troubled and villainous gunfighter named Johnny Crale. (Young would in fact win a screenwriting Oscar that year for *The Defiant Ones*, although the award was officially given to “Nathan E. Douglas” and Young would not arrive to pick it up.) Meanwhile, the star of the film is Sterling Hayden. Here, he plays George Hansen, a Swedish sailor who leaves the sea so he

can join his father on a farm in the Texas town of Prairie City, but arrives only finds that his father has been murdered by Crale, and his land repossessed by the richest man in town, Ed McNeil (played by Sebastian Cabot). Hansen then plots his revenge with the help of a neighboring farmer named Jose Mirada (Victor Millán).

The whole film culminates in the moment when Hansen confronts Crale, with his father's whaling harpoon in hand. In that strange final moment, we cannot but see Hayden the actor confront Young the screenwriter—the hands of a blacklisted writer hovering above his guns, while (a man who could well have been) his betrayer stabs him through with what Crale calls “that meat hook.” Young angrily described his first encounter with Hayden in this way: “The (censored) tried to suck up to me on the set. He says he recommended me for the role. He says he admired what we did—the people who fought the committee” (quoted by Bessie 19, expletive censored in original). Young's own anger seems to manifest in the film, and it makes visible the other meaning—his bitterness at Hayden the stoolie—that would otherwise have remained stubbornly extra-textual. The tension over anti-Communism is thus neither a kind of semantic excess to the film, nor its secret, as if it could be undone or explained by an act of critical truth-telling. Rather, the film tells its two stories at once and does so in ways both obvious and contradictory: one, the story of a confrontation between a peace-loving farmer and an old-fashioned gunfighter; and another, the story of a contrast or conflict between Young and Hayden, as well as the two kinds of political collective that can form in response to a state agent like HUAC: either collaborative or resistant.

So when the mass of townspeople follows Hansen up the street to his encounter with Crale, that crowd belongs simultaneously to an intimate narrative of community restoration (the purported inside of the film's story) and to a social narrative of large-scale resistance to the outmoded politics of anti-Communism (its supposed outside). And when Crale's lover Molly finally sets aside her whiskey bottle

in order to warn the town about Crale and McNeil, she simultaneously rejects an intimate bond with her lover in favor of a social bond with the community (inside); and also rejects the whole victim/traitor opposition on which HUAC relied (outside). The obviousness of the film's allegory forces our reading. And importantly for the present discussion, it shifts the terms under which one might respond to several scenes of dialogue on the subject of fear and terror—between Hansen and Mirada; Mirada and Crale; Crale and McNeil; and Crale and Molly. These dialogues establish the terms under which Sterling Hayden's own public feeling might be understood.

All these scenes of dialogue occur well into the final third of the film, and they function, to an extent, in the film's inquiry into the force of its own title. What is the "terror" that has arrived in this "Texas Town"? What are its objects or intensities? The terror would seem to surface in response to the arrival of Crale, who has come to evict farmers from land that they have occupied for years, but on which McNeil claims to hold prior deed. McNeil calls Crale a "dandy" for dressing like an old-fashioned gun-fighter: an appellation that suggests strangeness and foreignness, and that explicitly denotes Crale's preference for the color black. (His shirt, pants, hat, and horse are black; and he wears black gloves to conceal the fact that one of his hands is a steel prosthetic.) But in spite of Crale's evident threat, the terror originates elsewhere in the discourse of the film. In the first exchange on the topic, Hansen tells Mirada that it is *fear itself* that has crippled the town and killed his father:

HANSEN:	There is only one reason why my father was killed. And you know what that reason is?
MIRADA:	No, Señor.
HANSEN:	It is because of fear. It is because people are afraid. We could turn this valley inside out, if only people were not afraid.
MIRADA:	Which fear do you speak of, Señor?
HANSEN:	Being afraid to talk.

An echo of Roosevelt should be heard here. Yet Hansen has answered Mirada's question in a way that points clearly to the problem of the anti-Communist witch

hunts—and whether one imagines Hayden to be an informer afraid of his friends, or a barely uncooperative witness afraid of the committee, this public fear of speech clearly belongs to him and not to the condemned men, Trumbo and Young.

Yet perhaps Hansen has answered Mirada too quickly. It soon becomes clear that there is another fear that must be reckoned with by all of the film's major characters: the fear of death. This second kind of fear proves the necessity of Mirada's question—*which fear?*—a question that carries terrible results on the register of the film's story. As it turns out, Mirada—who had long been afraid to speak about the death of Hansen's father—has no concomitant fear of death. Crale confronts Mirada and, before killing him, demands a promise: "Get down on your knees and swear by this unborn child that you'll never testify against me. Get down, down, down. Get down, Mirada." But before he is murdered, Mirada issues his fatalist, even realist, view of the situation (in lines that make audible the screenwriter Trumbo's own frustration, resignation, and apparent lack of fear): "You will kill me because you must kill me. If I swear, you will kill me. If I beg, you will kill me. If I stand as a man, still you will kill me. Well, I stand as a man."

