THE TECHNICS OF REALISM:

MEDIA AND SOCIAL REPORTAGE IN NARRATIVE ART AFTER 1965

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Daniel Murphy

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Kate Marshall, Director

Graduate Program in English

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Abstract

by

Daniel Murphy

This project examines realism in fiction, film, and television after 1965. Questioning the analytic power of terms like "metafiction" and reconsidering the varied legacy of New Journalism, I argue that the media-intensive strategies common to newer strains of realism reinvigorate a literary program dating to the nineteenth-century social novel. A commitment to mimetic social reportage obtains in and after postmodernism, with realistic historical fiction emerging in recent years as the dominant mode of narrative art in American consensus culture. The texts I assess index a fascination with crafting a broad-strokes, "non-fiction" political history through a media-intensive, verité style contouring the familiar designs of popular genre fiction. More than identifying continuities between older and newer realisms, the project proposes that Realism as a cultural commonplace must be understood as a formal response to a crisis of knowledge, one that is inextricable from the fact of mediation and technology's unrepresentable impact on forms of seeing, knowing, and thinking. The analysis methodologically

foregrounds the epistemic connection between technics and technique as this interplay guides representational practices and drives realism's narratological interest in mediation. The dissertation establishes a new critical idiom for describing how different texts theorize the intelligibility of the social through its communication in technological media. Focusing on a range of artists including Jenji Kohan, Don DeLillo, Kathryn Bigelow, Thomas Pynchon, Terrence Malick, and Rachel Kushner, and assessing texts such as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Libra* alongside *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Wire*, and *Orange is the New Black*, the project proposes a techno-epistemological account of new realism and shows how media-intensive strategies in docudrama work to theorize, and even justify, the perceived cultural work of narrative art.

For Jill, John, and WLd ThNgZ

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Figure 4.14: This shot mixes a helicopter tracking shot, common in blockbuster films, with the lens flare and shaky cam consonant with indie and amateur filmmaking. Shots like these in *Man of Steel* indicate the film's style of realism, which I would argue via Jameson is in many cases affective. While the image on some level may feel authentic, it

arguably feels "authentic" where it on many levels conforms to comparable filmic representations of the Midwest in mainstream American cinema and visual culture. The Midwest here is less a genuine object that exists prior to a neutral camera as much as a highly rhetorical visual genre. The lens flare, tinting, and composition of the shot suggest as much. I argue that this genre is freighted with an investment in a certain economic mythology and proletariat ethos, one that the film's product-placement reveals as such where it makes clear the ideological function of this myth………………..……….. [267]

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INTRODUCTION

THE TECHNICS OF REALISM

Why does the camera shake when the tyrannosaur charges the jeep?

Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Jurassic Park* (1993) is not a realistic film. Nor is it an obvious candidate for consideration as a realist artwork. After all, the movie is about cloned dinosaurs living on a tycoon's island-based zoological park. Predictably, things go awry and adventures ensue. There is also chaos theory (sort of) and Jeff Goldblum. Based on Michael Crichton's "techno-thriller" novel, the film is a fanciful mix of sci-fi, action, and horror – all tied together with Spielberg's signature interest in broken families and elected kinship. Neither realism nor its corresponding vocabulary would appear especially helpful for discussing the film. And yet the *Jurassic Park* production team emphasized *verisimilitude* throughout principal photography and post-production.[1] Particularly when it came to credibly "realizing" the blockbuster's main attraction:

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[1] As did Richard Donner's 1978 lighthearted and fantastical *Superman*, the director and crew of *Jurassic Park* assumed for their guiding mantra the idea of *verisimilitud*e. The famous tagline for Donner's film: "you'll believe a man can fly." The relatively simple but effective teaser-trailer for *Superman* consisted of a single shot of the sky, taken from a camera attached to the nose of a fighter jet, implying point-of-view (POV) focalization, as the frame moved forward through a cloudy skyscape at terrific velocity. In thinking about marketing the spectacle of a film boasting realistic depictions of a flying man, the technical operations behind the shot indicate the basis of the anthropomorphic Cold War-era wish-fulfillment fantasy on offer: visualizing in a realistic cinematic vernacular an omnipotent airplane-man hybrid.

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believably living, breathing (and eating) dinosaurs. Not unlike the fictional park at the center of the story, the film's allure resided in letting audiences experience long-extinct species *realized* before their eyes.

In trying to present the most compelling images possible, the crew worked tirelessly to fulfill Spielberg's dictate for "life-like, photo-realistic" dinosaurs (*Making Jurassic Park*, 1999). It is worth pausing to assess this combination of terms. Conjoining "life-like" and "photo-realistic" links together two diverging sets of ideas. The first concerns the appearance of an observed object as it is seen firsthand. The second conceives of reality through the testimony of its documentation. There is an important difference between the scenarios "as if there were real dinosaurs" and "as if one could take real photographs of dinosaurs." "Photo-realism" consociates unrehearsed, *immediate* objectivity with the stuff of *mediation*; its theory of reality summons and relies upon the terms of the technological medium (the photograph). The *Jurassic Park* example may seem unduly specific, but the film's approach to representation in the short sequence I've identified bespeaks a narratological ethos common to newer strains of realism. It evinces a moment of *media-intensive* style, entreating a documentary-like perspective to depict something obviously fictional.[2]

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[2] Katherine N. Hayles pioneers the concept "media-intensive" in *Writing Machines* (2002). Owing to the book's pedagogic design, Hayles's describes media-intensiveness as a technique in *media specificity* – readers and critics need to be aware of the ways texts take advantage of the distinct expressive potential of their mediums. As a heuristic, media specificity is helpful for thinking about how different media create distinct meanings. As a historiography or critical approach to media at large, however, media-specificity is less helpful. Media obviously do not work in isolation to one another or subordinate to each to other in straightforward ways, and, media do not precede one another or fall prey to "better, more adaptable" media in a linear or predictable manner. There is no media telos. As Bernhard Siegert has recently suggested, "media specificity and its program may now appear to us an accident of history" ("An Epistemology of Disruption," Plenary Address, Princeton-Weimar Summer School for Media Studies, June 2016).

I want to start this project and its consideration of "the technics of realism" by pulling apart an idea like photo-realism. What does it suggest as an artistic priority, an idea of representation, or even a cultural technique? What is the nature of the connection between technological media and a grammar of the real?

I will be arguing that "realism" describes an epistemological situation as much it designates a set of artistic practices or functions as a periodization in the history of art and literature. Realism must be understood as an evolving feature of consensus culture wherein mimesis obtains as a contested but vital political activity. By synthesizing media theory with new formalist analysis, I assess how realist fiction, film, and television after 1965 respond to and reflect the fact that media technologies produce conditions of knowability in different historically situated contexts, shaping what can be known, said, and perceived, what can be nominated for "reality" or not. My goal is to offer a new critical idiom for describing the relationship between technics and technique, media and forms of perception, the ties between technologies, techno-semiotic conditions, social formations and cultural forms. Realism is never just about reality, its revelation and its representation – it involves finding forms for representing *the communication of reality* where this figures as a pressing social activity. Reality is itself plus its communication, a fact which requires a new way of assessing realism and describing its cultural work in epistemological terms.

As a way into these broader inquiries, let us return for a moment to my opening question: why does the camera shake when the tyrannosaur charges the jeep? What can this seemingly minor detail in a popular film suggest about a perceived relationship of representation and media? I want to begin here because the shaking camera discloses how

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the film as suggests its cultural operations in spectacle through media-intensive realism. Let me explain.

One of the most famous scenes in recent cinematic history, the initial tyrannosaur attack in *Jurassic Park* stages a well-executed "reveal" of its star dinosaur and stands today as a dramatic declaration of computer-generated imagery's (CGI) arrival on the scene of mainstream filmmaking. Now a standard arrangement in Hollywood blockbusters, the sequence synthesizes practical effects and digital inscription. "In-camera" effects such as lighting tricks, stunts, and massive, animatronics were coordinated with digital effects and CGI modeling in post-production to create the illusion of a massive, naturally moving animal.[3]

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[3] The ontology of the photographic image meaningfully changes; no longer a medium that simply stores direct impressions of light on film stock, the medium's visual information changes when the filmic image, materially, becomes a composite site of multiple stages of inscription. This situation, of course, existed well before 1993, but chiefly in the form of extra-diegetic animations and title sequences; the illusion of the shot's ontic integrity itself remained intact. Now, since the majority of studio and independent films are shot digitally, there is compositional and material continuity at the level of information between the initial shot and extra-camera digital effects. See Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2002)

Figure 1.1: The tyrannosaur from *Jurassic Park* (1993) charges after Ian
Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum)

The tyrannosaur attack begins when young Tim Murphy (Joseph Razello) feels

the percussive impact terms of the approaching animal's heavy footsteps from inside one

of the park's electrically-powered tour jeeps. Perceiving these initial, almost subsonic

tremors before anyone else in the party, Tim senses the footfalls before noticing a glass of

water in one of the jeep's cup holders.[4] To Tim's dismay, the water in the cup begins to

ripple, indicating the impending attack and portending the violence that will upend the

park's pristine, consumer-oriented appearance and its attendant fantasy of total control. It

is important that the non-descript everyday object - - the water glass in the cup holder

connoting an infrastructural economy of sedentary comfort - - becomes a medium for

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[4] It is important that the youthful Tim (aged 8) perceives these extra-linguistic signifiers first –
before the animal is seen or identified, Tim's primordial senses suggest a privileged relation to the
Lacanian Real, a point enunciated by the faux-amniotic quality of the vehicle and its illusion of security.
The vehicle is a metaphor for the Park's subtending a cinematic spectacle a la realism – the tyrannosaur
breaks the veneer of voyeurism by attacking the car and endangering the viewer, perforating its
confinement in the "screen" of the car window and assuming another kind of physical reality.

another kind of message. As Tim fixes his gaze on the cup, the camera in a point-of-view, eyeline match quivers in unison with the rippling water. Diegetic surfaces and extra-diegetic instruments simultaneously register the presence of the animal before it is known by the characters or properly visualized by the narrating camera.

Once the attack has begun, when the tyrannosaur escapes her enclosure and assails the jeep in which Tim and Lex are hiding, Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) exits his vehicle, attempting to distract the predator with an emergency flare. Ian Malcom (Goldblum) follows Grant, lighting another flare to draw the tyrannosaur's attention while imploring Grant to rescue the kids. Turning away from Tim and Lex's (now overturned) jeep, the tyrannosaur charges forward at Malcolm and the camera, accelerating with heavy, lurching steps. As the dinosaur thunders after its prey, the camera heaves with each footfall. In short order, the tyrannosaur overtakes and grievously injures Malcolm. The brief chase scene is one of the most ambitious shots in the film; the tyrannosaur that closes in on Malcolm is composed entirely through CGI.

The camera's shaking might simply be ornamental. Rapidly backtracking on a dolly as Malcom runs away from the dinosaur and toward the viewer, the camera's already kinetic participation in the shot is further amplified by its reverberating in concert with depicted events. The shaking is rhetorical and descriptive, conveying a plot-level 'world urgency' as well as communicating the animal's size and its (nearing!) position in story space. The camera's movement subtly certifies the image's referential integrity. Whenever possible, the filmmakers used hydraulics-based animatronics for the dinosaurs because of their material tangibility – the producers worried how CGI images might look

under scrutiny, especially when they appeared in the same frame as people. But Spielberg

wanted to present the tyrannosaur's full body, requiring the animal move naturalistically

in-frame. Contributing to the dinosaur's credible on-screen 'physicality,' the shaking

camera vests the scene with a palpable sense of the here-and-now. If the (would-be)

profilmic object may or may not appear believable as a digitally constructed image

inserted into the frame after the fact of shooting, the shaking camera suggests active

recording and coincident witness through a manufactured technical signature; the photo

of "photo-realism" is implied through the effects a massive animal might have had on

filming. In other words, the camera narrator simulates imperfect conditions of

spontaneous, unscripted *live* recording. Life-like *and* photo-real.

While the appearance of docudramatic techniques in mainstream filmmaking was

hardly new in 1993, *Jurassic Park* offers a useful starting point for thinking about a

normalized media-intensive register at the dawn of digital cinema. The production team

used new computer-aided techniques to simulate the dinosaur's *actually being filmed* by a

stand-alone analog device. The sequence stages active documentation by insinuating a

pre-digital means of capture – *this* stylistic representation of a newly outmoded analog

recording, together with the CG dinosaur, is what comprises the shot's content.[5] It is

worth noting that the cinematography in this respect appears to violate a key tenet of

Hollywood realism. Conventional Hollywood narration, understood both as a

narratological template and formal system, underscores continuity and embraces

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[5] The sequence obliquely naturalizes what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe in *Remediation*, by extending McLuhan's arguments, wherein the content of new media is other media. Later, I will qualify "remediation" against Hayles's preferable "intermediation." Bolter and Grusin's perspective is nonetheless helpful for clarifying the type of media-intensive techniques we can see casually inflecting a range of different artworks.

storytelling strategies that elide markers of a film's material production. This long-established and popular approach to "realism" in mainstream filmmaking strives to mask the filmmaking apparatus and camouflage the artificiality of the cinema image, naturalizing the syntagmatic logic of movies in the interest of presenting a unified, immersive fictional universe.[6] The overwhelming majority of Hollywood films made in this style treat the camera as a transparent window onto complete, self-sustaining worlds that, however fictional in their own right, are visually analogous to "real life." Indeed, Spielberg's camera assumes this posture through most of *Jurassic Park*.

But the shaking camera momentarily breaks from this template by quietly announcing the mechanics of narration at a key instant of heightened dramatic tension. Yet, at the same time, the film does not suddenly veer toward self-reflexivity, "knowingness," or metafiction.[7] Though metafiction and realism are sometimes thought to be opposed in kind, we can see a very different outlook unfolding in *Jurassic Park* and in a number of realistic and 'unrealistic' films since.[8] The shaking camera reminds the audience that a camera is present and recording what is happening. But rather than

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[6] See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's seminal *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) for a discussion of mainstream Hollywood "realism."

[7] For all its pioneering special effects, *Jurassic Park*'s approach to media-intensity does not suggest avant-garde or "post-classical" filmmaking. *In Post-classical Cinema: An International Poetics of Film Narration* (2009),Eleftheria Thanouli establishes a "new paradigm in narration" designated through the titular "post-classical cinema," a heuristic informed by postmodernism criticism and which accounts for the self-awareness, self-reference, and sliding signification she identifies in a subset of mainstream international films from the mid-1970s and through the late 90s and early 2000s. These films do not move to reject classical narration as much as they deliberate classical Hollywood technique as a formal system.

[8] J.J. Abrams, Zack Snyder, Kathryn Bigelow, among many others, are filmmakers who have popularized camera-intensive techniques across a range of "realistic" genre films. J.J. Abrams, for instance, has popularized lens flares in sci-fi films; Zack Snyder hand-held filmmaking, slow-motion, and smash zooms; Kathryn Bigelow an on-the-ground, photojournalist-like zero degree of film style in her war dramas.

announcing a narrator and thereby drawing attention to the artificial nature of the image and contrivance of the project in which it appears, the image's inflection by a present, recording camera furnishes the scene with an aura of realistic "immediacy."

The shaking camera rehabilitates the technological allure of early cinema – where the technological feat of mimesis is indistinguishable from its cultural formation in an economy of spectacle. Jean-Louis Comolli states in his seminal "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field," emphasizing the technical constructedness of the film image, that cinema's producing reality and projecting "life as it is" is itself an ideological fantasy of the technology ala realism, where it prepares images of "real life" for consumption and commodification (42). But rather than hiding the image's mechanical composition, a stylized intimation of the camera's technical operations as we see in *Jurassic Park* credentials the image with the kinds of direct-mimetic plausibility against which Comolli argues. Where Comolli presses a Marxist argument in apparatus theory to highlight the technical construction of film images in opposition to a positivist interpretation of the camera, Spielberg's cinematography mixes these two attitudes to communicate a strategy recognizable as "realism." This is not, in the original scenario Comolli feared, the camera pretending to objective vision and masquerading as the unmediated, natural eye (reifying, as it were, false consciousness under the guise of impartial documentation free of ideological bias). The camera's technicity instead communicates the preferred terms of its narrational propinquity.

It is worth reiterating that the narration's admitting to the presence of an actively recording camera doesn't disrupt the story, arrest the scene's suspense, or otherwise break the immersive continuity the film has worked to sustain. On the other side of the

realism question, the sequence highlights a fundamental limitation of 'realistic' cinema: neither the film nor this particular scene beguiles the audience or tricks viewers into believing that a living tyrannosaurus-rex was found in Hawaii and persuaded to star in the film as a monstrous caricature of itself. If the apocryphal story is to be believed, the 1895 screening of the Lumière brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat* sent terrified, novice cinema attendees running to the exits in fear that a real locomotive was barreling down on them from the screen. Consisting of a single fifty second shot, the black-and-white documentary apparently had audience members envisioning the cinema screen as a window to another dimension in the manner of virtual reality. This obviously did not occur in the case of *Jurassic Park*.

Figure 1.2: Still from *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat* (1895). Notice the way Spielberg's shot of the approaching tyrannosaur parallels the Lumière brothers' film. More than wanting to establish the fact of the allusion, I would suggest that Spielberg's foray in cinematic realism is attentive to cinema history and media-specific in very deliberate ways.

I want to stress that the realism I identify in the shot has less to do with the putative reality of the tyrannosaur and more to do with the tyrannosaur as an intra-textual media event. The single shot in Spielberg's film is a miniature version of what we will later see in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), a film whose retelling of the CIA's ten-year search for Osama bin Laden ends with a protracted episode in verité docudrama, a highly focalized thirty-six-minute-long, "real-time" depiction of the SEAL Team Six's operation on the night of May 2nd, 2011. These intra-textual media artifacts warrant considering how form modifies an engagement with content suggested as especially real. The point I want to make about the tyrannosaur is that its mimetic plausibility, its fidelity to an imagined "real" dinosaur, is only the first part of the special effect. The second and more interesting part is the semiotic situation in media in which the tyrannosaur is integrated in order to signify as real.

The film stages "noise," underscoring the process of photo-documentation by simulating conditions under which the straightforward exchange of information is impinged, influenced, or negotiated by the technical means of capture. It dramatizes a model of communication described by Michel Serres in *The Parasite* (1980). Rather than communication involving a binaristic, transactional exchange between parties, Serres argues that any communicative act structurally solicits its interference by a third element. The signal of any transmission is constituted with and against the infrastructural fact of its possible disruption.[9] In the words of John Durham Peters, "communication" does not

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[9] As Serres later argues, the disruptions that noise and interference cause are potentially productive where they result in the formation of a new system (52). I want to talk about this kind of disruption in the terms of extra-linguistic signification, what Jameson describes as realism's guiding desire to "represent but not mean." Where Jameson is working in a logocentric and representational parameter defined by his literary purview, realism as a larger cultural practice suggests an epistemological problem inextricable from

designate a transaction of information between parties; it instead describes the total

environment in which information - - disruptions and noise as well as the intended signal

- - can be formalized and "exchanged" (1999). Thus, mediation as a constant and ongoing

process accrues an ontic, topographic dimension; discrete communication acts are

always, in a sense, second-order expressions of an underlying techno-epistemological

environment.[10] The fabric of the real, one's sense of being-in-the-world, is accordingly

inflected.[11] Spielberg's shaking camera technique discloses that the reality to be revealed

is the reality of reality's communication in technological media. The technique moves to

represent a technical situation, stylistically accommodating Katherine N. Hayles's insight

that "[art] registers the impact of information in its materiality, in the ways in which its

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technics that Stiegler will call "disadjustment." This will be discussed at length shortly – see Introduction subheading "Technics and Techniques."