After killing Mirada, the aging gunfighter is confused and disturbed, and before killing McNeil (for reasons unexplained), Crale tells him of his confusion: "I want to talk to you about...something I saw this morning. Something rather remarkable. Sit down, McNeil. Sit down, McNeil. I think this might interest you. What I saw this morning was really remarkable. Really remarkable. I saw a man who wasn't afraid to die." Later, in the room of the saloon that he shares with the prostitute Molly, he remains troubled:

I saw something this morning I've never seen before in my life...Why don't you listen to me? Why don't you try to understand? I saw a man this morning that wasn't afraid to die, do you know what this means? A man that wasn't afraid to die?...Every man I ever held a gun on was sweating with fear. Every single one, except this one man. Even McNeil, but not this man.

In the end, the black-hatted Crale is himself also killed. But he is killed not by the unique figure of the man who was afraid to speak but unafraid to die: Mirada, who is already dead. Instead, he is killed by Hansen, who is instead the flawed and common man who is unafraid of plain speech, but who clings to life by a kind of cautious self-preservation that can only be called a fear of death.

Hansen is the man afraid of death and unafraid of speech. Mirada is afraid to speak but he accepts his death with a triumphant anger, not fear. Meanwhile, Crale is unafraid of anything—he stands square in front of Hansen and dares him to come closer so that he will have “a fair chance with that meat hook”—but as a result, and through his strange obsessive manners of speech and dress, we know he is unequipped for life among other people. In fact, it would turn out that Young himself was the man unafraid. In his own testimony to HUAC, Young issued a fiery and defiant refusal of the committee’s very premises, saying: “I will not answer your question, because to answer your question would be to concede your right to ask it, and this I do not do” (3). Additionally, the screenwriting Oscars awarded to Young’s *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and Trumbo’s *The Brave One* (1956) were among the contributing causes to the end of HUAC’s crusade against Hollywood.

But beyond his refusal to speak and his prematurely triumphant movie title, Young took another kind of action—leading a lawsuit against the MPAA in 1961 that questioned the industry’s right to blacklist anybody to begin with. Speaking publicly for the first time, in an event at Carnegie Hall that commemorated and explained the lawsuit, Young confessed of his speech that “it’s frightened me, but my son is in the audience tonight, and I cannot afford the cowardice” of remaining silent (10). He concluded his speech in a manner that might even recall the unafraid-to-die Jose Mirada: “The time has come to un-silence ourselves. The time has come to fight back” (11).

I have raised questions about *Terror in a Texas Town* through the lenses of casting, character, and script—rather than through a more advanced study of acting, lighting, or camera technique—and this is largely because that film demands to be thought primarily as the place where Hayden met Trumbo and Young. But from the standpoint of textuality and reading in general, film acting is notoriously difficult to theorize. This is not to say that acting goes undiscussed by film scholars. Indeed, as Kevin Esch has recently observed of several recent screen-acting anthologies: “it has become standard for works on the subject to lament its underprivileged status, usually in the opening paragraph” (62). Still, a discussion of the cultural or emotional effect of a film performance does seem exceedingly tough to extricate from the commonest platitudes about acting: that an actor’s technique is good or bad; or that (from the perspectives of cognition or communication) an actor has really connected with an audience, or a spectator has really felt a performance.

In a now-classic analysis of the problem, John O. Thompson argues that studies of acting usually amount either to the mechanical interpretation of technique, or else to a romantic form of essayism—he writes: “performances seem ineffable, and thinking about them induces reverie rather than analysis” (55). Since Thompson, the debates about acting continue to be governed by the common refusal of scholarly critics seriously to consider both the ineffability and reverie of film performance. Indeed, my own discussion of *Terror in a Texas Town*, with its insistence on systematic articulations of political fear, has given little attention to acting, either as a technique or as an object of fantasy. This might be a secondary effect of that film, whose performances are stagy in their intensity, but whose casting is even more interesting still, serving as the film’s almost-audible invitation to work through the biographies of Young and Trumbo, Lewis and Hayden. But it might be an effect of Hayden’s style as well: untrained, affecting but unaffected, unrehearsed. Considering the theoretical difficulties of studying an actor without a method, Hayden’s own

acting might make more sense in the embrace, rather than the rejection, of Thompson's "reverie," even as a kind of "analysis." To do so is to engage a theoretical technique which itself admits to being emotional, but only so as to examine the largely emotional effects of film performance. To read emotion emotionally is not uncommon, and may in fact be the dominant mode of the contemporary study of emotion (and of affect!) in the disciplinary studies of literature and film. However, this has not always been the case. And the 1950s, while a key period in the history of thought about emotion in the U.S., was also a decade of attempts to rationalize this least rational of textual effects.

When it appears clearly, Hayden's terror can sabotage an efficient political machine—it is proudly inconsistent, puckishly anti-institutional, and uncommitted to either professionalism or patriotism. These qualities appear to be directed against the ideals of conventionalism that appear to have been so common in the two decades following the war. But, in important ways, the errancy of Hayden's (or anybody's) emotion could always be accommodated by social norms. Or so argued sociologist Talcott Parsons at the time, in the theoretical opposition he imposed between "affectivity" and "affective neutrality": where the first term describes how emotion is produced by individuals in excess of state interests; and the second describes the state's task in remaining neutral to its subjects' feelings. The opposition, Parsons argued, showed how systems of governance can survive, even as their citizens always spend less energy on the maintenance of social norms, than they do on the attainment personal pleasure. Affective neutrality was thus "essentially the same as the imposition of renunciation of immediate gratification in the interests of the disciplined organization and longer-run goals of personality" (11). Parsons's theory would seem to suggest that norms would never be threatened—and rebellion never achieved—through the unpredictable emotions and confessions of somebody like Hayden.

But then Sterling Hayden's emotion seems just as indifferent toward social norms, as they seem to be toward him. Something else is at work, then, when a disruptive emotion can be unresponsive to social conventions, as well as to the differences between texts and authors, or between film and literature. How might something else take shape, out of "the amazing, frightening, and terrifying problems of social commitment"? More importantly perhaps, might the terror of Hayden's testimony circulate in ways that his personal terror never could? Is it possible that the text, and not the author, is the thing that "wanders" freely?

In 1952, Mary McCarthy told the leftist Committee for Cultural Freedom that the HUAC hearings had signaled a major change in the state of writing, and in the social control of authors and artists in the U.S. For her, the limits of culture were being policed in new ways, as the committee hearings had shifted the weight of blame and punishment: no longer banning texts deemed to be transgressive, the committee was now pursuing the rogue authors of those texts. She explained that while the blacklist of leftist authors and artists continued to thrive, there was still a proliferation and free movement among leftist publications, so that under the new regime, "ideas circulate and the individual is imprisoned" (35). For her, the function of the anti-Communist witch hunt was "to create new underground men behind the façade of conformity, new lies, new evasions, new human beings who float like glittering icebergs on the surface of society, with the perilous eight-ninths submerged" (42). For McCarthy, this was a bad thing, a loss of authentic political expression "in a society of surfaces, where papers and books circulate freely, like so many phantom abstractions, while their human authors and readers have been suppressed" (42). But the narrative of Sterling Hayden's terror seems to offer a slight corrective, and a hint of promise to her formulation. True, Hayden admitted to the sorts of lies and evasions that McCarthy names. But his admission exposes a void at the heart of the testimony, turning it into something that is inauthentic: a text,

something more and less than a person, that appears to feel emotion. What is his terror but a “phantom abstraction” that survives the suppression of something more human, the author himself?

Opening the door to such analysis, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published their essay “The Intentional Fallacy” in 1946. Along with another influential article “The Affective Fallacy” (published three years later, as the Fifties loomed), Wimsatt and Beardsley helped to establish principle tenets for the next stage of literary criticism in the U.S.: that the meaning of fiction or poetry is not to be found the historical moment of its authorship, nor in the emotional response of a given audience, but can instead be divined from the work alone. While the first essay had shifted the terms under which it was possible to think about texts and their authors, this second essay marks another turning point, in the thinking about emotion and literary reception. In the latter piece, Wimsatt and Beardsley observe the increasingly heated debates over the emotive qualities of literature, but they aim to displace those debates by setting a properly interpretive practice in opposition to something that is “no concern of criticism, no part of criteria” because it naively seeks “some objectified feeling of pleasure” (48). (Wimsatt and Beardsley’s frustration with emotive criticism here sounds quite a bit like Thompson’s frustration with the available discourse on acting: that it can offer “reverie” but little more.) The style of criticism they advise “will not talk of tears, prickles, or other physiological symptoms, of feeling angry, joyful, hot, cold, or intense” (47). Rather than see emotion as an external effect of a literary work, they would instead see that work as nothing other than “a pattern of emotive knowledge” (48). Thus following the gesture that would show authorship to be the motivation of a text, in that text, comes a gesture that would show the whole range of possible effects to be similarly built-in.

A similar perspective appears in work of the philosopher Langer who then as now was best known for her 1941 book *Philosophy in a New Key*, and its conception “symbolic form”: a processual and relational way of reading the world’s objects in their “articulation...but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression” (240). In extending this perspective for a 1953 book of aesthetic and emotive theory, entitled *Feeling and Form*, Langer came close to Wimsatt and Beardsley in some critical respects. Like them, she held that the meaning of an artwork is tied to its emotional functioning rather than its ends, and that this emotion must be seen to manifest in the mutable form of a text rather than in the event of an encounter with that form. Yet whereas Wimsatt and Beardsley had seen art objects to be legible as “patterns of emotive knowledge,” Langer insisted that such objects in fact presented a profound challenge to knowledge. Langer asks where the emotion of a work might even be located, once both the intentional and the affective fallacies have been abandoned. And she concludes that artworks must contain a whole range of feelings that would remain irreducible to the historical moment of a work’s reception.

But just what would these feelings be—and how could they be known—if there were no author or reader around to feel them? She writes:

Art works *contain* feelings, but do not feel them. We find the feelings there and react to the apperception of them with pleasure or displeasure, which are our own feelings, the ones we feel at the time. But the status of the unfelt feelings that inhere in art objects is ontologically obscure, and their non-sensuous apperception in a work that is generally supposed to be given directly and entirely to sensuous perception is epistemologically just as difficult. (22)

For Langer, works of art cohere around emotions that they cannot express, containing these emotions as incitements to an audience response but not as that fallacious response itself. However, rather than content herself with “ontological obscurity” and “epistemological difficulty,” Langer proceeds to argue that the pervasive function of this tricky object—feeling—is to pull an artwork together,

imposing a unity upon it, without ever becoming analyzable in the practices of criticism or philosophy.