[10] In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles offers a strong version of this claim in the statements, "enacted and represented bodies are mediated by technologies so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer be meaningfully separated from the human subject" and "thought cannot be disconnected from the embodied form enacting it" (ix, xiv).

[11] This is as good a time as any to briefly address the ontology vs. epistemology debate that has raged in postmodern criticism for decades, largely under the influence of Brian McHale's early work. For my purposes, I am not interested in ontological debates or the discussions of essences. Instead, this work proceeds from a premise informed by media and systems theory, chiefly the work of Niklas Luhmann, ascribing to operational constructivism. This viewpoint assumes the constructivist and correlationalist logics of post-structuralism but attributes an ontic nature to discursive and techno-semiotic formations. To clarify, Foucault's discourse analysis and archaeology of knowledge, as Kittler famously points out, limits itself to language, linguistics, and text-based representation. Technologies and media are, for Foucault, just tools or institutions for disseminating the content of dominant regimes of truth. Luhmann's sense of the system, in part informed by sociotechnical systems theory, describes (even vaguely) an in-effect reality continually (re)produced from the complex interworking and *self-organizing* aggregate of media, mediation, and discourse. Whereas critics like Jean Baudrillard decry the dematerialization of the real in the face of simulacra, the precession of charismatic images over and away from a privileged relationship to an empirical bedrock of existence, I reject the logocentric basis of the claim as well as its alarmist media historiography. I prefer to examine the realities tended by new media epistemes. Forms of measure, as well as that being measured, are components of the real – this relation between object, tool, and human sensorium, what McLuhan calls in *Understanding Media* the "ratio of sense relations," comprise our provisional and operational reality – Joseph Vogl will later recast this formulation as the "applied geometry" of media. The methodological emphasis being on how reality is construed rather than what, essentially, it is. Which is all to say that the epistemological is, point of technical fact, the ontological.

physical characteristics are mobilized as resources to create meaning" (7, 2005). Pure narrative information, being the tyrannosaur and the physical fact of its attack, is authenticated by its becoming mediated.[12]

In staging reality's deictic communication in media, the camera narrator deviates from acting as a straightforward, transparent window and assumes the flip-side of "transparence": not seeing through the medium, but the medium having an openness to being seen. Not only does the narration model this second kind of transparence, *it treats it as a version of the first*. Removing the barriers between audience and object enthrones the camera's provisional claims on reality. Recapitulating an interpretation of film that so attracted André Bazin to the medium for its being a technology that could faithfully capture and store impressions of the ephemeral, so "immortalizing the moral," the technique I'm describing harbors a desire for extra-human perspicacity. A quasi-empiricist fantasy of perceptional embodiment oversees the paradoxical marriage of mediation and "immediacy."

It is in this fashion that newer strains of realism revisit and modify traditional realist practices. As Katherine Kearns describes in *Nineteenth-Century Realism: Through the Looking Glass* (1996), realism's attempt to faithfully describe reality belies a more complex approach to representation:

> Realism, often charged with blind-siding social, political, and epistemological complexities, with throwing considerable weight being the status quo, manages, nonetheless to communicate its sense of itself as a bifurcated and inadequate accommodation of any holistic reality. (7)

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[12] I am using "becoming media" in the sense Joseph Vogl proposes. Vogl states: "Media make things readable, audible, perceptible, but in so doing have a tendency to erase themselves and their constitutive sensory function, making themselves imperceptible and 'anesthetic'" (16, 2008).

Kearns attests uncertainty rather than certainty drives realist technique. Description is a performance of social knowing enacted through a textual representation of active perception. One of the distinguishing features of nineteenth-century literary realism is its interplay of third and first person perspectives, a formal dialectic that works to present 'objective' story information through a subjective, firsthand experience of that which is being described. Fredric Jameson attests in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) that realist narration moves to avoid straightforward signification. In order to escape the route determinations and entrenched networks of association that inhere in language, realism aims to *represent but not mean*. It presses to "communicate a reality bare of communication." Jameson identifies in realism an attempt to elide literary significations and get at "sensations" that "simply exist" (29). Prizing sensation before its linguistic codification, the realist novel enjoins an extra-linguistic, affective "immediacy" through "an intensified representational presence." As a matter of formal technique, this entails scenes of extended description where the objective scale of third-person narration is focalized through the eyes of a wandering "explorer protagonist" (28). The narrative consciousness that prevails in nineteenth-century realist fiction is that of an observing ethnographer-detective – a figure whose proliferating descriptions register a density beyond meaning (34).

In newer strains of realism, this figuration still applies. But newer realisms embrace the *technical* aspects of an extra-human, quasi third-person ethnographer-detective. Its representation gravitates toward what Wolfgang Ernst advances in media archaeography, "an awareness of moments when media themselves, not exclusively

humans anymore, become active 'archaeologists' of knowledge" (62, 2012).[13] New

realism entreats and moves to represent the extraneous, extra-linguistic signifying

capacities of technological media where technicity itself arises as a kind of reality effect.

This entails representing technological otherness in positive terms as it bears on the

rendering of the perceptible real. New realism both performs and represents what

Bernhard Siegert identifies in restating Serres, "in all communication, each expression,

appeal, and type of referencing is preceded by a reference to interruption, difference,

deviation…a mediate, a middle, an intermediary… constituted by technical artefacts"

(34, 2008). Indicating the kinds of metaleptic energy and media-fetishizing strategies that

define new realism, the shaking camera is just one example of how different narratives

will move between the registers of transparence I've suggested. Imagining that direct

mimesis is possible, valid, and, in the final instance, desirable, it also discloses an affinity

for the material contingencies of firsthand mediation.

The imperative to detect the real through its being recorded is itself incorporated

in the formal character of the narration. New realism retains but *retrains* the aesthetics of

observation of an earlier realist tradition. Where nineteenth-century realism mobilizes a

set of techniques in description to simulate direct perception, perception is rendered in

new realism as a biotechnical arrangement. Its aim is not to recreate the thing *qua* thing,

but through its simulation in becoming-media, surpass it and become more in the manner

of hyperreality; the essence of the extra-real derives from the mechanical testimony of its

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[13] Ernst's interest in media generated modes of inscription draws from the gap between the
recording capabilities of technical media and their intended use by humans. According to this analytic
perspective, and returning to the communicative models articulated by Serres and Stuart Hall, Ernst's
method looks to how media often contain extraneous material, commonly known as 'noise' which exists
"outside of human intention or signifying structures."

capture. Newer realisms communicate reality through its observations in media, staging

scenes of its mutual elucidation. This explains why so many contemporary texts are

preoccupied with storylines about collecting data, producing evidence, and scrutinizing

information. Whether it is historical fiction in the manner of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988),

Steve Tomasula's *The Book of Portraiture* (2006), Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006),

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), any slew of "found-footage" films, or

discovered-document, assemblage-style novels including, Mark Danielewski's *House of*

Leaves (2000), Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013), or Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*

(2014), the force of reality is refracted through the metaleptic experience of its

documentation.

Art composed in this style stages *and* represents what Joseph Vogl describes

when he discusses "media-events," events that "are communicated through media, but the

very act of communication simultaneously communicates the specific event-character of

media themselves" (16, 2008). Any object or event represented implies the technological

media that makes it discernible. By contradistinction, technologies are instantiated as

"media" by and through the phenomena they make visible. New realism centrally

concerns this reciprocal determination as it bears on the production of social knowledge

and apparels readers with forms of thinking and knowing. New realist narratives

formally approximate what Dirk Baecker has described in "The Reality of Motion

Pictures" (1996). Baecker, revisiting Siegfried Kracauer, accepts that film is a vehicle for

the "registration and revelation of realities that were previously out of focus." Baecker

adds, however, that this situation does not recapitulate naïve mimesis, whereby reality is

unproblematically captured, stored, and (re)presented. Rather, media do something to the

nature of reality. "The camera's registration and revelation [of reality]," Baecker argues, "makes a difference to the original reality – it becomes a different reality, consisting of itself plus its registration and revelation" (561). The reality depicted, in other words, is the reality of its communication in technological media. After all, reality in this estimation is preformatted retrospectively – it is already *out of focus*. Such a sensibility guides media-intensive style and motivates it relationship with documentary techniques. Across a range of media and genres, we see a preoccupation with finding forms for expressing how objects, occasions, and events come into being as emplotted information structures. Social reportage thereby comes to entail staging how "communication is not primarily information exchange, appeal, or expression but an act that creates order by introducing distinctions" (Siegert 35).

If Spielberg's tyrannosaur may be dismissed as a relatively unimportant example of the larger cultural habitus I am identifying, the stakes of the discussion change when one considers how media-intensive techniques function in socially minded artworks with pedagogical designs. These are novels, films, television shows, or even news specials, documentaries, or infotainment programs conceived to inform as well as entertain. New realism circulates fashionable *forms* of social knowing and suggests its cultural station along these lines. This is why the CNN original documentary series *Declassified: Untold Stories of American Spies* (2016) closely resembles the tone and style of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Interfacing immediacy and hyper-mediation, popular history is in these stories unveiled through its present envelopment in media. 'History' along these lines performs itself as an archive. Joe Sacco's non-fiction graphic novel, *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-1995* (2000), similarly offers a docudramatic re-telling

of true historical events. Drawn from photographs and video footage Sacco took while

working as an embedded journalist in Bosnia, the comic book's distinctive look

underscores its thematic interest in remediation. Its simple but eerily realistic panels

communicate their photographic origins. At the level of its graphic composition, the

novel's diegesis wears an unremitting announcement of its multiple media translations.

Further emphasizing the subjective nature of the narration, Sacco includes himself in the

story, appearing as a cartoon-style narrator alongside more realistically drawn characters.

The tactic estranges the narrator from his subject in visual terms and dramatizes the

observer observing. But these self-reflexive gestures are not offered to recuse the

narrator's story or trivialize its journalistic endeavor. The project offers itself as an

insufficient but necessary corrective to American news media coverage of the conflict.

Foregrounding the artificial quality of its images is a way of tendering an unimpeachable

nomination to a provisional objectivity. Stylized though its images are, the panels retain a

trace of their empirical heritage. Sacco's comic moves between scales of exposition to

discomfort its modes of narrative address. Moments of highly focalized storytelling are

juxtaposed with a recurring third-person narrator whose succinct overview of the relevant

geopolitical history attires readers with a familiar journalistic overview of America's

military involvement in the region. The effect is to dramatize the different evidentiary

status accorded to each narrational mode.[14]

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[14] Sacco's small but devoted cult-following applauds him for contesting the kinds of emplotted structures that organize how mainstream news outlets typically cover American military endeavors.
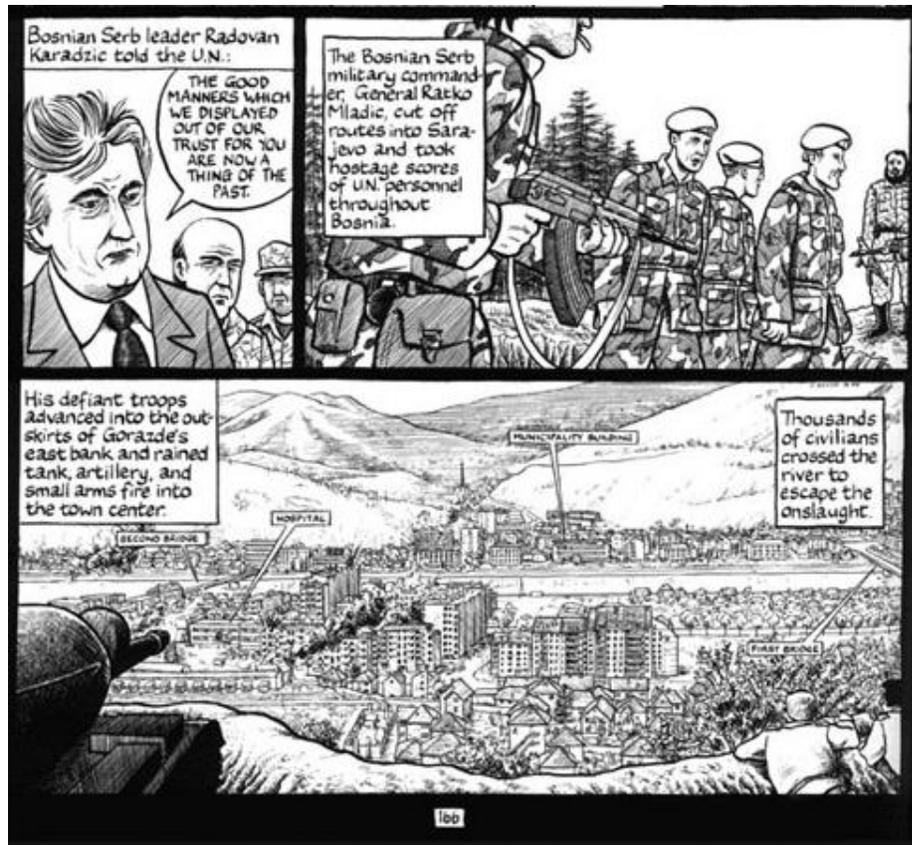
Figure 1.3: This image from Sacco's graphic novel shows how the narration moves between simplistic, cartoon-style images and incredibly detailed "scenes" recalling photographic detail.

The point I want to emphasize is that new realist histories emphasize the act of revealing truth through its documentation. They indicate how parsimonious attention (focus) and technical inscription (production) are articulated through the other under the rubric of a detective observer. But the data detected is rarely the important issue, because there is no presumption that data, words, or figures will in the end accurately correspond to reality. Form thereby supersedes content in a way that is perhaps unexpected given realism's historic predisposition to referentiality. As I have been suggesting, realism is more interested in modeling forms of perception as they allocate a syntax of social knowing. Realist stories stage *looking to reveal*. Militating implicitly against an "official

story," texts like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Libra* (1988), and *Safe Area Goražde* cultivate an insurgent sensibility in evidence gathering and on-the-ground reportage, so crafting a democratic exigence for political storytelling at the level of information. They posit a crisis of knowing, a narratological premise enfolded in their plots and reiterated formally though an emphasis on the mechanics of detection, capture, and composition. New realist histories recommend themselves as an experiential counter-archive. Don DeLillo in *Libra*, for instance, avers that the novel's admittedly speculative account of President John F. Kennedy's assassination is intended to serve as a propulsive entry in the dataset that is the readerly national imaginary. The author's stated agenda is to communicate through plausible re-enactment some yet unknown, unformed truth of the event rather than furnish an evidence-based argument about the facts of the assassination.

This study examines the proliferation of docudramatic techniques, media-metaphors, and simulations of "noise" as they function in a range of postwar realist artworks. Newer strains of realism reconstruct a nineteenth-century realist investment in observation where this investment both informs artistic technique and serves as a justification and motivation for producing realistic art. But like its predecessor in nineteenth-century realism, new realism is both dependent upon and encumbered by its representational task. Its signifying strategies contour and strain against what Mark Hansen calls technesis, or the problem of representing technology and conceiving of its holistic effects in a representational idiom.

I argue that we can understand the indexing, annotating, and re-presentation of media systems, and the fetishizing of unprocessed, noisy media in experimental

accordingly. It is a metonym of mediality itself as a "quasi-object," an approximation of a medial technicity that resists representation but nonetheless characterizes what is to be represented. New realism seeks to access and present "raw" glimpses of reality that, far from being free of or outside of mediation, express mediation and its double-logic, a desire for reality's communication through its unrehearsed extra-human observation: noise, feedback, granularity, assertions of the medium over or prior to its message, what Roland Barthes calls the "lure and blur of the real." If nineteenth-century realism attempts to craft "a reality without communication" to simulate unmediated perception, new realism presumes that the very fabric of lived reality is the stuff of mediation prior to and during the occasion for perception and representation. New realism attends to and dwells in the paradox that technological media constitute the material conditions for perceptual and cognitive life at the same time media technologies simultaneously foreclose all possibility of knowing them as such.

One, subsidiary goal of this project is to elucidate the long life of realism and explain its status with regard to dominant interpretations of cultural production since 1965. It is not my intention to discard postmodernism as a periodization or theory of material economic circumstances under late capitalism. It is my sense, however, that the constructivist motivations often attributed to postmodernist innovation in the postwar period can be better understood by examining a larger, more general shift toward media-intensive representation across all venues of cultural production. By questioning the analytic power of terms like "metafiction" and reconsidering the variegated heritage of New Journalism, I argue that media-intensive strategies common to newer realism reinvigorate a literary program dating to the nineteenth-century social novel. If

postmodernism was thought to have predisposed major artworks toward self-reference, pastiche, and irony, another very different trend has prevailed in literary fiction as well as mainstream film and television. Mimesis as a basis for social reportage obtains in and after postmodernism and realistic historical fiction has in the last several decades emerged as the dominant middle-class American art form. Best-seller and award-finalist lists teem with media "based on a true story" or "inspired by real events" – many more still are period dramas, biopics, docudramas, stories offering a "realization" of important historical events or personalities through reenactment, or narratives trying to "recover" and restore to the official record untold, "never-before-seen" tales of historical interest.

It is worth briefly contextualizing newer realism within a cultural lineage and discursive tradition inspired by New Journalism. Where New Journalism is often discussed as a relatively conservative, post-fictional literary predecessor to high postmodernism, it is my sense that the movement's anti-hermeneutic epistemology must be understood in relief of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*: *The Extensions of Man* (1964). McLuhan's treatise, largely responsible for the outgrowth of contemporary media studies, provocatively claimed "the medium is the message." He further argues that "the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension to ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (23). But what proceeds in *Understanding Media* is not a study of media per se. The book's title is deceptive; the argument contained therein does not provide a guide for "understanding" media. In fact, McLuhan argues that media and their holistic range of impacts are difficult to fathom because media constantly and subtly alter our perceptual states. Media produce worlds, creating

the environments they act within. Not only does McLuhan's analysis destabilize what "reality" refers to, his proposals challenge an intellectual tradition based in logical, linear thinking long naturalized in a print-based media episteme. Specifically, McLuhan deconstructs the authority of interpretation and therefore deconstructs the ontological foundation of 'Western' epistemology. Against and in face of this situation, the basis for social reportage in narrative art changes meaningfully.