Non-fiction writing, for example is the “vehicle” of an emotion that is peculiar to it and proper to it: “the feeling that naturally inheres in studious thinking, the growing intensity of a problem as it becomes more and more complex, and at the same time more definite and ‘thinkable,’ until the demand for the answer is urgent, touched with impatience” (302). This tone, which for Langer belongs to all non-fiction, appears as the very feeling voiced by Hayden’s throughout his literary and cinematic testimony (301). In Hayden’s memoir and interviews, his novel and his line readings, both impatience and urgency are palpable—if only through the repetition of words such as “fear,” “terror,” “regret”—yet these belong not to a historical Hayden and still less to us, but serve rather as unfelt incitements to “our own feelings, the ones we feel at the time.” These diverse texts speak collectively about a common object that they studiously and urgently approach—the terror that binds Hayden’s testimony to itself, without necessary reference to its author or reader, and without respect for the stable boundary that separates literature from film.

With regard to film (and taking a cue from Sergei M. Eisenstein) Langer argues that the primary function of cinema is that of “direct apparition”: the operation by which a film can show those aspects of the world that cinema alone may perceive, through the recording and editing of sound and moving images.

Direct apparition is made not only by visual means, though these are paramount, but by words, which punctuate vision, and music that supports the unity of its shifting ‘world.’ It needs many, often convergent, means to create the continuity of emotion which holds it together while its visions roam through space and time...[in] an endless Now. (414-5)

Langer thus differs from the majority of film theoreticians (in her era or any other) for whom cinema is a manipulation sound and image toward a sensible narrative or a fully-mappable space. Instead, she finds a film to make itself coherent by establishing a consistent tenor of emotion. On this view, there is a cinematic consistency in

Hayden's testimony to match the literary insistence of "studious thinking." Even though it is composed of incommensurable objects then, Hayden's testimony has a cinematic way of sustaining a common emotion that "holds it together."

Langer, along with Parsons, McCarthy, Wimsatt and Beardsley, thus serves as a conceptual backdrop for Hayden's performances of (and musings on) terror, but also as diverse, and not necessarily compatible, tools by which to understand his terror—neither as a biographical trait of a lost author nor as a response by a reader or viewer, but rather as an "unfelt" element that serves to cohere his text, his testimony, and his identity.⁴¹ Hayden's terror thus travels across the surface of his testimony, binding it together in political identification, anarchically indifferent both to the suppression of its author, and to the historical moment of its reception.

As the decade progressed, two major changes occurred to alter all the new and emergent discourses on emotion: the literary, the sociological, and the psychoanalytic. The first of these changes was a common attempt, across all of these diverse approaches, to move from a general theory of emotion to specific theories of specific emotions. Among the emotions that came to be of broad interest were those that we have seen active in the acting, speech, and writing of Sterling Hayden: fear and shame. The second major change to occur during this time, to the various epistemologies of emotion, was a general confusion among them—a dissolution of the apparently secure disciplinary and practical boundaries that had long separated them. The decade was rife with highly emotional hybrids of social sciences with theories and objects of the arts and humanities. Literary theorists like Fiedler would

⁴¹ This position is not so far from current theorizations of stardom in cinema, in which a tremendous number of diverse films can make sense together because they share an actor who exerts a unique and powerful public persona, and who generates numerous promotional materials and biographical narratives. Among the sources for this argument (long espoused by readers of Richard Dyer's 1979 book *Stars*), is the French sociologist Edgar Morin, whose 1957 book *Les Stars* argues that a group of films can be organized and tied to one another through a shared actor, and the emotion that actor provokes. Morin's book was read and widely reviewed when it was published by Grove Press in 1960.

analyze objects (such as social movements, political events) that had traditionally belonged to sociology and history. A rapidly changing scholarly sociology (thanks to Goffman, Parsons, Lynd) would be as likely to adopt the theoretical tools of ego psychology as to examine the social effects of films or novels. Aesthetic philosophies of emotion would address themselves to both film and literature, but also and at the same time to ontology and ethics. And melodramatic films would engage explicitly, and sometimes simultaneously, in psychoanalytic discourse and social problems.

Terror in a Texas Town stands as a clear example of this tendency.

From this last perspective, one might also approach one of the iconic films of the decade, Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954). Labeled by *Sight & Sound* upon its release both as a "Post-Freudian Western" and as "the first Krafft-Ebbing Western," this is undoubtedly Hayden's best-loved and most-remembered film from the period. Importantly, *Johnny Guitar* is also another HUAC allegory. But unlike *Terror in a Texas Town*, which overflowed with the dark themes and lighting of *film noir*, as well as the extra-cinematic political reference (say, to the confrontation of Young and Hayden through Trumbo's political dialogue), this earlier film takes shape more in the overflow of color, desire, costume, voice, song, and setting that are all typical in the melodramatic films of the period. This is not to say that there is no extra-cinematic reference to HUAC in this film—one of the features most frequently noted is the confrontation between Hayden's title character and the bad-tempered rancher John McIvers, played by the notorious anti-Communist actor, Ward Bond.⁴² Nor would it be right to say that the film eschews the explicit political configurations that dominated *Terror in a Texas Town*. Like that film, it produces a bad model of collectivity (Bond's posse of land-grabbing ranchers) and a good model

⁴² In a 1974 article for the British magazine *Punch*, blacklistee Carl Foreman would describe "Ward 'The Hangman' Bond, who could smell a Commie-Jew a mile away." Such stinging invective was, and is, not uncommonly directed at the people who named names to HUAC. It seems significant that even Hayden skeptics, like Ned Young, never did batter him with such language.

(a band of nomadic and good-hearted outlaws)—a pair of alternatives between which Hayden easily chooses. But this choice is overshadowed as a political decision, because it is first and foremost about the love story that brings Johnny Guitar together with the tough bar-owner and former prostitute, Vienna, played by the film's top-billed star, Joan Crawford.

This is a different kind of film than *Terror in a Texas Town*: not one that would refuse to reference Hayden's publicly lived life (these are few) but instead one that would channel Hayden's emotions rather than describe them. There are two key strains to the film's critical response, both of which are suggestive in this regard. First, it is sometimes held, as *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody has recently offered, that Hayden gives "what may well be the single coolest performance ever delivered in Hollywood." This sort of reading generally hinges on a single scene early in the film, when a pair of gangs stumbles on one another in Vienna's saloon, and Johnny Guitar defuses the situation with a calm detachment that Brody argues "set the tone for an entire generation" of cool men.

One gang is led by McIvers along with another rancher named Emma Small (played by Mercedes McCambridge), who has long wanted Vienna dead. The second gang is far smaller, a gang of outlaws played by three well-known character actors—The Dancin' Kid (Scott Brady), Bart (Ernest Borgnine), and Corey (Royal Dano)—as well as a teenager named Turkey (Ben Cooper). As the two gangs face off, the outlaw Corey nervously knocks over a glass, which rolls slowly toward the edge of the bar. When, in close-up, the glass finally topples off and threatens to shatter the fragile peace between the two gangs, a hand suddenly emerges from the right of the screen, to catch the glass and maintain the quiet nonaggression. Zooming out, the camera reveals that this hand is attached to a placidly smirking Johnny Guitar, who holds in his other hand a dainty blue-and-white coffee cup. Johnny asks The Dancin' Kid for a cigarette ("Could you spare that smoke, friend?") and then asks McIvers for a

match (“I’ll trouble you for a light, friend.”) before delivering a monologue, his voice mellifluous and his manner calm:

There’s nothing like a good smoke and a cup of coffee. You know some men got the craving for gold and silver, others need lots of land with herds of cattle, and there’s those who’ve got the weakness for whiskey and for women. But when you boil it all down, what does a man really need? Just a smoke and a cup of coffee.

The great shootout obviously does not occur at this point. Johnny’s comments are inane, and even he does not believe them—in fact, he is the one who craves whiskey as well as guns, and is secretly a notorious Albuquerque bandit named Johnny Logan. But in this moment, in his role as peaceful and nomadic musician with a simple love of coffee and cigarettes, Johnny does manage to postpone the inevitable violence.

This is what Brody and others have found so “cool”: Hayden manipulates the codes of civility (with the genuinely affectionate utterance: “friend”) as well as gentility, and he proffers a model of hyper-masculine comportment that does not conform to any of the masculine codes available in 1950s culture. This conclusion dovetails with the other common reading of Hayden’s performance that predominated in the film’s initial reception. On this reading, *Johnny Guitar* is really Joan Crawford’s film, and Hayden is not only marginalized but also feminized. The story told is that Crawford bullied everyone on set, starting with the director Ray, into shifting all attention to her, to the point of rewriting the script and re-imagining all its characters. On this view, the film concludes in a gunfight between Vienna and Emma—rather than between Johnny and McIvers—because, as Peter Wollen has commented, Crawford insisted on “making the female lead into a gun-toting, swaggering, dominatrix” while relegating Hayden to “the traditional woman’s role” (13). Wollen’s observation is in fact a repetition of the film’s first reviews. The review in *The Chicago Tribune* resignedly suggests that if Crawford and her film were to have their way, men might as well just abandon their styled masculinity: “You might as well toss in the sponge, men” the reviewer proclaimed, since in *Johnny Guitar*, “it’s

the gals with the gats who battle it out while the boys stay quietly on the sidelines.” Meanwhile, in *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther found Crawford to be “as sexless as the lions on the library steps,” while a downgraded and dejected Hayden is left to “gallump about morosely as though he’d rather play the guitar.” But there is nothing in these negative reviews to contradict the visions of *Johnny Guitar*’s coolness, since the whole appeal of Hayden (to Brody and others) is that his take on the role would seem to emphasize a combination of Johnny’s folksy reserve, his wide-eyed love for Vienna, and the extreme violence that he nearly always succeeds in suppressing. As for Crowther’s suggestion that Hayden would rather be doing something else, that can hardly be argued against—after all, Hayden is the one who in 1959 admitted, surprising no one, that acting had only ever been “an easy way to make money” and a job he hated but kept, since “they give you a check for doing nothing” (Villasenor B1).