As Tom Wolfe described in his de facto, retrospective manifesto for New Journalism, there was in the 1960s "something in the air right now,"[15] a drive to turn the expressive richness and cultural cachet of novelistic realism to work in "the real world" (19, 1973). Evident in Wolfe is a sense of literature's undue demarcation. The artistic power of literary expression was thought to be confined in the postwar era to an ever-shrinking and rarefied cultural domain.[16] Wolfe and his contemporaries were motivated by a desire to reinstall the literary imagination at the fore of the cultural scene. More than preserving the literary project by extending its social purview, New Journalism thought to vitalize literature as an epistemology trusted with and relaying the real. Under this aegis, Wolfe in particular worked to promote the figure of the "literary non-fiction writer" as a type of republican-minded raconteur. In this mold, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson led a generation of avant-garde American writers whose careers

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[15] Both Pynchon and DeLillo use this exact phrase - - Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and DeLillo in *White Noise* and *Libra* - - taken from Wolfe's "The Birth of 'The New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report by Tom Wolfe", *New York* (40, 1972)

[16] This almost certainly correlates with the upending of English departments over the course of the 1960s, wherein the severity of ongoing geopolitical and domestic conflicts trivialized a belletristic account of the literary text popularized in the New Criticism. For artists and writers otherwise interested in a conventional sense of the "literary," the method and subject of literature had to change.

boasted equally extensive fiction and non-fiction portfolios. New Journalism popularized a creative, sociological-style of embedded journalism that offered lyrical, vivid, and expressly subjective "eyewitness" accounts of its topics.[17] The movement moreover championed an essayistic approach to storytelling, holding that creative accounts of real events disclosed "truths" more true than the "facts" of a given case. To this day, the long-form non-fiction essay remains an indelible touchstone of literary magazines.

At the same moment New Journalism was founding its inchoate program, a resurgent cinema verité took root in the United States in the wake of Italian neo-realism and Direct Cinema.[18] This development offered a reinforcing correlative approach to New Journalism. No film better typifies how filmmakers sought to contest classic news journalism with new storytelling techniques than the Robert Drew-produced and Richard Leacock and Albert Maysles-shot documentary *Primary* (1960). The film's minimally narrated coverage of the 1960 Democratic primary contest between Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy provides a striking example of cinema verité. Eschewing interviews and exposition, Drew encouraged his directors to keep their cameras rolling. The hope was to capture "real" moments amidst the campaign's highly orchestrated political set pieces. In addition to boasting unprecedented access to the Presidential candidates and their staff, the film offered a series of protracted, visually arresting long takes enabled by newly mobile, lightweight cameras. The film's free-floating, behind-the-scenes camera narrator communicated at the level of style the production's foray in embedded photo-

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[17] White's seminal *The Tropics of Discourse* (1985) revolutionized historiography and intellectual history, but his early book *Metahistory* (1974) also received an enthusiastic if controversial reception for famously demonstrating the textual and specifically "literary" nature of history and historical referent.

[18] Gillo Pontecorvo's widely acclaimed newsreel-style war drama *La battaglia di Algeri* (1966) is a clear forerunner for the kinds of media-intensive historical fiction I am identifying.

journalism. Presaging the immersive quality to come in Wolfe and co.'s "literary journalism," *Primary* ushered in a wave of formally innovative realist documentaries.

Fusing together journalistic, sociological, and artistic designs, New Journalism refashioned qualitative methods from cultural anthropology as pioneered by Clifford Geertz. Wolfe's axiomatic emphasis on firsthand experience and a style including "manifold incidental details" approximates Geertz's field protocol. Abandoning the positivist complexes of classic anthropology, Geertz acknowledged the subjective quality of observation, his methodological approach emphasizing prolonged immersion and "thick description." Geertz's preference for thick description derived from an interest in discerning and reporting with detail and nuance how an intricate array of relationships organized the cultural activities of a given social system.[19] Surface-level observations from a dispassionate, detached observer were not sufficient. New Journalism assumed for its guiding model a similar sociological animus, importing its anthropological habits of mind as well as its classist baggage and implicit ethnocentric values.

While New Journalism has faded as an organized movement, its negotiation of non-fiction discourse normalized a socially-oriented brand of constructivist realism alongside postmodern ribaldry.[20] The current proliferation of historical fiction

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[19] In this respect, Geertz's method resembles the attitudes György Lukács famously defends in "Realism in the Balance" (1938) on behalf of his darling social realism. Where Lukács rather famously assumes literature's ability to represent reality and presumes literary realism is a sufficient formal strategy to the task, thereby espousing a somewhat naïve theory of representation, he emphasizes that realism's strength as an artform inheres in its ability to depict 'historic' social totalities through the representation of variegated social relations that, taken together, comprise an integrated system under capitalism.

[20] One might easily forget that Thomas Pynchon's national parable and investigative-thriller style dramatization of 1960s California, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), now a monument of postmodern fiction, was first published in serial-form in the New Journalist publication, *Esquire*.

melodramas based on true stories speaks to the success New Journalism has had in institutionalizing the literary docudrama as an esteemed mode of social reportage. It is not surprising that some of the most provocative entries in new realism wear openly their affiliation with journalism – David Simon's *The Wire* (2002-2008) was inspired by and based on his time as crime beat reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* (Simon also having spent a year shadowing the Baltimore Police Department's homicide unit) ; Mark Boal, screenwriter for *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, began his career as a freelance reporter before working as an embedded journalist in Iraq in 2004.[21]

As I hope to have made clear, I am not suggesting that realism has survived unchanged from its nineteenth-century iterations. And yet, to borrow the lexicon of postmodern criticism, meta-fiction and its "ontology disruptive agenda" has not in the main derailed social reportage as basis and justification for producing narrative art (Sauerberg 10). The Balzac-Flaubert model of the novel has generally persisted, and with it, a predominant understanding of literary fiction and its social role. We read literature because it shows us things, reveals things, brings into focus aspects of social, imaginative, and psychological experience we might forget, miss, or simply not have otherwise discovered. What I've just stated is, of course, a bourgeois and reformist theory of narrative via realism, one wherein artworks, however abstractly, promote empathy and "participate in the movement toward greater democracy and social justice" (Pam Morris 55, 1998). The cultivation of a shared reality, establishing a shared syntax for discussing

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[21] Simon left journalism largely because he felt it didn't have the capacity to offend or shock people, "because it was ineffectual." It could not properly inform a readership. Simon wrote the non-fiction, journalistic thriller *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) which prefigured his work on *The Wire*. Mark Boal's article, "The Man in the Bomb Suit" (2005) was published in *Playboy* magazine and became the basis for the original screenplay for *The Hurt Locker*.

and foreclosing what can be admitted as real, is just one conservative function of pedagogic art.

In his 2010 assemblage-as-manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, David Shields speaks to changing attitudes about contemporary realism. Recapitulating the kind of media history guiding Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), Shields identifies a vague if nonetheless urgent and widespread desire to "admit ever more reality" into art (4).[22] Shields criticizes fiction, and the novel more specifically, as a middle-brow activity dispossessed of meaningful political potential or artistic value. Adopting the major precepts of New Journalism, Shields's argument for creative non-fiction internalizes a constructivist, postmodern epistemology: if reality is unstable, relativistic, and always already socially constructed, one need not differentiate fiction and non-fiction to begin with. If Shields misses the point (he does), it's only because artists have been doing this for decades. To write compelling non-fiction is to harness the creative faculty, imagination, and stylistic license attributed to literature. For a score of contemporary writers and artists, such a project also entails understanding how media-specific forms shape human perception and, by extension, are themselves commensurate with the dimensions of lived reality. New strains of media-intensive realism contest the beleaguered fiction/non-fiction binary and reiterate mimesis as a social, as well as aesthetic, practice. This is what I identify as a cultural fascination with crafting a majoritarian, "non-fiction" political historiography through a media-intensive, verité style

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[22] In Bolter and Grusin's historiography, a cultural desire for reality drives technological innovation and oversees an increasingly intricate tie between immediacy and hyper-mediation. The authors assume cultural production is motivated by an economy that prioritizes increasingly vivid forms of virtual reality.

that contours the familiar designs of popular genre fiction. Major historical events, quotidian moments from daily life, scenes from nature – all are inflected in their communication in media.

Where realism can and has been addressed as an assured and conservative artform, which is often warranted, it also admits and derives from a point of epistemological urgency. In the most straightforward versions of complacent realism, the word is thought to be the carrier of meaning – presuming that meaning exists prior to words and only requires translation. New and older realisms alike contest this position to various degrees. New realism, however, desperately navigates representation as an artistic practice precisely because it has commitments to mimesis as a social activity. Representational thinking and its corollary landscape is the necessary baseline realist technique appeals to and continually strives against. The constitution and legibility of the physical world comes into question, a crisis in knowledge reconfigured specifically as a problem in accounting for and describing. A heritage of descriptive technique is renegotiated in media-intensive representation where *description*, as a necessary form of taking social measure, is itself rendered as an anxious, politically-riven activity.

Michael Snow's landmark 1967 film *Wavelength* testifies to the unnerving dimensions subtended within representation as a social practice. The film breaks down cinematic representation at its most basic unit of technical inscription. Consisting of a single, forty five-minute long straight-shot of an apartment interior, the film is an extended exercise in direct mimesis. In an exceedingly slow progression, the frame gradually closes-in through a protracted zoom to a picture hanging on the opposite wall from the camera's position. Outside the apartment, impressions of an urban soundscape

occasionally press into the room from the (implied) streets below. It is unclear if the sounds are diegetic or non-diegetic – beset with noisy buzzing and scratchy intimations of video recording, the camera's frame reiterates its composition through stylized expressions of media granularity and filtration. The subdued but zany soundtrack further obscures the status of the soundscape; it remains ambiguous what sounds, warped as they are, have a source in the diegesis and which can be attributed to the camera's recording or to an extra-diegetic sonic profile. Moving in and out of focus, the camera's perspective on the room slides in and out of precision, distorting its own viewpoint and complicating any claim to fidelity or even reference. Because of this multivalent narrative noise, it is unclear what exactly is being communicated in the room or suggested rhetorically by the camera's slow zoom across the apartment.

![The opening shot of Wavelength]

Figure 1.4: The opening shot of *Wavelength*

A media-intensive gesture in direct mimesis thus becomes its own kind of detective plot at an informational level. Throughout the film, the camera's steady surveillance oversees several mundane activities as they come into the frame and then leave with little fanfare or explanation – these are not "plotted" story events, but

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seemingly unmotivated, incidental moments of capture recorded without intention. A woman (presumably the tenant) instructs two men to move furniture, then they all leave; later, she returns with a friend and the two listen to music before exiting; glass is heard breaking off-camera and then, moments later, a man staggers into the apartment and dies, collapsing in the middle of the floor; the woman returns, sees the body, and dispassionately calls the police. All of these events occur at an askew, uncentered angle or out-of-fame as the camera's ever-constricting purview narrows on the opposing wall in its slow journey across the room. These in-frame events that "take place," or fail to, are ancillary to another presiding concern. The film's final moments fixate on the garbled sounds of approaching emergency vehicles as these sounds bleed into the narration's ongoing static rhythms, fusing the semiotic regimes of a responsive civic infrastructure with the extra-diegetic act of mechanical recording.

Wavelength closes with the camera's frame neatly outlining a picture of waves, an abstracted image of water disarticulated from an oceanic or beach scene – it is a lingering last impression of mediation, noise, and stochastic flux figured as an unplaceable environment. And this image is itself enclosed in a noisy frame beset with provisionality. This staging of a double perception through remediation derives from an ur-realist gesture. *Wavelength* takes what Jameson attributes to realist technique and installs it in its depiction of present mediation:

> The doubling of perception, in which the aesthetic perspective of the painter does not replace that of the explorer-protagonist, but rather imperceptibly slips in beside it, in a kind of stereoscopic view which is, no doubt initially multi-dimensional, but which, we will argue, ultimately tends to release its sensory material from any specific viewer of individual human subject, from any specific character to whom the function of observation has been assigned. (56, 2013)

Thus, the ambivalence that courses through newer strains of realism encounter more than the aporias associated with post-structuralist relativism; its ambiguity concerns more than the deconstruction or deferral of meaning. An unstated forensic dimension inheres in the film's suggestion of communication. Documentation is addressed as an uncertain and dramatically freighted form of taking social measure. In new realism, this entails coordinating objective exposition with a positive depiction of technological alterity as it all at once impinges upon, stymies, and vitalizes mimesis. Snow's film stages what Vogl describes as a "stigma of provisionality," when he states that media yield self-referencing forms of evidence and create realms of visibility while "every visibility [they produce is] surrounded by an ocean of invisibility," rendering any new visibility "questionable, endangered, risky…riddled with uncertainty, dependent on coincidence… and relativized by its segmentarity" (22, 2008). The crime-mystery subplot is a metaphorical expression and organizing trope for imagining the exigent political stakes of reality's production in narrative art.

Figure 1.5: The final minutes of the film close on this enigmatic image

I examine how and why realism has endured well beyond the context in the nineteenth-century with which it is most often associated, as well as come to terms with the nature of its purchase in the present. Arising from these questions, this project reconsiders realism as a cultural mainstay and narrative logic, focusing in the main on different strains of new realism in novels, film, and serial television that appear in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I want to think about realism as a formal expression of a theoretical problem inextricable from technics. Technics deconstructs the division between tekhnē and ēpistēme, the splitting of the forms of knowledge, cognition, and being from its technicity, its technological basis and material manifestations. The guiding aim of this project is to better understand the interrelationship between capitalist circumscription, technics, and media-borne constructions of knowledge in literary, cinematic, and televisual artworks, and to assess how a body of socially minded and politically responsive artworks derive from and articulate these dynamics in a representational syntax particular to their medium. I foreground the "technics of realism" for two reasons. First, it is my goal to fashion an analytic method attentive to the ways in which narrative art and cultural production at large are impacted, epistemologically, by *techno-semiotic* conditions that are often difficult to represent in positive terms. Techno-semiotics describes the ways technologies structure meaning, how technological media infrastructurally negotiate and refract discursive formations and ideological horizons. Second, this project examines how technological conditions, and specific *representations* of technological conditions, impact the communication of reality appears in a number of artworks as a basis and justification for narrative.

The novels, films, and serial television programs here assessed are concerned with the drive to secure and present knowledge, an organizing drive which is in several cases self-reflexively enfolded into the plot-level architecture of the narrative. The archive I propose through the organization of this argument is necessarily limited and provisional. These are stories of detection, discovery, of attaining or storing knowledge or of the presentation of unreported or under-documented realities. More than simply 'being about' knowledge and its communication, these texts confront by way of a consideration of the technics of communication the forms for how we know.

Technics and Techniques

In *The Red and The Black* (1830), Stendhal issues this now famous defense of the novel:

> Ah, Sir, a novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shews the mire, and you blame the mirror! Rather blame that high road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form. (148)

The formulation offers an account of social fiction still popular today. Capable of depicting beauty, azure skies, as well as reporting in stark terms the world's more unsavory aspects, the mire, the novel is here addressed as a tool. It doesn't create meaning, it simply reports what meaning already exists in the world. Yet, this instrumentalist interpretation is employed strategically. On the one hand, saying that the novel is just a mirror insulates the novelist from accusations of creative license or charges

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of "immoral" prurience.[23] On the other hand, the novel is imagined to have properties

exceeding straightforward representation. After all, Stendhal implies this mirror's unique

capacity to inspire social reform. It can "reflect to [the reader's] vision" conditions of

existence the eye apparently failed to comprehend or appropriately "see" in the first

place. The exhortation implores the reader to critically (re)consider their environment. In

its commitment to revelation as a form of education, Stendhal's argument consecrates the

realist novel as a bourgeois practice. It encourages bureaucratic intervention: talk to the

inspector of roads. Write your congressman. The novel's alacrity in description models

critical attention as a habit of engaged citizenship.

Stendhal's account of the novel vis-à-vis realism has held remarkable sway. In

defense of her films *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty*, Kathryn Bigelow

offered a similar approach to Stendhal's: "representing is not endorsing"; "If you hold up

a mirror to society and you don't like what you see, you can't fault the mirror. It's a

mirror" (2012, 2009). But where nineteenth-century realism will refer to the mirror as a

metaphor for its narrative-based social reportage, new realism emphasizes how the mirror

pre-forms the objects of its apparently "reflective" purview before and in excess of what

these objects may *mean* while or after being reflected. An impression of the physical

mirror and the duration of the mirror reflecting content in coincident time instills its

provisional view with an auratic representational energy. It is important to note that this

component of realist practice is present in Stendhal's original defense of the novel. Able

to crystalize truths that the eye itself cannot or could not initially discern in the course of

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[23] Stendhal is contesting a longstanding and largely poetic tradition wherein the elevation of beauty, rather than the authentic or dramatic communication of reality, motivated the literary arts.

daily living, the realist novel-as-mirror is an occasion for seeing with renewed alacrity where forms of looking are scripted and patterned in text. The mirror metaphor elucidates the novel's purported cultural operations as a technical device, a tool-enhanced vision that produces its subject as well as generates the environment of its reference.[24] In other words, Stendhal implicitly essentializes the novel as prosthetic seeing.[25]And thus, the author's anointed station and metaleptic charge in Stendhal's account – reporting from the "high road," the novelist is both within and above the society on which she reports, occupying an embedded but also Archimedean vantage in the manner of an ethnographer journalist.

As I have suggested, media-intensive narration underscores the machine grammar of social reportage. Impressions of the mirror's technicity authenticate the content of its reflection by testifying to the time and place of exchange. It is not surprising, then, that *intermediation* propels new realist techniques.[26] It is precisely for its accommodating the

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[24] This is what Bernard Stiegler, via Foucault, describes when he addresses how technology oversees a recursive process of interiorization and exteriorization. When one speaks or, more aptly, when one sees oneself in a mirror, the putative viewer undergoes a process of mutually reinforcing self-reference. This is a specifically technics-oriented reading of Lacan's stages of development first popularized by Kittler.

[25] The novel's historical prominence owes to this fact – in a primarily print-based media regime, the novel's formal and linguistic character and their analogous claims on the human sensorium are discursively naturalized as a theory of embodiment. Freidrich Kittler discusses this at length in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.

[26] I am using Hayles's sense of the term "intermediation" rather than "remediation," the latter implying the straightforward subsuming of antecedent media. Hayles defines intermediation in *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005) when she states,

> an important aspect of intermediation is the recursivity implicit in the coproduction and coevolution of multiple causalities. Complex feedback loops connect humans and machines, old technologies and new, language and code, analog processes and digital fragmentations. Although these feedback loops evolve over time and thus have a historical trajectory that arcs from one point to another, it is important not to make the mistake of privileging any one point as the primary locus of attention, which can easily result in flattening complex interactions back into linear casual chains. (31)

signifying strategies of different genres and different media that new strains of realism

can often look very different from conventional realism. Its focus on technicity

encompasses more than what can be described by "self-reflexivity," "self-awareness," or

"meta-fiction," concepts frequently linked to postmodern art and understood to be

opposed in kind to sincere attempts at 'realistic' representation. Working from this

premise, my analysis pressures a mindset that differentiates documentary realist

technique (associated with non-fiction discourses) from the non-mimetic, meta-textualist

modes attributed to high postmodern literature. An oft-repeated critical common place I

want to reconsider is a tendency to frame "formal innovation" as a move away from

realism as a discursive norm, where innovation is legible in the first place because of this

contradistinction.