In one of the film’s most famous scenes, Johnny and Vienna have reunited after years apart, and he urges her to deceive him, asking her to cure him of his terror and loneliness:

JOHNNY: Don’t go away.
VIENNA: I haven’t moved.
JOHNNY: Tell me something nice.
VIENNA: Sure. What do you want to hear?
JOHNNY: Lie to me. Tell me all these years you’ve waited.
VIENNA: All these years I’ve waited.
JOHNNY: Tell me you’d have died if I hadn’t come back.
VIENNA: I would have died if you hadn’t come back.
JOHNNY: Tell me you still love me like I love you.
VIENNA: I still love you like you love me.
JOHNNY: Thanks.

An analysis of Hayden’s testimony can probably go no further than this. For at this moment, we bump up against the ceiling of accepted modes of interpretation and give way to the reverie that I insist is probably necessary in any study of film performance. The camera does little throughout the exchange. In fact, for most of the scene, the camera sits behind Hayden and above his shoulder, and little is visible

of him aside from his ear and hair, and a corner of his jacket, above which sits Crawford's glowing face. Johnny's voice is tearful, while Vienna's is terse. But the overriding emotion in this scene is Johnny's terror that his fantasy may be truly lost and that this loss is his fault entirely: shame and fear.

The voice demanding to be deceived ("lie to me") also acknowledges the inadequacy and fantasy of self-descriptive speech ("Tell me you still love me like I love you") as well as the necessity of self-preservation ("Tell me you'd have died if I hadn't come back"). Johnny's voice is Hayden's voice, as it yearns for a kind of collectivity—here a romantic couple with a socially disastrous division of gender—that will survive on the surface, through fantasy and emotion, but nothing else. That is the contradiction and tension in the identity that Hayden builds, and that films such as this build for Hayden. When Vienna introduces Johnny Guitar, the Dancin' Kid tells them both: "That's no name!" Johnny does not deny that his name is improbable and fantastic, but only replies with a grin: "Care to change it?" Thus, Johnny Logan invents "Johnny Guitar" not as an attempt at acceding to normal life, but rather as an extreme artifice: a fantasy of an impossible character that, in its unachievable coolness and gender play, also characterizes a cultural impossibility. Meanwhile, Hayden continues to invent (and be invented as) the character of a bellowing and nomadic rogue, why? Precisely because that character simply cannot exist outside of literature or film, insofar as it rarely exceeds the available clichés of either.

Emotion, unlike affect, is often thought to be too ideologically compromised and generically narrativized to be politically useful. Yet Hayden's performance of terror provides a powerful counter-example. That terror is not a kind of expression, but an ideal of expressiveness, and a mobile, multiform object of reading. Borne across and outside literature and film, it marginalizes both the techno-institutional and aesthetico-formalist questions of medium. It invites us to see an emotion as a

rich object of interpretation, no matter where it appears, and one that refuses to be subordinate to the biographies, books, and movies that mean to narrativize it. An emotion is rich in this way, not in spite of its ideological and narrative compromises, but because it is nothing other than such materially legible compromises. Hayden's terror thus offers a way of reading a multiform political and cultural scene in the Fifties, whose turmoil and thick documentation are more ambiguous than any of the canons or lives that make it up. But it is also a troubling impetus behind that scene: a fear and shame that are generated not by state control, but by a cowed and mobile, artificial and awkwardly textual subject, who demands of himself just what Johnny demands of Vienna: "Lie to me."

Asked at the end of his life how he would want to be remembered, Hayden told his publicist Dennis Brown: "Oh something like this: he was a beautiful old fucked-up son of a bitch who loved touching strangers passing by" (in Brown 127). This is apt as a confession to the emotion that characterized his diverse body of work, inasmuch as it resonates with the combination of abnegation and aggrandizement that Hayden directed at himself, but also insofar as it suggests a kind of social bond that is also a "wandering," a "lostness," and a performance. But it is also apt as a cliché, and as the lie that a withering anti-social alcoholic might well be expected to tell himself and others, purely because it sounds like something that an aging movie star might say to a young protégé. It belongs to a highly generic form, the deathbed confession, and is thus a form of speech that is poetic and cinematic, as well as pathetic. It is a sad thing to say, and describes a negative feeling that belongs to an isolated old man who has entirely submitted to the role he created for himself.

I close the dissertation with this instance because of how vividly Hayden produces a void and a medium with his emotion, terror. Terror belongs to the genealogy of void because it is negativist without being nihilist. It destroys, it even destroys itself, and yet it persists and survives as something that is not quite just

dissent. Instead of simply countering consensus, it lodges there as the other of consensus, a space immune to compromise because it is always already compromised. Terror is a constitutive disruption in the work of postwar post-politics, not because it advocates for any particular politics, but rather because it refuses to accept the post-political premise of satisfaction with the current order. As a medium, terror is just as disrespectful of what divides film from literature, and both from culture, as it is disrespectful of complacent consensus. It is intermedial only insofar as it calls us to produce a newly fluid concept of medium that is emotional and political before it is spiritual, spiritual before it is aesthetic, and aesthetic before it is technological.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of a history of art, a medium is a basic device or substrate of an artist's practice: just as wood may be taken to be a sculptural medium among the raw materials of stone, wire, glass, and bronze, on this view, so might sculpture be taken to be one artistic medium among painting, drawing, dancing, or flute-playing. Alternately, from the standpoint of a history of what are called "mass media" or "electronic media," a medium is instead the technical apparatus upon which expression or representation may then occur, secondarily: TV or paper or celluloid, newspaper or website, print or speech or radio. In the art historical situation, medium is the tool or basic material of an artist, or else as the object of aesthetic judgment by a critic, reader, or viewer. And in the case of the study of communications, a medium is the machine or technology that is used by an industry of entertainment or communication, by a user (of anything from computers to written language or speech), or by a spectator-participant. And yet, a medium may also be plenty of other things, and can name nearly any substance through which something moves, or any figure that stands in between one thing and another thing.

Medium is merely a spatial designation that marks a middle, any middle, or any zone of a passage. This passage could be a passage of power or of knowledge or wealth, say between a political subject and a sovereign state, a human being and a divine being, or a living person and a dead person. But like the aesthetic definition, any of these spatial and political definitions will take a back seat in common usage to the anti-aesthetic, technological, and often instrumental definition that has been gaining ascendancy at least since the rise of newspapers, and certainly since the rise of television in the 1950s and of the discipline of media studies in the decade after. The void between media is also a void in the very concepts of representation and, more particularly, of communication: a gulf that divides two media and so prevents

any communication between them; but also an inbuilt difference of each medium to itself (the zone of mediation between, say, its aesthetic and political strivings or its cultural and its technical components) by which it exceeds the tidy, presumably shared category of communicative medium. As W.H. Auden wrote in 1962: “If two members of the public meet and speak to each other, the function of their words is not to convey meaning or arouse passion but to conceal by noise the silence and solitude of the void” (462). In short, whatever communication film and literature may actually achieve, communicating is not all that they do; and what communication they do achieve is often a form of disavowal: a denial that communicative activity is basically futile and fundamentally noisy.

The essence of the art or aesthetics of void is in the manipulation of non-communicative noise. Art, on this view, is neither immaterial nor free of ideology. But it is hard to read and therefore almost uniquely opposed to the imaginary world-shrinking inspired by the fields of global telecom and industrial entertainment. An aesthetic approach to the void can produce a formal language capable of prising apart the tightening stranglehold of technocratic language over art and cultural objects that are so much more than technological. It is my contention, though certainly not mine alone, that an ideology of communication and information (quite apart from communicative and informative *practices*) has facilitated a movement within politics, art, and culture away from community as a site of perpetual struggle in difference, and toward a goal of unified world culture, social sameness, and a level human economy. Digital media, in particular, have served as both the justification and the vehicle of this movement. The diagrams for this ideological procedure are familiar, and not always drawn with a skeptical eye. Marshall McLuhan dove in early on, enthusiastically (sometimes optimistically, sometimes pessimistically) and famously called it the “global village.” In the language of liberal political theory, like that of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, it has been called an “ideal communication

community,” and thought of as that space where political air gets cleared and crises get resolved. Other more recent spatial metaphors describe a shrinking of the world through the fast motion of technologically facilitated bodies and capital: the “global marketplace,” the “information superhighway,” etc.

The linguist and philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle has described the appeal and promise of such (both utopian and dystopian) dreams of connection:

Dare to communicate, know how to communicate—such is the watchword of our liberal modernity. The promises held out are enticing: communication is the surest means for the individual subject to flourish; she realizes her freedom to the utmost in it, assumes her responsibility in it, enjoys control over her existence and her thought in it. To service such noble needs, a communications industry and institutions of communication have developed: they are regarded as the cutting edge of technological progress and stock-market enrichment...In one hand, modern man holds his steering wheel and in the other...his mobile, on which he is constantly communicating. For modern man is never alone and the most trivial and babbling insights must be communicated forthwith. (214)

One might add “scholarly endeavor” to this list that also includes “technological progress and stock-market enrichment.” For among the theorists of media—including those who teach and write about so-called “old media”—nearly all engage in building knowledge about the rapidly moving hustle-bustle of “new media” now, today: that is, with the goal of communicating, to students and colleagues, the revised rules of efficiency in the conduct of a collective global and national project in communication.

I find that the discourse of aesthetic and political mediation can be held apart from the discourse of communication, if we refuse to see communications technologies as the primary social innovation of the postwar period. Rather than succumb to what I see as this inevitable endpoint of the dominant lines in much contemporary media theory (the telos of a present moment toward which all technologies have developed without accruing non-technological traits), I would hope instead to isolate what I see as the historical root of its discourse: a postwar period of rapid changes in the conduct as well as the critical epistemology of culture.

That is why I have focused upon the aesthetic and cultural radicalism that opened up, within and between film and literature, during the very postwar period that gave birth to a conservative movement and to the basically liberal apparatus that Jodi Dean has called “communicative capitalism.”⁴³ It is under the aegis of an aesthetic theory that I have brought together film and literature in this dissertation. Both forms, it seems, were left behind by what McLuhan called the “electric media”: television, radio, telephones, and eventually computers, all of which facilitated the shrinking of geographical difference and led to McLuhan’s fanciful vision of a communal “global village.” The shortcomings of this vision are many, in that the global village promises a new world determined by technology, in which cultural and political differences are erased through long-distance communications (that is, telephony) and the imposition of a common audio-visual language (that is, television). Desirable or not, this vision assumes that such unified forms of togetherness are even possible. An ideal of total inclusiveness emerges, therefore, that pits the global village, and communicative media as such, against all forms of social distinction.