If Stendhal's realism proceeds under the confident assurances of an omniscient

third-person narrator, subsequent experiments in narrative perspective across literary

history, however innovative, do not reject an original realist premise. They may, in fact,

reinstall realist designs. [27] It has become increasingly common for conventional realist

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[27] As Joe Cleary has argued, the classical European classic bourgeois novel sustained its "confident sense of the 'real'" through foreclosing its optical purview and repressing the operations of imperial capitalism ("Realism After Modernism" 261, 2012). Cleary's argument proposes that nineteenth-century realist literature and the discursive "reality" it was thought to refer to functioned for a time by way of selective cognitive mapping. In other words, as an aesthetic program and theory of the social, realism obtained its cultural purchase, and shored its validity as "realism" in the first place, by presuming the constitutional continuity between its discursive domain and "true conditions of existence," to cite Althusser's representational account of the real. This is what Fredric Jameson in "The Realist Floorplan" (1986) calls the "bourgeois cultural revolution," wherein the Enlightenment program and its "desacralization" must not only be considered as a move toward empiricist parsimony, a paring down of a mysterious and enchanted world, but a positive production of homogenous, equivalent Newtonian space-time. In this shifting paradigm is the epistemological basis for a quasi-positivist realism obsessed with detail and description and preoccupied with observation as a narrative mode. Crucial to this undertaking is a fundamentally linguistic theory of an occularcentric world – the real as it is really experienced (i.e., seen) can be described in words. Nancy Armstrong's *Realism in the Age of the Photograph* (1999) identifies how realist novels interact with prevailing visual codes of reality, drawing attention to the forms of pictorialism that dominate most facets of nineteenth-century literary realism. The point I want to emphasize is the tie between the act of representation and an a priori theory of the world being represented. Nineteenth-century

narratives to jettison a single interpretative voice, the authoritarian author-as-privileged

medium for sensing and representing the truth of how things really are.[28] This tradition

goes at least as far back as Joyce, whose modernist experiments in encyclopedic realism

pushed the novel away from the singular, Jamesian author-narrator toward a formally

pluralistic perspective inclined to heteroglossic portraiture, affording a multitudinous

collection of impressions, voices, vantages.[29] *Dubliners* (1914) and *Ulysses* (1922) are

modernist masterpieces with obvious origins in realist social portraiture. Barthes in *Grace*

Notes (1973) describes this dense "web of encyclopedic citation" as a kind of reality

effect, a "farrago" evokes a sense of repleteness, the text seeming to share the semantic

fullness of a known social reality (185). Joyce famously wanted readers to be able to

physically reconstruct Edwardian Dublin from his maximalist depiction of the city in

Ulysses. Historical fiction in this vein is imagined as a project in ur-mimetic virtual

reality. As Lars Ole Sauerberg has argued, modernism's characteristic formal

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realism, as Cleary identifies, is more confident about its ability to represent or at least indicate the truth of larger social realities from the representation of a limited, nearly always Eurocentric purview because 1.) it is a racialized and bourgeois ontological fantasy, and 2.) because the fabric of the real, qua Enlightenment humanism, is thought to be fundamentally similar and accessible everywhere. A partial, limited picture of provincial real could thereby be justified as an accomplished representation of the whole. As Katherine Kearns contends, British and American realists struggled under the historical condition of "technologization," whereafter cultural homogenization prepares new and often anxious strategies in representation.

[28] This particular metaphor, the idea of the artist as a medium, is an old one – Romantic poets were vessels for the inspiring energies of their muse; Ezra Pound famously stipulated that "artists were the antennae of the race," an idea that is especially helpful for thinking about artists as civically-engaged persons who attend to techno-semiotic conditions of communication and meaning

[29] Pynchon's Oedipa Mass sees this tradition through to postmodernism in *The Crying of Lot 49* where she must reorient her initial worldview and look for a totally new epistemological grounds for basing her knowledge of social reality, and even all of history, in opposition to that of her former lover's design – Pierce Inverarity, the perfect iteration of patriarchal capitalism and elderly father-figure lover to Oedipa, is nowhere and everywhere in the novel, owning stakes in everything and every landscape Oedipa encounters, his literal and figurative "will" organizing the story in the first place. Inverarity is an expression of the authoritarian, Jamesian third-person-author-as-Godhead who makes worlds in their image.

experiments can be seen to derive from realist convictions.[30] Wolfe argued as much when

he asserted New Journalism had overtaken the realist novel. For Wolfe, it was the

modernists that had been surpassed: "The writer is one step closer to the absolute

involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of but never

achieved" (1970, 272). In rendering the fragmentation and flux of interiority, for instance,

a number of writers look to find better forms for depicting how consciousness *really*

looks, works, *is*. If, after Freud, one's psychology cannot be "known" as such, its

anfractuous and digressive nature can be reified qualitatively through its approximation

in syntactically dexterous language. Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Stein – all make claims on

the mind's textual essence. Modernism's recommitment to the bildungsroman must be

understood as a genre-based corollary of this formal endeavor. It demonstrates a

revitalized project in realism as a de facto theory of art; the educable, would-be

matriculated bourgeois subject retains its position at the imagined fore of literature's

operation.

Bigelow's almost verbatim restatement of Stendhal's defense of the novel is just

one of the more prominent testaments to realism's long cultural tenure. Realist

preparations still inform how scholars discuss literary art and its social role. Good art

helps us understand and "see" elusive or under-reported aspects of reality. Realism in this

formulation, in and across its many new and diverse permutations, is centrally concerned

with *perception* and *forms of perception* as they relate to the construction and

dissemination of knowledge. An emphasis on rendering perception inaugurates

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[30] Sauerberg argues in *Fact into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel* (1991) that the avant-garde/realist dichotomy needs to be challenged precisely because a drive for realism has overseen so many formal innovations.

representational praxis, realist technique retuning, in many cases, to the refinement of "vision" as a social priority. The space between individuated sensory experiences and cultural "ways of seeing" is superintended through a generic predisposition for detective story formats. Realism gravitates toward strategies of documentation, reporting, and (re)presentation made coextensive with structures of revelation and the project of consciousness raising. The realist artist models 'good' and politically astute perception for the reader, serving all at once as artist, pedagogue, and perspicacious social anatomist. But the realist novel also legislates what is true, what can stand for evidence, what can claim "reality," what gestures, maneuvers, or forms of measure can make a nomination to truth. Moreover, it perpetuates a democratically-inflected informational fantasy, "a hopeful sense that when all the facts are in, truth will stand revealed, and that language will be equal to saying it" (Kearns 11).

But far from attempting objective or 'more objective' accounts of the world as it "really is," realism is and always has been about crafting moments of felt reality, simulating immediate and 'natural' perception disavowed of predetermined "meaning."[31] It communicates an extra-discursive intensity, an impression of reality that seems bare of communication. As I have cited, Fredric Jameson refers to this sensation as realist affect – a historically situated "sensation" that, far from just referring to embodied "feeling," designates a theory of the body with respect to language.[32] Jameson contends that realism

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[31] As Katherine Kearns has argued, realism is driven by an insecurity along these very lines. "Realism," she says, "often charged with blind-siding social, political, and epistemological complexities, with throwing its considerable materialistic weight against all that would challenge or suborn the status quo, manages nonetheless to communicate its sense of itself as a bifurcated and inadequate accommodation of any holistic reality" (7)

[32] I am not referring to and utilizing the sense of "affect" that obtains in Affect Theory proper, which tends to emphasize pre-linguistic emotional autonomies as well as the coherence of the bodied

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as a practice, revolving around the cultivation of said affect in fiction, arises from a specific historical and linguistic context in the nineteenth-century. The key matter "is the relationship between the perceptual and the language of naming," the distance between experience and intelligibility (55). Amy Kaplan offers a similar interpretation of realism's propulsive juncture. "Realism explores and bridges," Kaplan states, "the perceived gap between the social world and literary representation." In so doing, realists imagine "reality itself is problematic, something to be sought rather than merely lived" (9). Barthes in *S/Z* (1970) reiterates a similar understanding. For Barthes, reality's perpetual retreat means it can only be accessed, momentarily, through its traces. Realist techniques thereby enclose an intended experiential quality.[33] As Katherine Kearns surmises in discussing realism's asymptotic relation to its referent,

> the realist artist attempts to brings art to the service of the immediately real, the contingent, and the unformalized, which is to say that the realist embraces the possibility of translating unmediated sensations into words, an attempt as problematically complex when it is believed to have been effected as when, more often, one feels that it has failed. (4)

Failure is a necessary part of the design. Jameson describes the situation laid bare by realist description according to its limitations: "far from enriching representational language with all kinds of new meanings, the gap between words and things in heightened" (56).

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feeling subject. My sense of realist affect, by way of a modification of Jameson's term and an application of posthumanist understanding, connotes a biotechnical arrangement whereby perception, embodiment, and mediation are in interplay.

[33] Kaplan's focus on the experimental quality of realism cooperates with Jameson's sense of the movement as a kind of proto-modernism.

Realist techniques entreat what Hayles identifies as the limits of epistemology, the "cusp" separating representation from the real. For Jameson in *The Antinomies of Realism*, this cusp is a primarily linguistic territory. Affect is therefore a discursive formation. Because her analysis presumes a dynamic biotechnical subject in the first place, Hayles's account of epistemology entails a more holistic sense of "representation" as a cultural practice inseparable from mediation. What Jameson calls affect is, under a different set of epistemological priorities, an expressly techno-semiotic relation.[34] We can understand realist affect and the project of realism more generally when we consider that technological conditions and media-specific representational logics enframe the affective. Media install the edges of their representational indices, cordoning the possibilities of extra-discursive meaning. New realism strives for something akin to Jameson's realist affect by eliding entrenched networks of signification in the attempt to cultivate extra-linguistic intensities. But new realism sheds the presumed logocentric subject of traditional realism in favor of a prosthetic, biotechnical theory of perception.

My argument looks to integrate new formalist analysis with media theory to rearticulate contemporary realism and explain its epistemological and social project as well as elucidate its technical basis. I am interested in explaining how texts address and represent, in ways particular to their medium, what Joseph Vogl has called the

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[34] Mine is a different methodological priority on this front than, say, a historical perspective the likes of which is represented by Amy Kaplan's excellent *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988). Kaplan states, "historical perspectives hold that the textual production of reality does not occur in a linguistic vacuum… these approaches situate realistic texts within a wider field of what has been called 'discursive practices'" (7). Kaplan approves of this trend, but wants to move away from a mode of historicism that reads realism as a product of its social and discursive situation and towards a method that examines the dynamic relationship between fictional and social forms. In this respect, Kaplan's method presages the kinds of historicist new formalism advocated recently by Caroline Levine. While I agree with the priority Kaplan articulates, her approach to both fictional and social forms is also inordinately textual, consecrated and generated as they are by "discourse."

unpredictable double-becoming of media: "media make things audible, visible, perceptible, but in so doing they have a tendency to erase themselves and their constitutive sensory function, making themselves imperceptible and 'anesthetic'" (16). But how is this represented? Rendering plainly the fact of information's technical constructedness is itself a performance, a stylistic and creative tactic entailing a media-specific account of the recording medium or media. If realism is an aesthetic manifestation of and response to technologically-imposed conditions, is informed by a biotechnical model of subjectivity and is otherwise attuned to the ways that media-specific forms shape the ratios of human perception and thus structure shared social realities, as I am arguing it is, new realism still struggles to represent in a traditional, narrative-based representational mode the extent and nature of the technological conditions that inform and index its purchase on the real.

New realism, I argue, in part stems from and is always responding to the theoretical problem Mark Hansen has called "technesis," or the putting of technology into discourse and its subsequent reduction of technology's material dimension to thought and to representations of technology's social contextualization. Technesis influences realist description and even inaugurates Realism as a "cultural technique." In the words of Bernhard Siegert, restating a term popularized in German media studies, the idea of "cultural techniques… strategically subverts the problematic dualism of media and culture…and [highlights] the operations or operative sequences that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them" (29, 2008). Thinking about realism as a cultural technique facilitates assessing about how technologies function as embedded arbiters of the cultural real while remaining disjointed, systematically, from

their cultural instated interpretations. What Vogl describes as the "double-becoming" of media can therefore be situated historically as a semiotic phenomenon through what Bernard Stiegler calls "disadjustment." Before addressing technesis and describing how it influences realist techniques, I briefly outline how recent media theory prepares my methodology and s supports a technological account of realism's cultural work.

One of the underlying formal ideologies undergirding conventional literary realism is the liberal humanist subject. As I have discussed, nineteenth-century realism naturalizes and relies upon a textual theory of extra-linguistic sensation, even where it moves to bracket the referential capacity of language and delimit its descriptive purchase. That is, for all its formal interest in unmediated perception, realism instantiates a specifically (and necessarily) literary model of embodiment through its simulation of observation. Among recent media theorists and philosophers of technology, Bernard Stiegler has emerged as a prominent advocate for an extra-genetic theory of the human. In this respect, Stiegler's work carries through on the kinds of arguments first proposed by McLuhan and, later, Friedrich Kittler. McLuhan established and popularized the idea of the prosthetic subject, articulating a viewpoint where media technologies "extend" the human and modify the "ratios of human sense perception." For McLuhan, media are transformative agents that altogether change the worlds they are introduced into. Kittler accelerates this perspective. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1994), Kittler pushes Foucauldian antihumanism to an aphoristic extreme, dismissing the importance of "so-called Man" in the face of technological substantivalism. Later thinkers, like Katherine N. Hayles, Mark Hansen, Bruce Clarke, Mark Johnson, Francisco Valera, and Brian Massumi, among many others in media studies and cybernetic theory, have pushed back

against Kittler to reinstall the physiological integrity of the human.[35] These thinkers do

not rescue the autonomous human as a methodological truism or ideological construct.

Rather, there is an analytic emphasis placed on how embodiment mediates technical

processes.

Stiegler's arguments in the three-part *Technics and Time* series (*La Technique et

le Temps*, 1994) are helpful for thinking about the imbrication of the human, as a

heuristic category and biological designation, with media technologies. The analytic

priority Stiegler proposes in extra-genetic evolution reiterates what Hayles has proposed

in *technogenesis*, the idea that humans coevolve with technologies. Where posthumanism

designates a prosthetic 'man,' referring to the body as a material substrate for

informational processes, Stiegler's argument goes farther in asserting the integral,

constitutive link of the human with technics as a matter of historical and biological fact.[36]

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[35] This push has not, crucially, looked to restore liberal humanism as an ideological formation. Moreover, it has not on the whole insisted on the priority of the human as a site of inquiry. Rather, it has looked, in some cases in very practical ways, to discuss the imbrication of media technologies with human physical systems.

[36] For decades, in scientific literature as well as science fiction, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with explanations about evolution's chief mechanism in Darwinian evolution: natural selection. In Darwin's original thesis and across many of its subsequent revisions, it is posited that favorable mutations or other genetic variations are "rewarded" in a species if the change happens to prove favorable to its survival in a given ecological context. In this summation, genetic mutations and their corresponding physical traits play out in environments as if through an extended trial period and, over very long periods of time, those modifications that prove successful feature as genetic adaptations that prevail biologically in the genetic code of the species. But simply put, random genetic mutation does not explain how species actually evolve – even across millions of years, random genetic mutations do not occur often enough to explain the rate of change we see across animals and, moreover, what we identify as "favorable" mutations do not happen in isolation randomly. For instance, the audial equipment of contemporary bats cannot have simply evolved from a series of coincident single mutations that eventually cooperated in the animal to produce working echolocation. Echolocation as a complex biological system required the near simultaneous development of several different but cooperating physiological subsystems. Something external to the individual biological system organizes evolution. Stiegler explains how technics specifically oversees an extra-genetic process of development in humans:

"It is important to understand that technology is a process, an evolutionary process. What is technics, or technology, or technicity? It is a new form of life. A very specific form of life, for until the onset of anthropogenesis, forms of life were transformed exclusively through a genetic

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Hayles attests, for instance, that "enacted and represented bodies are mediated by technologies so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer be meaningfully be separated from the human subject" (ix, 1999). For Hayles, it has become historically necessary to conceive of how technologies interpenetrate and impact the "human" in ways that are discounted or otherwise hard to see or represent.

Posthumanism tends in its abstraction to metaphorize technology's impact on the biological human via its cultural ramifications, what Mark Hansen calls technology's cultural contextualization (*Technesis* 2000). That is, because it is often difficult to say with precision how exactly an individual technology may influence human physiology or impact physiological processes *in addition* to reshaping broader cultural practices, posthumanism as a program tends to rely on a set of tropological representations of "Technology." Donna Harraway's provocative and well-meaning, if ultimately ill-fated, trial in cyborg feminism is one prominent example. By contrast, Stiegler's method challenges the groundwork of technological determinism where tangible mechanical objects are thought to author or instate distinct historical potentialities. In Stiegler's estimation, technological determinism as such does occur in a certain practical sense – i.e., "the printing press revolutionized fifteenth-century Europe." But his proposal calls for a more fundamental reinterpretation, one that disavows the division between tekhnē

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process of transformation, that is to say through sexual differentiation and the relationship between sexualized organisms, which is the case for plants and animals. But about three million years ago there occurred a fundamental change in this process of transformation within the human species, due to the appearance of a new system of inheritance based not on the transmission of genes but of technical artefacts" (*Krisis* 2011, Interview)

and ēpistēme to begin with, the splitting of the forms of knowledge, cognition, and being from its technicity, its technological basis and material manifestations.

Hominization, in Stiegler's thesis, is technical as well as genetic phenomenon. This shift repositions mankind in history, where, traditionally, man is thought to be the subject of history and technology the object. Stiegler's analysis supports a recent turn in media theory and philosophy of technology to address the instrumentalist rendering of technology that has prevailed in western thought since Plato.[37] Since mirrored by Mark Hansen's work in this respect, Stiegler's analysis marks an important development in contemporary media theory. Where someone like Kittler will aver "media determine our situation," Hansen and Stiegler will not, in the first place, conceive of a human situation extricable from technics to be determined externally by technology. Technological determinism is not only redundant, it presumes an etiological, cause-and-effect calculus that does not helpfully describe the reality of ongoing processes. For Stiegler, reiterating an argument Hayles has made with a different inflection, "the human *is* technics… it is artificial to ask, for example, what is determining human life: is it the psychic apparatus of the individual, is it the social organization or is it the technical organization? It is completely artificial because you don't have a psychic individual without a society, and you don't have a society without technics" (4, 2011). As Hansen offers, helpfully rephrasing Kittler's axiom, "media do not determine our situation, they *are* our situation" (14, my emphasis).