Enabled by what Daniel Bell insisted was a real “eclipse of distance” between world cities and economies, the global village has become a powerful figure for capitalism’s victory over communism, as technological communication has evidently proven itself to be a better tool than workers’ movements for the construction of a harmonious worldwide community. The global village, in other words, is in part a product of the Cold War narrative. The sudden ability to compress time and space and so produce shared “global events,” as Armand Mattelart argues, “has not proved to necessarily create a closer-knit world community. One is rather tempted to

⁴³ It may also be worth noting that the theorists of mediation whose points of view most nearly approximate mine, and to whom I owe quite a lot, are very rarely professors of media studies, and very often theorists of political life—like Dean, Giorgio Agamben, or Armand Mattelart—as well as philosophers, linguists, and literary theorists—like Lecercle, Samuel M. Weber, Jacques Rancière, or Jean-Luc Nancy.

think...we move in leaps and bounds away from the global village toward narrow chauvinism” (104). And the reputedly unifying institution of “new media” is in fact a process whereby political exclusion is itself disavowed and excluded; whereby, rather than being drawn together without prejudice, we are instead pressed into greater and greater “chauvinism” while being taught that prejudice, as such, belongs to an old-media past.

The global village is the story we tell ourselves about a world that can be imagined as a single, fast-moving, postnational marketplace. Old national boundaries and identities have dissolved, according to this storyline, and no mere government can anymore stand in the way of an individual’s access to democratized information through high technology. This is bootstrap ideology writ large, and sustained by the myth that unique and productive collectives can rise through the force of communication technologies to overcome all challenges, from population groups or identity formations with the temerity to see themselves through other, non-technological, means. The strategic intervention of this dissertation has been to identify older forms that would resist such a disavowal, through their production of techniques and themes of negativity, and occasionally through their explicit attention to such forms of prejudice and exclusion. I take aesthetics to be the name of this sort of production and attention, while technology tends to appear here as a sort of cultural by-product.

The narrative that dresses itself as a critical left history of U.S. culture is in fact deeply embedded with technophilia and the ideology of communication. That narrative, roughly speaking, follows: Emerging at the start of the Twentieth Century and rising to its apex in the two decades following World War II was a massive shift in the sphere of public culture and popular representation, away from film and literature, and toward what McLuhan would begin to call the “electric media.” The old media made way for, and then gave way to, the new ones. The radical

inventiveness of the twenties and thirties (the pairing of modernism and proletarianism in art) fell entirely away in the fifties, or worse, got caught in a sterile and recursive feedback loop, conducted under the repressive signs of Eisenhower, Nixon, McCarthy, etc. Then at last, beginning in the late sixties, young people in America reached their political maturity, just as communications technologies, in their own maturity, managed to shrink the earth and make it accessible, not just to militaristic expansion but also to good liberal charity. Breathing final, angsty gasps on their deathbeds, at the same moment, were the narrative film on celluloid and the American novel in print. Art and politics merged in those texts for the first and last time—in films of Cassavettes, Altman, Scorsese, novels by Pynchon, Morrison, Roth—before the novel and the film began their long, slow slumps toward archaism, elitism, and obscurity. Now (that is, in the diegetic “now” of the half-century old narrative of “new” media), as never before in history, we seem likely to say: “never before in history.” Never before in history has technology moved so fast and grown so quickly, and never before in history has human life across the globe been lived as one common life.

We are successfully ridding ourselves of paper books, celluloid film, and the inconveniences of national boundaries and identities, so the narrative goes, so that as never before in history we feel that we might even solve all problems—from the biomedical to the military—together, and to move forward together as one human community, one global village. The very metaphor of the global village has always, and rightly, been about sublating just those same old forms—nations, movies, and print books—that kept us mired for so long in interpersonal distance, sensory numbness, and pointless squabbling between neighbors as between empires. Those forms belong to a pre-post-imperial moment. They are larval technology: synthetic and inorganic, but not yet transcendently humanist or communitarian. Now we can reach out to touch someone—with telephony, sure, but also with radio, television,

universal Internet access, and the touted “cloud” of disembodied digital information. Under the signs of celluloid and print, we were never so capable of touching, let alone healing or feeding someone, anyone, anywhere. The preceding set of propositions is a kind of composite view, through which U.S. society has begun to see itself as having abandoned the antiquated forms of art and politics, and along with them, all those old, merely social forms of difference: race, gender, sexuality, geography, and class.

This narrative belongs in italics, indented, and between ellipses, since it cannot be erased entirely. It is a terrible story we tell ourselves, it has become too familiar, but it won’t go away, because it is girded by common—that is, bad—sense. In its place, we might install histories of medium that would be as Waldo Frank imagined them: tracing the vital movement of human collectives, away from the institutional norms that bind them, toward a non-institutional or differently institutional form of organization and representation, even at the risk of disaggregating or disorganizing entirely, in the production of a life lived in or toward the void, a life that is open and productive (if also precarious), rather than positivistic and technocratically secure.

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