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[37] The instrumental view of technology is legitimized in Plato through his animosity to the pharmacological nature of writing and storage – the mind's capacity is compromised by relying on external devices to hold and store information.

This line of thinking has pushed theorists to reconceive of "technology" as it effects or relates to social formations and cultural production. In *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (2000), Hansen proposes:

> Technology affects our experience first and foremost through its infrastructural role, its impact occurs to prior to and independently of our production of representations: effectively, technologies structure our lifeworlds and influence our embodied lives at a level, as it were, below the threshold of representation. (4)

Not only does technology structure the real, the manner in which this structuring occurs elides representation and therefore evades legibility.[38] As Joseph Vogl affirms, media produce entire worlds at the same time they "make themselves invisible as media" (54, 2008). For Hansen, "if it is true that technologies cannot exist outside social systems, that in no way precludes them from having effects that cannot be captured by the interpretative tools germane to such systems" (3)

One of Hansen's methodological goals in *Embodying Technesis* is to accentuate the long-naturalized homology between textual structures, thought, and perception in the western intellectual tradition. For my purposes, I want to address how technesis attends realism as a cultural technique. Realism as a practice and cultural office cannot conceive of a relation to the real as anything other than a cognitive relation, a relationship culminating in a successful "cognitive mapping" (19). This is not to accuse realism of naïve mimesis or unreflective positivism. To the contrary, realism admits the limitations of language to fully 'capture' or 'depict' reality. The "reality" tendered is analogic with a culturally situated, discourse-consecrated practice for designated the extra-textual real.

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[38] Hansen returns to a crucial element of McLuhan's misleadingly titled *Understanding Media* by delineating an anti-hermeneutic assessment of media.

What is more interesting is the way realism formally accommodates the active perception of reality in its attempt to "represent but not mean." Realist affect, in my restyling of Jameson's concept, is not just a phenomenological response, an "affect" that explores the edges of a symbolical order within an epistemological system. It is rather an epistemological extension of the phenomenological sense. Life-like *is* photo-real. Newer realisms cultivate a biotechnical realist affect. Its heightened representational presence is secured through the authentic rendition of reality's subliminal technicity.[39]

Technesis augurs descriptive technique by exploring the edges of representational thinking within a techno-epistemological field. Perception always involves a parsimonious selection in relation to the totality of "raw material" available. In this respect, the intellectual problem of technesis refers to a historical phenomenon Stiegler describes as "disadjustment," being the epochal disconnect between technical systems - - and their epistemological realities - - and social formations, including prevailing estimations of the human.[40] This accounts for the retrospective and often anachronistic character of new realist invocations of media. One of the ways technesis works is to summon a positivist informational fantasy – media are treated as inscriptional technologies, an epistemological status that itself needs to be represented. Because realism prefers to work in positive terms, it looks to the attenuated confessions of

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[39] There is perhaps no better illustration of this idea than Walter Benjamin's sense of "shock," an equally cognitive and embodied paroxysm, an arresting encounter with technological alterity. Of course, Benjamin's humanist metaphor needs to be negotiated as a literary figuration, but his gesture prefigures the ways subsequent artists and thinkers with try to represent contact with the irreducible technological real at the level of sensory "contact" and bodied sensation. Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* is a key example of this – See Chapter One.

[40] Stiegler's interest lies primarily in the mnemo-technological, the nature of the relationship between psyche and technological processes as he describes it *Technics and Time, Part Three: Cinematic Time and The Question of Malaise*

superannuated media. As Hansen remarks in discussing how technologies are represented under the designs of systematic analysis,

> technologies can only attain significance by contributing to scientific epistemology; as forms of capture of the real, they constitute embodied inscriptions that function, like scientific facts, to reduce the real to manageable proportions (35).

Newer realisms generate their representational ethos between the poles of this inscriptional tradition in mimesis and epistemic disadjustment. It looks to represent *what is* as well as entails an intimation of something inexpressibly other. This is precisely why so many entries in new realism fetishize older media and specifically fixate on analog granularity. Reality's provisional disclosures in noisy, disarticulated media organizes new realist technique.

The State of Realism

As I have been suggesting, realism, broadly construed, remains the dominant mode of storytelling in American culture. One might, understandably, suggest that the direct-mimetic quality of film and television predisposes these media to realism, or at least a version of realism, owing to their semiotic situation as representational technologies.[41] But the contemporary novel also testifies to realism's extraordinary persistence. Lyrical realism characterizes the majority of novelistic fiction – "low,"

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[41] In *Technics and Time, Part Three*, Stiegler extracts two fundamental cinematic precepts: the fact that cinema shares with photography the "coincidence" of what it records with the recording itself, which makes it possible to store and itemize the past, resulting in the spontaneous tendency to believe that what one sees has in fact been; and second, not unlike phonographic recording, cinema a "temporal object," that is, an object that exists as it's flowing through time, thus that the flow of the film "coincides" with the flow of the consciousness that watches the film. Mary Anne Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002) foregrounds cinematic materiality of time in this exact light. But Stiegler will further posit an "essentially cinemato-graphic structure for consciousness in general" (13).

"middle," and "highbrow" alike. As Zadie Smith articulates in "Two Paths for the Novel," what she terms the "Balzac-Flaubert" tradition of realism has persevered since the nineteenth-century in spite of the "theoretical assaults" launched against it.[42] "The American metafiction that stood in opposition to Realism," Smith attests, "has been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules, and dismissed, by our most famous public critics, as a fascinating failure, intellectual brinksmanship that lacked heart" (2008).

A number of contemporary novels reproduce a similar account of recent literary history. In Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), for example, an ensemble of loosely associated and equally adrift characters search for emotional truth across their interlocking storylines. The characters' struggles are personal in nature, but they are also crucially environmental. None of the alienated ensemble can address or alleviate their troubles because there is no cultural space for authentic expression. None of the characters can productively or honestly narrate themselves into their surroundings. Like the formerly-maimed convalescent narrator of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, wounded indescribably by "Technology. Parts, bits," these are character left unnerved or unsettled when they "try to get [their] grip on things" (9). What is suggested as an epistemological problem is transfigured into a form of neurosis where it destabilizes psychic individuation.

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[42] Integral to Smith's account of realism is her reading of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), a novel she extols as a commendable effort in "anti-realist realism." The novel is obsessed with technological alterity and its determinations. The novel opens by restating Pynchon's London-set salvo in technological determinism from *Gravity's Rainbow*, "a screaming comes across the sky…" McCarthy's novel opens: "About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge. Not much, I know." (3) The first sentences deconstruct cause-and-effect relations as well as testify to the unspeakable effects of technology that cannot be construed as "events" but generalized conditions.

Egan's novel ends with a talented but undiscovered middle-aged musician, Scotty, "untouched" and "pure," finding through a cathartic public concert a "pure language" in music for a new generation (326). Scotty's unassuming grunge lifestyle and casual authenticity contrasts with the atmospheric stagnation against which each of the characters struggle. One of the questions Egan poses is whether art can remedy the expressive impoverishment characterized in the novel by ironic detachment and empty signification. This idea is expressed concisely through an ironized treatment of "word casings." The idea is coined by Rebecca, a "star academic," whose new book focuses on this very concept, "a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside of quotation marks… words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" (323, 324). Rebecca commodifies the stylized precariousness of words, seemingly important words like "democracy" and "identity," channeling 'radical' poststructuralist impulses into an upper-middleclass career accessorized with the cachet of intellectual prestige. Other persons in the story are less successful in navigating the problem of insincerity and turning it to their advantage. One character laments, "all we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right. You can never just *Say. The. Thing*" (321).

In *Americanah* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's fictional avatar more squarely castigates the smug, self-applauding machismo of high postmodernism. Discussing her ex-boyfriend's taste in fiction, Ifemelu recalls his condescending take on Jean Toomer's *Cane*:

> A precious performance, Blaine had called it, in that gently forbearing tone he used when they talked about novels, as though he was sure that she, with a little more time and a little more wisdom, would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men and packed with *things*, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic

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books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness. She had read many of them, because he recommended them, but they were like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue's memory. (14)

In Egan and Adiche's fiction, postmodern style and its would-be incendiary maneuvers are recast as intellectual exercises bereft of meaningful political content or emotional urgency. They lack staying power because they fail to engage the "tongue's memory" – these are words unmoored from a bodied, perceptual correlative. "Literature" – not life. The vitalist metaphor is telling with regard to Ifemelu's view of literary art. To restate Smith's assessment of high postmodernism, its "radical deconstructive doubt which questions the capacity to describe the world with accuracy" is rendered as a paralyzing and self-satisfied theory of literary art.[43] Postmodernist de-mythologizing, a version of consciousness-raising as mansplaining, is reframed in this discourse as an insulated activity in style, a testosterone-fueled theater of self-presentation.[44]

If Smith's influential argument misreads postmodern fiction and overstates its disconnect from the literary tradition it annotates, her essay nonetheless diagnoses a longstanding critical commonplace as it regards the status of *the literary* a la realism. The now famous, if rather confusing, debate between Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus speaks to the novel's controversial and possibly waning position in the cultural

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[43] Smith's argument crucially revisits Hutcheon's assessment of postmodernism as a polemic that derives its power through negative critique. By way of contrast, Smith lauds the "constructive deconstruction" of new realist fiction. While I generally agree with Smith's take, she does open herself to criticism downplaying the dialectical and "constructive" elements of metafiction that someone like Hutcheon acknowledges and which are, on some level, an obvious structural aspect of "*meta*-fiction"

[44] This ethos of de-mythologizing of course characterizes figures in the postmodern canon as diverse as Thomas Pynchon and Frank Miller, authors whose political persuasions could not be further apart.

landscape.[45] Fearing for the novel's relevance in the face of other compelling media, Franzen argues for an accessible and popular style in the fashion of conventional realism. Franzen's view recounts the "The Art of Fiction" (1884) when Henry James makes an appeal for serious fiction as an art form that can appeal to the masses, because it creates what he calls "an impression of life" unmatched by any other medium. In this way, Franzen shares with Smith an investment in an essentialized bourgeois calculus, that which Smith looks to rescue from the high postmodernist assault on realism, "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self" (1). Marcus, on the other hand, defends stylistically difficult literature and advocates for a new kind of modernism along the lines of avant-garde innovation. Though he guards his argument against being read as a manifesto, the urgency with which Marcus makes his case reiterates the kinds of full-throated declarations one sees in manifesto-modernism. Marcus extols a literature that can ""interrogate the assumptions of realism and bend the habitual gestures around new shapes" (47, 2005). He wants to turn his readers into "fierce little reading machines, devourers of a new syntax" (49).

The anxieties subtended with these debates, and expressed by artists like Egan and Adiche, relate directly to literature's imagined social role. Realism makes a claim on representing the whole of national moment and capturing a prevailing intellectual and cultural spirit. As I hope to have made clear, Realism must be understood as a cultural commonplace and cultural technique as well as an artistic program. Stanley Corkin has

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[45] See Jonathan Franzen's "Mr. Difficult" (2002) and Ben Marcus's "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It" (2005)

argued persuasively about literary realism's role in fashioning the political imaginary of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States in *Realism and The Birth of the Modern United States* (1996). Drawing from his interpretation of founding American realist William Dean Howells, Corkin states that nineteenth-century realism indexes a "conservative" desire for order, "a basic impulse to conserve to the degree possible that element of the older organizing hierarchy and systems of United States life" (11). For Howells, post-Civil War realism moves away from romanticism and embraces a material emphasis, so naturalizing "the authority of a worldview derived from corporate liberalism by showing how this perspective is correct and able to find (but not create) the real" (24). Realism continually demands its performance to authenticate the terms of its orthodoxy. Katherine Kearns surmises accordingly, "as realism knows, it is only in the act of claiming a reality that one has 'a reality'" (23).

If, as Corkin argues, nineteenth-century realism consecrates corporate liberalism as a de facto civic epistemology, newer realisms rehearse and negotiate an information fantasy in capitalist positivism. This is what Mark Fisher discusses in *Capitalist Realism* (2009) as a predominant "business ontology."[46] It is for this reason that I want to state what is probably an obvious point, that narrative art comprises just one component of Realism – it is a worldview as well as an ideologically freighted nationalist praxis. Condoleezza Rice, for instance, while writing for *Foreign Affairs* about American exceptionalism and its complicated balance of ideological idealism and military realpolitik, suggests her essay's leading question in this light. Her essay's title: "The New

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[46] Fisher's proposes, from his reading of the 2007 Alfonso Caurón film *Children of Men*, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism.

American Realism" (2008). I want to suggest that the arbitration of realism as an epistemological activity is one the country's longstanding democratic pastimes, one that inflects all facets of cultural production. It is a cultural technique that precedes its specific articulations. Because of this, it generates the imaginative grounds and social context enframing artistic production.[47]

I am curious about how this imperative inflects how artists have turned to media-intensive rhetoric as a means of demarcated neo-confessional positivism. Egan, for instance, sends her existentially fraught characters in a search for something *real*, something that is conceived in terms of its technical authenticity. What is depicted as a widespread social problem in the novel is diagnosed as an epistemological issue in communication. One of the primary characters, a washed-up, middle-aged records producer named Bennie, laments the age of digital art –

> too clean, too clear. The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through it microscopic mesh. Film photography, music: dead. *An aesthetic holocaust*! (23, emphasis in original)

Situated against the "aesthetic holocaust" of evacuated high-definition kitsch, Bennie fetishizes what he sees as a more authentic modality in older, "dirtier" media[48]: "He listened for muddiness, the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an

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[47] To attempt to write "the Great American Novel," for example - - a surprisingly popular and long-lived, if unstated, motivating conceit - - presumes to address and speak on behalf of an entire, fractious nation. While this grandiose project does not, of course, in every instance characterize the imaginative basis of artistic production, it informs the purported site of literature's operation as a communicative and artistic act.

[48] I am referring to Justus Nieland's term in "dirty media," a term he coins in "Dirty Media: Tom McCarthy and the Afterlife of Modernism" (2012). Addressing the technophilic nature of McCarty's interest in modernist media, Nieland argues for "dirty media," "the constitutive impurity, otherness, or heterogeneity of media, its way of being technically contaminated by alterity, noise, and the stochastic—rather than its more notorious insistence on medial specificity or purity that McCarthy's archaeology ends worth recovering at the scene of the modern" (583)

actual room" (22). Later, while in a recording studio, Bennie gets his first "natural"

erection in months as he hears a young group perform their decidedly non-digital music

while he listens alongside his young, voluptuous assistant, Sasha.

> Oh, the raw, almost threadbare sounds of their voices mixed with the clash
> of instruments – these sensations met with a faculty deeper in Bennie than
> judgement or even pleasure; they communed directly with his body,
> whose shivering bursting reply made him dizzy. And here was his first
> erection in months – prompted by Sasha, who had been too near Bennie all
> these years for him to *really see her*, like in the nineteenth-century novels
> he'd read in secret because only girls were supposed to like them. He
> seized the cowbell and stick and began whacking it with zealous blows.
> He felt the music in his mouth, his ears, his ribs – or was that his own
> pulse? He was on fire! (30, emphasis in original)

Bennie's apostrophic episode dramatizes technophilic embodiment, staging realist affect

through the reification of anachronistic media. It presents an experience with art that

takes nineteenth-century literary realism for its model. Bennie's experience with analog

equipment, with the raw provisions of an inscriptional media technology, revitalizes his

own perceptual faculties (*really seeing*) as well as is encountered in the form of sensual

overload, an antidotal and eroticized Benjaminian shock.

The scene evidences how new realism courts modernist technophilia as a basis for

its formal innovations and epistemological play. As I discuss in closing this project

through an analysis of Rachel Kushner's novel *The Flamethrowers* (2013), new realism

oversees a rehabilitation of modernist aesthetics described by Mark Goble in *Beautiful

Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (2010). As Goble argues, discussing

modernist experimentation and its desire for opening new channels for authentic

communication, "the mediated life of modern U.S. culture takes shape as a network of

desires for intimate, material, and affecting relations with technology" (8). Goble's

analysis illustrates modernism's attraction to media for precisely those moments when

they do more or less than communicate — moments when machines do not function as transparent conduits for the flow of information, but instead emerge as objects of affection, nostalgia, and delight.

Methodological Aims

One of my key motivations in this project is to contribute to an ongoing reconsideration about how best to consider and represent the cultural work of narrative art. In discussing literature's "cultural work," I am of course taking cue from Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985). In her exceptional analysis and ambitious theory of literary production, Tompkins assesses literary form as an expressive repository of evolving historical forces and cultural pressures. The literary artifact, and specifically literary *form*, is treated as a diagnostic expression of the processes attending its creation – Tompkins's approach is a compelling Foucauldian forerunner to new historical approaches where she converts close-reading methods into a hermeneutics suited to cultural archaeology. Where I value the priority Tompkins establishes, and find her readings genuinely compelling, it is my hope to model a more dynamic approach to form. By integrating new media studies and new formalism, my goal is to coordinate each of these fields and their mutual commitments to questions of genre, form, and materiality that do not abandon the historicist and politically engaged research that has long defined the agenda of cultural analysis.

Recent studies of realism, which take up the term as an aesthetic strategy and genre as well as a category for interpretation, often tend to approach the concept from a Jamesonian model of literary analysis coming out of *The Political Unconscious*.

Criticism in this vein aligns post-structuralism with the tools of discourse analysis, placing an emphasis on tracking the ideological and material-economic logics that underlie the construction of texts and which shape the reality that texts simultaneously refer to and reproduce. Form in this way of thinking is an object constrained and molded by ideological horizons. Realism, a narratological strategy as well as an operative theory of literature and literature's work, has along these lines been discussed as an inherently conservative aesthetic. Securing and reiterating the armatures of the rational bourgeois subject, traditional realism supposes a knowable reality and presumes that the important parts of social reality can, in the first instance, be properly understood and communicated in language and in media.

It is my sense that a critical account of realism necessitates (re)thinking what we think art is and can do in a given social and epistemological field. It also provides an occasion to put media theory and technics-based analytics in a productive and methodologically fruitful dialog with materialistic dialectics. As I see it, this is an ancillary aim of this analysis: to clarify how media theory and technics furnish a consideration of mediation that helps us reconsider and nuance existing theories of cultural production as they come to bear on the analysis of texts. It is my sense that ideology criticism has precluded scholars from identifying and understanding realism's epistemological and technical elements. One of the questions new realism forces us to ask is whether technology is the tool of capitalism and an instrument of capitalist operations, or does technology constitute a dynamic and process-oriented condition of being and knowing within which the logic of capitalism is subtended? Articulating the difference concerns how one may consider art as a field of dynamic emergence as well as changes

how one thinks about the nature of that emergence. If and where emergence occurs, how is it bracketed, advertised, or suggested? If realism is, in fact, actually much more conservative in its alignment, this too warrants descriptive analytic attention.

Artists as well as critics have in the past several decades confronted the ongoing tractability of realism and realist technique and contested how one might understand its lingering popularity and commercial viability. Realism, as I have suggested, is in many respects still tacitly understood to be integral to and a proxy or metonym for serious and socially-minded popular literary art, a conception of literature's cultural work that is more or less inextricable from the social novel in particular. The legacy of social realism continues to inform what realism is thought to be and do: it represents and indicts a standing social reality from the position that the important parts of life in the world can be diagnosed, understood, and then (possibly) reformed once comprehended.

A homologous framework attends the study of literature, and specifically realism, in academic circles where epiphanic and consciousness-raising reading strategies obtain in ideology critique, often referred to as suspicious reading. Critics in this mode identify disguised and/or latent expressions of hegemonic circumscription in texts or otherwise read artistic forms as manifestations of ideological designs or the working through of ideological contradictions. Toward this end, scholars partake in a critical project that, curiously enough, looks a lot like realism – they are arbitrating the constructedness of the textual real as it can be judged against a better interpretation of the structural "reality" that actually exists behind and informs the text's surface level features. More so than other genres, realist artworks seem to demand an almost urgent responsive criticism along these lines where the premise of realism is tacitly granted. Moreover, after the

passing of New Criticism, suspicious reading and ideology critique have together been understood as a politically responsive and socially attuned rationale for conducting the enterprise of literary and cultural scholarship. It gives meaning to both the artwork and to the discipline that studies it.

My goal here is not to dispute or disregard ideology critique, whose orientation toward literature and the work of the discipline is one I share. Taking cue from both Jamesonian thinking and the sorts of discourse analysis that formalizes in and after post-structuralism, literary scholars and cultural critics have been especially good at illustrating how the different features of texts assume, index, or themselves constitute historically specific ideological formations as well as express the different operations of power. I do want to suggest, however, that the industry around ideological scholarship has had the effect of changing (essentializing) the object of study (in an oblique, but rather conservative fashion) in English and Literature departments and left us with a desiccated critical lexicon for talking about texts and understanding the actual work they do in the world.

In addition to reproducing the same types of insights in and across different bodies of work and in different media and media contexts, ideology critique can also look a lot like canon affirmation enacted through the vocabulary of the left. As Rita Felski has argued, suspicious readings frequently offer similar conclusions across a diverse range of narrative purviews and historical periods, i.e., that all texts indicate the subtended workings of capitalism, and well-crafted texts composed by exceptional artists offer unique and brilliant insight into the interworkings of cultural production and social reality. The literary scholar in the New Critical mold is here restyled and reequipped to

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discuss the stuff of literary greatness in a new, ostensibly more politically responsive capacity, but it often serves the same end: making the case for a text or author to be studied and even celebrated, often precisely because they understand and can show us what "really is" better than other artists.[49]

Rather than demonstrating why great art should be appreciated for its complexity and well-composed aesthetic unities, as was the style inaugurated by New Criticism, literary artists are now fashioned as prescient social critics and even cultural heroes for identifying and, in some small way, resisting the operations of capitalist calculus. This line of critique takes its assumption about literature's categorical social efficacy for its conclusion. Literature as a technology is essentialized along these lines precisely because it is not often thought of as a technology. On the one hand, critics emphasize that literature is understood to be a historically situated mode of expression, and, on the other, that literature and its study categorically refers to a transcendent mode of inquiry that is uniquely helpful for understanding certain aspects of human life and thinking through standing social and cultural questions. If literature and other forms of narrative art are, in fact, exceptional, and if we are committed to thinking in the confines of this arrangement, it is my sense that we need to find better and more productive ways of defining how this is true.

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[49] Minoritarian artists and critics in particular have a tangible investment in identifying, resisting, and rearticulating dominant cultural formations along these lines. This is important, precisely because English and Literature departments have not, historically speaking, been a place of contesting political operations. Though it is not a popular view to take, one has to recognize that the academic study of literature and art in the context of the university, and in English departments in particular, often the first to celebrate radical politics and anti-capitalist sentiment, are very much complicit in the prevailing economy as well as the legislation of cultural capital

As Caroline Levine has argued in outlining a "strategic formalism," literature should not necessarily be taken as an object produced asymmetrically by the forces of history as much as a mode of meaning making that extends, reproduces, resists, or reshapes the formations provided to it by a historically-situated semantic field. Rather than viewing artistic products as oblique symptomatic expressions of ideology (Jameson) or evidence of a hegemonic order's discursive operations (Foucault), Levine emphasizes the recursive role that art-based forms play in and across a series of linguistic and institutional contexts with other social forms. In the dissolution of the "formal" and the "social," as Levine terms it, critics trained in close-reading might "read social structures – politics – in…alert and insightful ways" (xii, 2015). One can understand the appeal for literary critics, particularly where this truism has generated interesting work for decades in media and cultural studies departments. This approach in English derives from a recent turn toward a descriptive new formalism the likes of which Rita Felski articulates in *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Regarding literature and literary form as they bear on larger questions of epistemology, Felski argues:

> Knowledge and genre are inescapably intertwined, if only because all forms of knowing – whether poetic or political, exquisitely lyrical or mind-numbingly matter-of-fact – rely on an array of formal resources, stylistic conventions, and conceptual schemata. (2015).

I share Levine and Felski's constructivist orientation toward knowledge and knowledge production. Felski's statement nonetheless posits a very specific type of form. "All forms of knowing" are in her analysis linguistic in nature and preformatted by text-based social contexts. A textualist premise of this kind is convenient for a literary critic, but it does not consider the relationship between materiality and information. In privileging discourse

Felski diminishes its techno-epistemological basis by splitting forms of knowing from their technological basis.

The methods outlined in Levine and Felski necessarily deemphasize the media-specific nature of form. "Form" as they configure it is predicated on a textualist premise. It presupposes the self-similarity of social configurations and representations of them in different media and across signifying contexts. This is how, in Levine's reading of *The Wire*, for instance, a televisual representation of a court system in the HBO ensemble crime drama is similar in kind to an actual Baltimore court system – approaching social structures as texts with correlating formal features has the effect of flattening objects of analysis to the stuff of text-based semiotics. It assimilates things to words. Form defined in this fashion does not afford that technologies operate on our basic perceptual and experiential faculties and impact what is known or knowable independent of our representations of said technologies and their effects. The method found in Levine and Felski espouses a framework that, in the words of Mark Hansen, appears to "forego the material reality of technology beyond the theater of representation" (4).

I argue that we can recognize literature and art's cultural work not for the way it indexes symptoms of history or ideology, though it can and does, but for the way it participates in and derives from an economy and ecology of historically situated media-forms. It gives us insight into the operations of different material-semiotic milieus. Kate Marshall has suggested along slightly different lines that new formalist analysis can illustrate the ways techno-epistemological structures underlie the discursive features of literary texts: this is the important insight that everything communicated is also implicated in the materials and forms of its construction. "Everything [media] store and

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mediate is stored and mediated," Joseph Vogl posits, "under conditions that are created by the media themselves and that ultimately comprise those media." This sensibility informs my epistemological orientation toward a media formal approach to cultural production.

CHAPTER ONE

DETECTING MEDIA:

THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* (1966) AND *GRAVITY'S*

RAINBOW (1973)

Technology is both the chance and obstacle for thought

– Martin Heidegger

The traditional realistic [novel] is the only novel worth a shit [and] is what, someday, I would like to be able to write

– Thomas Pynchon, letter to Faith and Kirkpatrick Sale, March 9th, 1963

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Thomas Pynchon has for decades attracted the interest of scholars interested in the intersection of technology, media, and literature. Pynchon's early novels in particular consider how emerging postwar technologies reshape what Marshall McLuhan calls in *Understanding Media* (1964) the "ratios of human sense perception," and, by extension, later the dimensions of cultural and social life. If Pynchon accedes to this view of media, which he clearly does, it warrants paying attention to how technologies and their cultural effects appear in his fiction. As media scholars are quick to point, McLuhan's seminal book is deceptively titled; his thesis is less about "understanding" media and more about

discussing how media technologies profoundly influence the human and human lifeworld at the same time they evade "understanding" as such. Media technologies, and the fact of mediation as a feature of social reality, resist traditional interpretative tools for theorizing the nature and extent of their epistemological impact. This chapter examines two of Pynchon's early novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, and analyzes how they each grapple with this problem under the organizing design of conventional literary realism. The novels partake in a politically-minded endeavor in mimetic social reportage which is why they each summon in their design investigative thrillers. Oedipa Maas and Tyrone Slothrop both initiate quests for truth that begin as personal journeys but quickly grow into much bigger plots with national, historical, and even ontological ramifications. Simultaneously, the novels press back against the storytelling techniques and narrative strategies that obtain in genres inclined toward plots of knowledge-acquisition and consciousness-raising. Pynchon's fiction resists structures of revelation and elides the straightforward delineation of verifiable knowledge.

The Crying of Lot 49 pulls apart the workings of conventional detective fiction and furthermore questions the ability of literary texts, and language more generally, to represent or adequately describe technologically installed conditions of meaning. Published just some years later, *Gravity's Rainbow* explores with redoubled focus the epistemic problems sketched out in *The Crying of Lot 49*. More so than its predecessor, *Gravity's Rainbow* directly concerns technological determinism. The novel moreover questions what it means for literary works, and "literature" at large, to represent "realistically" conditions of existence for the purpose of raising social awareness or cultivating political consciousness. Toward this end, Pynchon's magnum-opus can be

read as a study of technologies and their various (il)legibilities as semiotic actors. The novel poses in its WWII setting a nightmarish posthuman scenario: an endemic, worldwide incursion of the human lifeworld by new, literally world-changing war technologies. And yet *Gravity's Rainbow* teases out this trope and pressures its limitations as a representational figuration, parodying what Mark Hansen calls "the machine reduction of technology," or the putting of technology into discourse. In both novels quest-for-truth plots turn into an interrogation of representational thinking. This is why Pynchon warrants a technics-based study as writer interested in technology and its impact. The novels scrutinize representation as a social practice and theory of communication, just as they interrogate representation as an auspices for securing socially and politically germane knowledge in narrative art. This is one of the key ways Pynchon reinvigorates something like conventional realism. Transcription and active looking are of course unified in realism under designs that fuse subjective experience with objective narration. It is crucial that this is a metaleptic account of perception engendered by media. In part, this chapter's title is meant to suggest the duality at the heart of Pynchon's fiction. Where the realist imperative is to simulate immediate observation, new realism means does this plus the perceiving of perception in media-intensive terms. *Thus media detect,* doing the work of the detective in the sense of writing/perceiving, *as well as media are detected* – there is an attempt to render a sense of media technologies acting upon and shaping the perceivable lifeworld in ways that may or may not be representable. The idea of the "novel" that emerges is one of an equally technical and discursive object that mediates impressions of technological alterity.

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In a feverish moment of something like clarity, Oedipa Mass, the protagonist of

The Cying of Lot 49, suggests that what began for her as a quest for truth has become an

arresting exercise in unknowing. It is one of just a few "moments of revelation" in the

narrative, if revelation is in fact what it is. The scene refracts the novel's project, chiefly

its send-up of detective fiction. It is important that the reading experience mirrors

Oedipa's unknowing; the reader never knows the status of the conspiracy she

investigates. Like Oedipa, we do not know if Trystero exists, is an elaborate prank

conducted at her expense, or is, perhaps, the product of her own paranoid delusion.

Reflecting a priority thought to be definitively postmodern, *The Crying of Lot 49* is less

concerned with delineating knowledge and more interested in examing how one knows.[50]

For a score of writers and artists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, this

project concerns understanding how media-specific forms shape human perception and,

by extension, are themselves commensurate with the dimensions of perceptual life and

the experience of lived reality.

The way Oedipa describes her sense of unknowing bespeaks an epistemological

concern in Pynchon's novel with technological media. Gripped by a sudden paroxysm,

she surmises that the reality at the heart of her investigation may be "too bright for her

own memory… [whose truth] must always blaze out, destroying its own message

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[50] As I will discuss, "how 'one' knows" suggests something like a subject position as a baseline template for constructing knowledge. It is important that Pynchon assumes and negotiates this humanist figuration, naturalized as it is in nineteenth-century realism and consecrated in the grammar of neo-liberalism. Pynchon's fiction structurally requires this formation while it at the same time moves, often playfully, to estrange its conventional appearance in literary form. (1999).

irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back" (76).

This is one of many places in the novel indicating an interest in extra-discursive knowing.

The drive to uncover and communicate a verifiable "central truth" gives way to a

representation of reality *as* a disarticulated energy, a kinetic field of force that overrides a

discrete signal or "message."[51] Hermeneutics and the project to interpret and make sense

are thwarted. Truth in this estimation supersedes human faculties as well as eclipses

representation, resisting as it were its translation into information. If she can 'sense' truth

it nonetheless cannot make sense. It exceeds Oedipa's ability to process or (re)present

what it is and, however momentarily detectable, it fades away in the face of consensus

reality - but this sense of an affective semiotic surplus is nonetheless mutually

constitutive with its material substrate, that which bears its trace and enframes its

operations for human perceptibility. It is a reality, in other words, intelligible because it

can be *mediated* if not *communicated*. The truth beyond the would-be clues confronting

Oedipa is not something that partakes in a positivist economy of "facts." It cannot

necessarily be discovered, articulated, or (re)presented. It is a reality that is only

accessible as a generalizable wave of sensation prior to and in excess of articulation,

somehow immanent in her thinking and present in her field of vision, but only ever on the

edge of realization. And it is its being preformatted by media that constitutes its sense of

reality. Oedipa's over-exposed blank - - a media metaphor for the trace of reality, one

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[51] This is not unlike Roland Barthes's "reality effect," where a sense of a wider truth is implied
through the unintended "residue" it leaves behind in a text. Realist texts frequently invoke this as a matter
of style, trying to simulate unmotivated details that suggest a reality in excess of the plot. The imperfect
recording of a phenomena or object - - the "an overexposed blank" - - conveys a stochastic environmental
noise whose "realistic" rhetorical effect is to connote an excess of what could be straightforwardly signified
(1968). It also underscores the time and place of the recording device, emphasizing the presence of
apparatus at the event of capture rather than the coherent meaning or essence of the object being captured.

that is an assertion of the *condition of mediation* as much or more than it is a viable

record of an object or event - - itself becomes an impression of reality.

Whereas Oedipa spends the entire story looking for truth, supposing that truth

might be detected and found, the novel conveys a theory of knowledge opposed to her

task in detection. Pynchon's truth is the truth of knowledge that takes form in technics.

Rather than approaching a transcendent meaning through the correct interpretation of

signs as they correlate with real objects and events, Oedipa encounters noise in a way that

lays bare the reality of perceiving in terms of technological media.

Oedipa's media metaphor elucidates a crucial dynamic of Pynchon's novel, but it

also suggests a fascination with intermediation that is, I want to suggest, a type of

reinvigorated realism. *The Crying of Lot 49* takes up realism's inclination to "show" by

taking social measure. It then transfigures this guiding impetus into a question, a plot-

level crisis of knowledge coordinated through the mechanics of a detective story.[52] As in

conventional realism, Oedipa's mission to find and furnish knowledge has a social and

political resonance. The encyclopedic scope and maximalist style of Pynchon's fiction,

David Cowart argues, teases comprehensive knowledge by offering a "seductive promise

of the big picture" (89, 2012). Thus what begins for Oedipa as an enigmatic request to

execute the will of an estranged former lover, Pierce Inverarity, quickly spins into a

sprawling and possibly dangerous investigation involving secret societies, assassins'

guilds, and a clandestine postal conflict dating to the American Civil War. Oedipa begins

to wonder whether or not her investigation may at any moment unmask a network of

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[52] As I explain in the introduction, this correlates with a later project that interrogates "Literature" and questions literature's (purported) cultural work.

nefarious elements working below the surface of post-war "legacy America," thereby

pinpointing a conspiracy so extensive it "might be found anywhere in the republic" (121).

It is important that Oedipa imports the language of epiphany and consciousness-raising to

make sense of her investigation and envision its (possible) ramifications. Foreseeing as

she does a deliverance from false-consciousness, her formulation recapitulates realism

and its putative task to educate by showing how things really are.

The novel nonetheless relinquishes the task of theorizing social life by presenting

a convincing social reality. Pynchon's narrative is instead preoccupied with conveying

how media forms are a primary, constitutive feature of experience and integral to what

passes as knowledge. Appropriate to the oxymoronic endeavor that is realist fiction, the

theory of truth on offer in the novel is ontogenetic rather than ontological; it concerns the

production of reality more than it cares about arbitrating what is or isn't real. The novel's

interest in the construction of reality as it is realized in and through the *process* of its

measurement anticipates the insights of contemporary media theory. Such an

epistemological orientation complements Joseph Vogl's point that, "everything [media]

store and mediate is stored and mediated under conditions that are created by the media

themselves and that ultimately comprise those media" (16, 2008). This is not to suggest

the narrative pursues a solipsistic engagement with its own textuality as a way of

theorizing the social as a second-order concern. Quite the opposite, *The Crying of Lot 49*

foregrounds the material and medial situation of knowability as a social problem

precisely because the novel has relatively traditional commitments to social discourse and

the intellectual heritage of consensus politics. This is one of a number of ways that

"postmodern irony" is frequently misread as a self-adulating and apolitical turn. It is actually something more recognizable deriving from the lineage of social realism.

Pynchon's world reverberates with anxieties about the status of representation as it concerns knowledge and media-contoured constructions of reality, those that reflect the forms, syntax, and grammar of particular media and their corresponding information environments. Far from dismissing realism or sidelining the realist project, Pynchon's dismantling of certain realist techniques is indicative of how a number of serious-minded literary artists in and after high postmodernism, in and across a range of narrative artworks in different media, struggle to articulate new forms and new ways of signifying or evoking a sense of reality. New realism does not bring into focus features of the real that, in Fredric Jameson's description of an earlier realist project in the nineteenth-century, "remained hitherto unreported, unrepresented, and unseen" (231, 1988). It emphasizes instead that the yet unseen can feel real, can be talked about as "real" or as a "reality effect," precisely because it is preformatted by media, because it was made already *out of focus*.

What I propose in this chapter is a way of reading that, modeled through an analysis of Pynchon's fiction, brings a consideration of technics to the study of literary form.[53] Recent entries in literary theory have highlighted the ways that cultural forms, broadly defined, structure political life, influence social organization, and determine how

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[53] "Technics" refers to the study and theory of the technological basis of all human activity. I am largely drawing on Bernard Stiegler's sense of the term as he defines it in his *Technics and Time* series. His major contention is that western philosophy has been too committed to a distinction between "episteme" and "tekhne," one that reduces technology to an instrument of human activity rather than conceives it as a co-originary form with the human.   Technology is both the chance and obstacle for thought, but more than that, the human and the technical are mutually constitutive

knowledge is conceived, produced, and disseminated. Rather than viewing artistic

products as symptomatic expressions of ideology (Jameson) or evidence of a hegemonic

order's discursive operations (Foucault), thinkers like Caroline Levine emphasize the

dynamic, recursive role that art-based forms plays in and across a series of linguistic and

institutional contexts with other social forms. As I discuss in the introduction,[54] however,

form defined in this fashion does not afford that technologies operate on our basic

perceptual and experiential faculties and impact what is known or knowable independent

of our representations of said technologies and their effects. The method found in Levine

and in the work of Rita Felski espouses a framework that, in the words of Mark Hansen,

appears to "forego the material reality of technology beyond the theater of

representation" (4). Logocentric humanism abounds, as does a fundamentally linguistic

view of knowledge that justifies essentializing literature as a privileged, Archimedean

point of social and cultural influence.

Pynchon's fiction is a useful place to work through some of these problems, in

large part because his novels equally depend upon and are encumbered by their

representational task. They are also obsessed with technology. Both novels moreover

consider how media technologies augur myriad social and cultural effects,

physiologically impact the human sensorium, and thereby influence what can be

perceived, detected, known. As several German engineers in *Gravity's Rainbow* intone

while discussing the new, mysterious rocket-building material Imipolex G:

> All the talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a
> diversionary tactic… If you want the truth – I know I presume – you must
> look into the technology of these matters. Even into the hearts of certain

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[54] See "Methodological Aims" sub-header of the introduction for a discussion of Caroline Levine, Rita Felski, and the opportunities and limits of new formalism.

> molecules – it is they after all which dictate temperatures, pressures, rates of flow, costs, profits, and the shapes of towers… (170)

The Crying of Lot 49 and *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular express Friedrich Kittler's notion that "media are world-enabling infrastructures… not passive vehicles for content, but ontological shifters" (234). The dystopic WWII landscape envisioned in *Gravity's Rainbow* sees the physical constitution of the world, the materiality of space and time, altered by the war's proliferating new technologies: "the very fabric of the air, the time, is changed…" (77). This is in part why Pynchon's works are often discussed as technoscientific allegories, darkly humorous prophesies of a post-war America spiraling toward increasingly efficient (and profitable) means of oppression in late capitalism. Kittler, among others, has popularized reading Pynchon in this manner as a writer who dramatizes a posthuman nightmare scenario:

> And since 1973, when Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was published, it has become clear that real wars are not fought for people or fatherlands, but take place between different media, information technologies, data flows. (24, 1986)

Yet more than dramatizing a prosthetic account of biotechnical personhood and presenting a post-national world order produced by media, there is an attempt in Pynchon to represent technology's effects on a human lifeworld that does not reduce the epistemological significance of technological media to said "effects." Pynchon's novels imagine and formally approximate a situation where, reversing an instrumentalist standpoint where technologies only serve, extend, or amplify a coherent human "user," wherein the "use" of a discrete tool exhausts that implement's semiotic potential, technologies triumph over thought and prevail over humanist designs. *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *The Techno-epistemology Strikes Back*.

In what follows, I argue that Pynchon's novels are preoccupied with the epistemological problems that inhere in taking social measure as a means of procuring knowledge. *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* move to accommodate in a prevailing literary idiom technology's primacy over forms of knowing. In turn, this sensibility is a condition of meaning difficult to represent or accommodate in the types of mimesis-based realities long since naturalized in fiction. My analysis will turn on reciprocal aspects of this situation. First, that the problem of representing the primacy of technological conditions over forms of knowledge in narrative-based literature drives Pynchon's innovative, weird, and frequently funny formal innovations. I am particularly interested in the way that media metaphors, metalepsis and analepsis, hysteron proteron, and documentary realist tropes function in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* both as conventional literary strategies as well as formal expressions of a representational problem deriving from technology's inexpressible influence on thought and perception.

Second, Pynchon's novels share an important continuity with nineteenth-century realism through their interest in extra-discursive signification and "communicating a reality bare of communication" (Jameson, 35 2013). It is worth establishing that Pynchon's fiction does not envision a facile technological determinism. What Jameson calls "realist affect" necessarily interfaces signifying strategies with what McLuhan calls "the rations of human sense perception." We might think again of the type of knowing Oedipa describes in the face of her elusive truth: she suffers an epileptic episode on contact with an effulgent, energetic reality, one that induces an extra-linguistic

Benjaminian shock.[55] Nineteenth-century realism works to create comparable moments
of "immediacy" through literary simulations of intensified perception in detail-oriented
passages conjoining objective narration and subjective focalization (Moretti 235).
Realism attempts to reproduce the experience of observation. Pynchon's novels retain
this structural element of nineteenth-century realism while teasing apart its component
pieces: chiefly, an individuated rational subject. This means jettisoning the notion that
literature, itself a technology and epistemological formation, is uniquely suited to
rendering useful or politically catalyzing types of social knowledge. As Pavolvian
scientist Edward "Ned" Poinstman of *Gravity's Rainbow* asks himself in a moment of
frustration, sensing that a barrier precludes him form understanding the specific nature of
the relationship between Tyrone Slothrop and the V2 rocket strikes that follow him
around Europe:

> Well… why not renounce the Book then, Ned, give it up that's all, the
> obsolescent data, the Master's isolated moments of poetry, it's paper that's
> all. (142)

Realism and Technesis

> As long as technology is modeled on the category of relative exteriority,
> its material autonomy remains subordinate to its function within the
> domain of discursive thought; far from functioning as an agent of material
> complexification, technology is deployed as a purely abstract marker of an
> alterity that is constitutive of thought. The most significant consequence of
> this reduction is the collapse of technology into metaphor.
> - Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond*
>   *Writing* (80, 2001)

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[55] Benjamin's formulation is itself, of course, a literary trope. Benjamin supposes, rightly, in his
anticipation of someone like Marshal McLuhan that technological media condition human sense perception
and act on people in ways that cannot be expressed. A moment of "shock," by way of contrast, presupposes
a discrete body that technology acts upon from without.

Thomas Pynchon is not talked about as a realist writer. This is largely because his works do not look conventionally realist or appear to be especially interested in "reality." Sprawling and absurd, Pynchon's novels may at first glance seem outright antithetical to the spirit of nineteenth-century realism.[56] For instance, Grigori, a scene-stealing star of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is a Pavlovian-trained giant octopus with a flair for the dramatic and a weakness for his favorite afternoon snack, Mediterranean sand crabs. Another episode of the novel chronicles the life and times of Byron, an immortal lightbulb and would-be Marxist revolutionary. Well before we arrive at Byron's biographical tale of extended political frustration, a major section of the narrative sends protagonist Tyrone Slothrop meandering through war-torn Germany in the weeks after VE Day – at this point in the narrative our hero is adorned in a plush, over-sized pig costume and working under the Russian superhero moniker, Plechazunga. This identity he assumes having first posed as a British Clark Kent, the mild-mannered war correspondent, Ian Scuffling, and this before adopting what is probably his most appropriate alias in the novel, "Rocketman." Manic verve and an abiding penchant for the bizarre in Pynchon have led scholars to fashion the author as a prophetic literary talent and his works the stuff of a hilariously

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[56] Positioned as Pynchon is at the fore my archive, my project may appear to endorse a literary and cultural historiography organized (implicitly or otherwise) by a conservative investment in male artistic genius. While I seek to diagnose and study an expansive figuration like "new realism," I want to be clear that I am not arguing for a designation that issues from a celebrated founding progenitor. As a concept, new realism does not indicate a movement or periodization as much as articulate a narratological problem and correlating formal responses in socially and politically minded artworks concerning representation and mediation. Pynchon is a useful figure to study in this light. His canonical status and his reputation as a postmodern writer interested in technology make him a useful, illustrative case to describe new realism. My project opens with a discussion of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* because these texts provide a helpful and demonstrative occasion to challenge prevailing disciplinary commonplaces precisely because of their consecrated institutional status as definitive postmodern novels. Formal innovation in Pynchon, reflecting a common position in contemporary literary studies, is often discussed in a manner that opposes metafiction and realism. As I discuss in my introduction and in my second chapter through an analysis of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), this is a binary I am contesting.

off-kilter national raconteur. His novels depict an equally zany and harrowing portrait of a paranoid post-war America, a nation suffering the predations of late-capitalism, divided by systemic racism and misogyny, and stricken by the ever-present threat of worldwide atomic devastation. On these grounds, Pynchon is often discussed as a banner American postmodernist, a vaguely leftist technoscientific savant working in the register of fantastic national epic.

Pynchon enthusiasts tend to celebrate the author's inclination for joyful irreverence, especially when this signifies as a send-up of high literary seriousness. To this day, many of the author's fans remain delighted that *Gravity's Rainbow* failed to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1974, having first been selected to win, on account of members of the selection committee objecting to a profane episode in the novel pertaining to coprophilia. The fact that the novel failed to capture the award, while it is also widely known to have won the prize, albeit unofficially, perfectly indexes the author's complicated status as a canonical author *and* a countercultural, incendiary artist. Pynchon himself, when he has deigned to comment publicly on his work, has helped shape the terms of his critical reception by acting the part of insurgent literary celebrity. The author has on several occasions styled himself as an anti-naturalist hostile to complacent novelistic conventions. Referring to realistic nineteenth-century fiction, Pynchon in an early essay declared outright, "The novel of bullshit is dead."[57] An ennobling, masculine trope of heroic rupture has stayed with Pynchon and often

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[57] Later published in the *Slow Learner* collection (1984). One may dismiss the claim on a number of grounds, particularly since it was issued by a young writer, but it warrants scrutiny. It echoes the perorations of manifesto modernism and furthermore envisions a similar political urgency attending formal experimentation in literary art realism. As I will discuss shortly, this is one of a number of ways Pynchon may strike us a social writer inclined toward an epistemological realism

structured the way he and his work are discussed. Whether or not we care about the author's sense of his work (truly, I do not), it is worth noting how Pynchon has successfully cultivated a persona amenable to the ways scholars have fashioned a literary historiography through paradigmatic heuristics like "postmodernism." This has had the effect of obscuring an important filiation in Pynchon's fiction with the project of nineteenth-century realism. It has also shaped how critics discuss the formal character of his novels, often with the reliable, if now shop-worn, lexicon supplied by postmodern criticism.

As Linda Hutcheon has argued in her seminal *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), historiographical metafiction utilizes a constructivist approach to politically repurpose the act of narrating history. For Hutcheon, these are novels that are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (37). I am not as inclined as Hutcheon to celebrate postmodernism as an innately subversive literary strategy. Yet Hutcheon's point about the continuity of pre-existing artistic dispositions as they function under a new cultural dominant corresponds with what I am identifying as realism's insistence as a logical program for literature and literature's cultural work in postmodern fiction. Rather than overturning a complacent literary realism and rejecting its tacitly bourgeois sense of "literature," postmodern writers challenge it from within (xxii). Implicit here is the notion that literature's praxis remains more or less the same; it just needs to be executed differently and work under modified auspices. We see this too as the level of definition: metafiction is constitutive with that which it annotates. Nineteenth-century literary realism, Lars Ole Sauerberg argues, assumes "an extra-literary reality which may be verbally communicated, and

[presumes] it is possible and indeed valid to create self-sustaining fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality" (13, 1995). Metafiction is premised on a realist literary tradition and its imagined correlation with a translatable consensus reality. Metafictionality functions, in the first instance, by indicating a discursive interpretation of everyday reality amenable to its text-based approximations. This is the reality inherent in the "legacy America" that Oedipa, a housewife and self-identified "Young Republican" living in suburban California begins to see as a self-referencing and closed system. She is the (importantly feminized) conservative, middle-class subject that needs to step outside the purview of her hegemonic discourse to encounter the world as it "really is."

For all their ribald hijinks and quintessentially "postmodern" stylistic panache, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are sincere and even 'serious' novels where they concern the problem of anchoring knowledge, awareness, and self-constitution in something like a shared reality. Steven Weisenburger attests that Pynchon might be best understood as a polemical historical novelist. Whatever else the fiction is, it has socially minded and pedagogical ambitions. *Gravity's Rainbow*, for Weisenburger, is a "profoundly moral fiction" that indicts the military industrial complex and its attendant horrors as they have proliferated through the atomic age (5, 2012).

The novel furthermore takes seriously its task in social reportage. Pynchon's research and subsequent fictional treatment of German concentration camps in West Africa offered some of the first widely circulated coverage, of any sort, in the Western world on the genocide of Herero and Hottentot peoples during the Boer War. This documentation of a marginalized reality found its way into mainstream history through an

avant-garde WWII story about octopus attacks, giant adenoids, and psychokinetic rocket strikes. In this same spirit, Pynchon's novels frequently mesh well-researched historical facts and realistic-feeling elements, extended lists of specific detail, "Auerbachian particularities," with absurd flights of fancy. Both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* employ what Lars Ole Sauerberg has calls "documentary realism," a technique wherein fictional texts incorporate "non-literary" historical facts and specific, concrete details into their diegetic settings. For Sauerberg, documentary realism works to call attention to the difference between the fictional and the factual or, in the case of metafiction, it serves "its ontology-disruptive agenda." Presumed in the argument is that the expository quality of documentary realist technique interferes with the imaginative integrity of the realist novel's fictional universe. But Pynchon's constructivist orientation of course reflects a mainstream postmodern attitude consecrated in literary fiction in the wake of thinkers like Simon Schama or Hayden White. But where these thinkers are primarily concerned with the textual nature of the historical referent, Pynchon's work tries to include a variety of technological registers. Historical fiction in this style stages and represents what Joseph Vogl describes when he discusses "media-events," events that "are communicated through media, but the very act of communication simultaneously communicates the specific event-character of media themselves" (16, 2008). For all its formal oddities and fantastical story elements, Pynchon's novels thereby partake in something like a transmogrified traditional mimesis, assuming on some vestigial level the social and political viability of that project in the arena of consensus politics.

The novel refers to its own pedagogical aspirations in this respect. One prominent example from *Gravity's Rainbow* comes in the form of a direct, second-person address. It

is implied that antagonist Dominus Blicero, a rapacious, lupine, and pederastic SS officer, the novel's chief representative of the fascist military imagination, escapes from Germany at the end of the war and finds quarter in the United States.[58] The narrator offers a warning and implores readers to keep a watchful eye: "look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisors, the token intellectuals who sit on the board of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low" (749).

Bracketed though it is in the wider narrative, the statement implores the reader to look out at their contemporary world and *see* with new eyes the proper legacy of America's victory in WWII. One of the novel's major structural ironies implies the narrative's polemical stance. Where the entire story more or less concerns a multifaceted investigation into the origin of the German V-2 rockets laying waste to military and civilian populations alike that cannot hear them approaching (they move faster than the speed of sound), the horror of this particular technology is bracketed metaleptically by the reader's awareness of the Allies' discovery of Nazi concentration camps and, later, the coming of atomic devastation in Hiroshima and Nagaski. However harrowing the world of the V2 rocket, a more dangerous and world-changing military media epistemology is known to be imminent. This is the reality the narrative asks the reader to see and think through.[59] Oedipa's forays in California would have her deal with a similar

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[58] Pynchon is likely alluding to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* as well as referencing Wernher von Braun and the historical fact that he and a cadre of other Nazi scientists found political asylum in the United States after the war, he and several others playing an important role in developing different NASA programs. This, in spite of the fact that von Braun, and others, were consultants for Hitler's "Final Solution" and administrators at various death camps.

[59] *Gravity's Rainbow* works in a way comparable to Joseph Heller's dark WWII satire *Catch-22* where both novels ask readers to identify the real forces working behind mad, war-concocted scenarios. Heller's character, Milo Foreman is in many respects embodies one of the primary concerns of *Gravity Rainbow*; Foreman begins as an Army food service employee, diligently works his way up through the

concern. Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa's imperious former-Nazi psychiatrist, bespeaks an

infrastructural continuity of facism in America. What her peers see as a regrettable and

distasteful proliferation of VW cars and Sony radios in the U.S. market are suggestive of

a more systemic, economic, and cultural linkage with wartime facism abetted through and

modified within a commercially-riven maintenance of a hegemonic American middle-

class psychology. It is no surprise that Pynchon's form of new realism is suspicious of

literature and the literary on these very grounds. The novels encourage readers to "look"

and to "see," but they are equally wary of this same endeavor in art as a sanctioned,

bourgeois cultural commonplace.

Thus seeing with critical consciousness in Pynchon entails working through a

paranoid ethos. One of the central dynamics that plays out in *The Crying of Lot 49*

concerns this very problem. Oedipa's fastidious attention to details and openness to the

suggestion of coincidence is a way of thinking that obtains in detective fiction and which

is rewarded in that genre's narrative framework and empiricist narrative economy.

Oedipa's efforts also parody suspicious close-reading. Her heightened exegetical aplomb

engenders a self-selecting myopia rather than helps her securing meaningful knowledge.

One of the things the novel does is make the point that conventional literary realism, with

its enumerating descriptions and fetishizing of the particular, can be understood as a

paranoid aesthetic exercise. Amy Kaplan identifies in realism an inherent reactionary

politics when it enacts an impulse to fix and control coherent representations of social

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airbase's food services ranks on account on his business savvy and profit-managing acumen, and, to his
mind, neutrally betrays his compatriots by dealing arms and foodstuffs with the Germans in the interest of
market maximalization.

reality (8, 1988). In addition to being moralistic and didactic, realism can also function to foreclose what can be permitted as "real" and what is allowed to stand as "reality." Whereas Kaplan is discussing nineteenth-century American realism, a slew of contemporary serial television programs indicate both the popularity and the staying power of a similar type of conservative realism that deals specifically with reality's repeated demarcation: the *Law & Order*, *NCIS*, and *CSI* franchises, among many others, testify to the popular allure of a type of detective fiction that assures viewers of a knowable, empirical reality. Fetishizing as they do a forensics-based performance of rational deduction, these shows insist reality really is objective and accessible as such. Empiricism and the viability of the state through the function of its policing operations are imbricated in meaningful ways. A reactionary anxiety about transgressions levied against the world and worldview of "law and order" underlies these texts in a way that is, in a very real way, paranoid.

For Pynchon, paranoia also always describes a general pre-condition for knowing. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, this is the teasing gap between observable details and a comprehensive, totalizing vision of the reality only partially implied by less than satisfactory evidence.[60] The novel's thematic investment in mediation concerns the dynamic interplay of these different registers. *Gravity's Rainbow* explodes, in several senses, the synecdochic procedures so important to detective fiction. In so doing, the later novel underscores how metonymies work as a formal logic in conventional realism. As Roman Jakobson has suggested, "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the

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[60] Worth noting is that this dyadic interplay is exactly what Katherine Kearns identifies as driving realist fiction (*Nineteenth-Century Realism* 1996)

Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the space in setting and time… He is fond of synecdochic details" (1286, 1956). Conventional realism stages scenes that successfully *evidence* with believability a greater social totality. Oedipa's fascination with the conspiracy presented in the underground Trsytero network belies the larger problem involved with respect to representing her "imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser).

Brian McHale addresses paranoia as a technique in Pynchon's fiction in a (unacknowledged) realist fashion along these lines. He proposes that the novels complicate how a reader might imagine the world and one's place in a world order. McHale suggests that the novels be read according to what Jameson (via Edward Tolman) refers to as cognitive mapping, which is the process by which the subject represents itself and its environment and "sees where we truly are" (1991, 34-38). In McHale's estimation, Pynchon's novels diagnose the aporias of postmodern culture and formally work through what it means to act or know as a political subject in the context of late capitalism. Rather than thwarting cognitive mapping, as paranoid texts are understood in Jameson's *Postmodernism*, this work is thought to crystalize a productive way of (re)conceiving the subject's relationship to "real conditions of existence." McHale then asks, "is it possible that [reading Pynchon] might empower us cognitively to begin finding our place and our way in postmodernity itself?" (109). The unironic celebration of Pynchon for the moment aside, McHale's inquiry is telling where he frames literary greatness in the terms of a socially minded project in bourgeois realism.[61] As a narrative

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[61] This is the masculinist template of the socially-minded and historically conscious artist, the male literary figure as privileged social anatomist and esteemed cultural commentator.

design, realism gravitates toward strategies of documentation, reporting, and (re)presentation, and is formally coextensive with structures of revelation and the project of consciousness raising. The realist artist models 'good' and politically astute perception for the reader, serving all at once as artist, pedagogue, and perspicacious social anatomist. This is why, apparently, Pynchon might empower us – "us" being critical thinkers and readers of difficult books.

As I have been suggesting, Pynchon's fiction operates under this 'realist' rubric at the same time it scrutinizes its logical premises and epistemological grounds. While the novels are interested in reality and its construction in different media constellations, they are for this very reason "realist" in their genre orientation more than "realistic" in their execution. They deviate in this sense from McHale's reading of Pynchon via Jameson's cognitive mapping. As Mark Hansen argues, Jameson's model is a representational theory that cannot conceive of a relationship to the real as anything other than a cognitive relation – "a relationship culminating in a successful cognitive mapping," a representation of reality organized around a thinking, perceiving individual (19, 2000). Jameson's schema preserves the priority of thought for comprehending experience. Accordingly, "technology is stripped of its robust materiality in order to serve as a *figure* for the impact of materiality on thinking." This is what Hansen calls "technesis," or the putting of technology into discourse.

> By reducing the broad experiential impact of technology to its restricted impact on thought, twentieth-century theoretical discourses effectively function to "enframe" technology within a linguistically or semiotically constituted field. In any such frame of reference, technology can only attain a positive ontological status in the form of the machine metaphor, a figure for some (mechanical) operation of thought. (21)

Many scholars have studied how different media appear in Pynchon's fiction. These studies are often well executed and insightful, but they tend to reify the media being discussed rather than treat them as text-based, "literary" instantiations of a given media technology. I want to emphasize that the novel examines the situation Mark Hansen describes when he says, "if it is true that technologies cannot exist outside social systems, that in no way precludes them from having effects that cannot be captured by the interpretative tools germane to such systems" (3, 2000). "Technology," Heidegger says, shedding for a moment his logocentric view of human cognition, "prevents any knowledge of its essence" (42, 1952). The novels I examine recognize and try to represent this condition in a literary idiom, a task that productively pressures such devices as metaphor, metalepsis, and narrative perspective where they are formal analogs to human understanding. Thinking again of realism's pedagogical motivation to "show aspects of reality hitherto unseen or unreported," the contemporary realist novel means to invoke via representation a felt intensity without relinquishing these moments to reification in language. *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* demonstrate in this regard how technesis augurs the formal expression of the realist imperative to represent and not mean.

Detecting Media in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

Few would argue that *The Crying of Lot 49* (henceforth *CL49*) is not expressly 'about' paranoia and its then incipient place in mainstream political discourse of the 1960s. One of the reasons the novel has been canonized so successfully is because it corresponds so well with a narrative of literary periodization indexed by American socio-political history. This way of reading Pynchon is by no means unproductive, but I want to

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suggest that the discussion can be reoriented. It is my sense that the novel does not

strictly offer a paranoid thesis of postwar American life. As C. Namwali Serpell has

argued in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), "to represent paranoia or one-worldedness

is precisely to delineate a place from which it can be represented – a place outside of it.

The narrative depiction of self-enclosed or self-enclosing states implies positions beyond

them; I may be locked in Oedipa's perspective, but language grants me a double vision

that allows me to see her and myself in tandem" (53, 2014). [62]

In an otherwise interesting and imaginative re-assessment of Pynchon's second

novel, Nick Ripatrazone of *Literary Hub* recapitulates in his review a conventional realist

valuation by arguing for the work's "ongoing relevance" as a guidebook for navigating

the mass media information world of contemporary American political life. For

Ripatrazone, the novel presciently anticipates our current media environment to such a

degree that "Oedipa's nightmare has become our reality." Paranoia as Oedipa models it in

the in the narrative has become, in this sense, "necessary rather than radical" and is

simply a byproduct of being an informed citizen, of being "aware and observant." In a

way that seems to miss some of Pynchon's implicit criticism of the literary project, the

argument at hand extols an educated bourgeois consciousness and finds in Oedipa an

early champion of a reform-minded critical thinker bent on tabulating public truth.[63] It is

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[62] For Serpell, the novel's treatment of paranoia is just that, a treatment. Serpell's subsequent reading proposes that the novel entertains an ethical commitment to uncertainty, a creative ethos of aporia summarized in the trope of oscillation. This allows in her reading "to see Oedipa's continual awaiting as a creative act" which allows her to escape the purview of her "deadbeat literary dad." It affords a "contrastive kinesis of similitude and difference in dynamic relation" that approximates the obscurity of our dealings with otherness and, specifically for Serpell, "other people" (77, 78). Uncertainty arises in this reading as a pedagogical model for navigating the ethics of social conduct. While I am inclined to follow Serpell's (excellent) reading, I'm not sure the novel is as interested as she argues it is in modeling future behaviors.

[63] As Serpell points out, paranoia is a playfully critical narratological ethos in Pynchon's fiction aimed at criticizing the masculine authoritarianism formally inherent in the omniscient narrator (50). The

in this vein that Oedipa is compared to Dana Scully of *The X-Files* – the ideal

consumer/participant of our contemporary media ecology and political landscape is a

paranoid hero detective. Here again we see heightened perception and consciousness-

raising as these ideas are thought to be intertwined with and enabled by literary narrative.

One might also question why one would be invested in rescuing the novel as a

contemporary guidebook when the narrative is so clearly ambivalent about the paranoid

heuristic it showcases as a political and historical sensibility.[64] The novel actually appears

to purposefully avoid anything like a portable 'takeaway' and furthermore avoids framing

Oedipa's journey as an exercise in moral or educational development. While there is

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plot of *The Crying of Lot 49* can be read as an extended metaphor of this very point: Oedipa's former lover, Pierce Inverarity, is a guiding father-author. He is a dead white man, a figuration of a ubiquitous patriarchal epistemology, an absent-but –present source whose machinations (his "will") catalyzes the story and drives the plot forward. An affluent real-estate mogul and widely diversified financier, Inverarity functions in the plot as an uninspiring exemplar of a hegemonic corporate masculinity inclined toward forms of proprietary conquest. Much older than Oedipa when they were a couple - - she was then in her early twenties - - Inverarity also indicates a model of authoritarian conduct coupled with a masculinist sexual prerogative: he is a creepy paternalistic lover. Inverarity's legal will, his "will," constitutes the information world Oedipa navigates. The fact of this situation is literal in the diegetic environment: as a shareholder, Inverarity seems to have owned or have had a considerable stake in just about every entity or organization Oedipa encounters. A homologous aspect of the story environment regards normalized sexual predation. This is a point emphasized in a more specifically formal manner as well as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the narrative consciousness of a third-person speaker naturalizes in the style of traditional omniscient narration the cinematic techniques associated with an anatomizing male gaze. Katje, as she showers and dresses, senses the presence of an invasive filmmaker whilst her activities are being described by the novel's narrator. Like Katje, and throughout her investigation Oedipa confronts a gross culture of uninhibited male sexual license. A host of pedophilic men and would-be fatherly lovers of much younger women and girls - - including Oedipa's traumatized, philandering, and ineffectual husband, Mucho -- haunt the narrative. Evident is a pointed criticism of literature and literary knowledge as exercises in delimiting the reality of a male, upper-middle class domain.

[64] After all, the adolescent Beattles knock-off band in the novel, "the Paranoids," indicates that vaguely leftist paranoia can feed the trite, self-serving ends of consumerist instead of functioning as a politically viable or politically committed worldview. The narrator implies as much about Oedipa as an atomized paranoid whose activities "managed to turn [her] into a rare creature indeed, unfit for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (83). Of course, this is an indirect indictment of "progressive" academics as well as a statement about Oedipa's class station enabling her quest in the first place. For his part, Ripatrazone also tends to valorize Oedipa for modeling a useful civic attitude and, toward this end, asserts that the novel's ambiguous conclusion sees the protagonist in an auspicious position. I am less inclined to see Oedipa as fit for treatment as a messianic cultural hero based on the novel's ending. Paranoia as it is modeled as a reading experience in CL49 also pokes fun at the myopic and possibly self-deluding tendencies of suspicious close-reading. Oedipa is, in a sense, either a brilliant or deranged textual analyst. I do not see the programmatic value in denying this ambiguity.

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much to agree with in Ripatrazone's essay, it continues a line of thinking about both Pynchon's fiction and the literary novel at large I wish to reconsider. Chiefly, Ripatrazone treats paranoia as a strategic reaction to reality rather than an epistemological condition (as McHale would have it) or as a thesis about truth value in literature (as Serpell attests).

While I do not think the aforementioned views are incorrect or incompatible with the reading I am offering, it is my sense that they each fail to grapple with the extent to which Pynchon's novel deals in a concerted and even anxious fashion with technology's radical alterity. For this reason, each critic tends to overlook the ways the novel interrogates its narrational formatting as a way of contending the formal politics of literary representation. The majority of Pynchon criticism on this matter tends to conjoin a thematic interest in paranoia with an invective against Technology as a dehumanizing instrument of international capitalism. This line of thinking is not wrong, but it subordinates Technological otherness and the fact of mediation as a determinant to convenient ideological dimensions. I will in this analysis draw a new kind of attention to the formal character of Pynchon's novels. *CL49* forwards an epistemological inquiry at the level of narratological syntax. In particular, I want to think through how the formal dimensions and story logic of detective fiction vis-à-vis new realism are foregrounded and then pulled apart as a means of performing a consideration of the politics of form.

Suggestive of most postmodern metafiction, the novel reorients an art interested in producing or "admitting" truth around an investigation of truth's production (Shields 3). But more than assuming a vaguely critical, constructivist view of knowledge as a means of pat social critique, the novel confronts with anxiety the trouble of knowing as a

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political crisis. The ideological fantasy espoused in traditional detective fictional is the promise of verifiability. Detective fiction works by presupposing a generally knowable world and then introducing a mystery to be solved so that which is momentarily unknown can be integrated back into coherent vision of a social-political order. However enigmatic the mystery might be, dynamic phenomena in detective stories can, in the end, often be explained in a manner that reaffirms the regular workings of a knowable world.[65] Objects and events can be reliably measured, known, and reconstructed by the tools available for this purpose. Concordant with this ideological fantasy and naturalized in the genre is a commitment to justice and the continuity of the state and its policing mechanisms. The life of a conservative world order is fortified in detective fiction against the deleterious force posed by contingency, accident, the inexplicable.[66]

Pynchon's oeuvre questions the grounds by which one might know or act. If realism tends in its didacticism toward social reform, the axiology on offer in *The Crying of Lot 49* is less self-assured in spite of its straightforward political commitments. Oedipa's would-be epiphanies offer a suspended sentence. Caught between "ones and

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[65] One meaningful and interesting early exception to this generalization is Carol Reed's *The Fallen Idol* (1948). In the film, the innocent and likeable butler, Baines (Ralph Richardson) is, after quite an ordeal and long series of half-lies, rightfully cleared of murder charges when detectives ascertain evidence that clears him of wrongdoing. The evidence, however 'accurate' in the sense that it clears Baines of a murder he did not commit, is not correct in that it was produced by the victim - - Baines' jilted wife and fellow housekeeper (Sonia Dresdel) at a different time than the time of her murder and has no immediately pertinent connection to the criminal investigation. The problem is one of representational fidelity. The detectives read the evidence and it exonerates Baines from the charge of killing his wife, but the evidence refers in no way at all to the "fact" of the victim's lethal accident. It is, however, legible in the diegetic setting and therefore available to be communicated as legally tractable evidence.

[66] The first section of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Beyond the Zero," can be read as a reaction to and parody of this mindset and its correlative literary techniques. Or, what happens when a statistician, a Pavlovian scientist, a philandering blonde bombshell, and a slew of military bureaucracies and intelligence agencies walk into a room and have to deal with a non-etiological problem? Forces of contingency are marked as anarchic and criminal as well as they are, curiously, allied with a transgressive counter-episteme. A positive iteration of this situation can be seen in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

zeroes," the status of her interpretation of the Tristero network is held in precarious abeyance. She estimates that there is "transcendent meaning, or only the earth…Another mode of meaning beyond the obvious, or none" (150).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss how the novels formally subvert the logocentric orders of operation that obtains in de facto conservative realism in the formal designs of detective stories. Crucial to this deconstruction is an attempt in the fiction to express in words the radical alterity of technological media as they bear on epistemology and influence what is or is not intelligible, what is or is not real. More than glossing axioms of media theory or expressing a posthuman interpretation of personhood, the novels deal in a concerted fashion with the problem of language as it relates to knowing and representing technology's extra-discursive impact.

The novel pulls apart the logic of the conventional detective story by deconstructing that genre's theory of knowledge. In so doing, *CL49* questions ideas about literature and its cultural work where a socially-minded literature is thought to produce and disseminate forms of knowing. As I have discussed in this chapter and in the introduction to this project, the detective figure is often used to theorize the social prerogatives of literary realism. The identification and arbitration of reality is, in a sense, what detectives are all about. Most detective stories begin by delimiting what could possibly have happened – parsimony and negation function in deduction to pare down 'reality' into manageable dimensions. The keen-eyed investigator then finds information and selects which pieces or evidence are relevant or not, deciding what will be admitted as truth or not, what will function as a tokenized representation of the truth (clues) and what will remain background detail. Detectives produce the terms of detectability by

establishing systems of reference. More than simply documenting the "facts" of a given case and making them fit together to resolve a given problem, the detective in some respects chooses the scale, granularity, and nature of that which counts as evidence. In most detective stories the pertinent details are perceivable and available. Part of the genre's allure coordinates with an expectation that, however disguised at the onset, the information required for solving the mystery has been presented in some form or another and the attentive reader can crack the case alongside the investigator as details are presented. In an Arthur Conan Doyle story or Agatha Christie novel, for instance, the mystery at hand can be deciphered from clues embedded in the narrative's description or through character's dialogue. The detective's scale of observation is sufficient to capture and represent the hows and whats lurking at the heart of a given story. Representation and representational logic crucially undergird the genre in this respect. Which is why the (principally male) detective figure typically appears to us as a talented logocentric seer – seeing well in words allows the detective to establish the correct relation between things.

Thinking of Marshall McLuhan's notion that media regulate "the ratios of human sense perception," we might consider the classic detective figure as an optimally calibrated receiver of information, his or her gaze able to assess (or deduce) correctly the true relationship between objects, events, and environments. Realist description and detail-laden style thereby find in the detective story a perfect amalgamation of realism's guiding impulses, chiefly a logocentric estimation of perception and intelligence. "Taking note" or "to note," after all, is a media metaphor that conjoins the act of writing with the act of perceiving – one involves writing for the purpose of storing information, but it also means simultaneously "noticing" or perceiving with focus in the present tense a particular

target of immediate observation. Perception is in this fashion is dyadic, consisting of the present moment of observation as well as the 'stuff' of that perception being somehow enabled by an analogous process in transmitting and recording information in writing. Transcription and active looking are of course unified in realism under designs that fuse subjective experience with objective narration. It is crucial that this is a metaleptic account of perception engendered by media. In part, this chapter's title is meant to suggest the duality at the heart of Pynchon's fiction. Where the realist imperative is to simulate immediate observation, new realism does this plus the perceiving of perception in media-intensive terms. Thus media detect, doing the work of the detective in the sense of writing/perceiving, as well as media are detected – there is an attempt to render a sense of media technologies acting upon and shaping the perceivable lifeworld in ways that may or may not be representable.

If an excellent formal expression of realism and the realist prerogative, the detective figure also informs how one might think of literary art as well as the practice of literary reading. Perspicuous and sharp, the talented writer is an artist-detective hybrid, a prescient observer and reporter of social and cultural life. The detective is a medium in this sense, recording with forensic sensitivity available information, incidents and details that might otherwise go unnoticed. Detective fiction in turn models a hyper-attentive reading experience and encourages a meticulous reader. Detective stories and popular crime procedurals alike solicit an enthusiastic ideal reader that derives pleasure from paying close attention to clues or red herrings embedded in the narrative and

'participating' in the investigation as it proceeds.[67] Literary scholars also contribute and

have contributed to the development of a forensic reading ethos. Critical and/or

suspicious reading, deconstruction, and even the New Historicism are all methodologies

that derive from and channel (in new directions) the insights of the New Criticism, which

sought to essentialize literature via the practice of close-reading and which posited that

pleasure and intellectual crux of literature resided in the intellectual process of close

examination: seeing how the component parts of a given work contributed to a sense of

an integrated wholeness. "Literature" in this vein is rather deliberately conceived as an

analytic exercise inextricable from hermeneutics. Interpretation itself becomes

inextricable from literature as an exercise where the "scientific" study of texts and the

production of meaning in texts constitutes the object of study as well as its academic

discipline.[68]

I want to emphasize that the detective figure has in a variety of contexts worked

as a conceit for the literature's cultural work vis-à-vis realism. The detective's task

sounds similar in its orientation, after all, to both conservative, demarcating forms of

realism (delineating what 'is' real and modeling in formal terms a narratological idiom

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[67] Other reading practices also suggest a hermeneutic scrutiny commensurate with detective work.
The allusion-riddled, encyclopedic works of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Mark Danielewski, Alan Moore, or
even Thomas Pynchon, demand readers carefully pore over and parse the text to make connections or
inferences crucial to the work's "meaning." High modernism in general, with its self-styled emphasis on
decoding, consecrates a certain masculine aesthetic of difficulty and so idealizes implicitly a meticulous,
forensic reader.

[68] Reading under the auspices of New Criticism, looks a lot like detective work – Oedipa's
acknowledged paranoia in many respects calls to the mind that of Nabokov's Charles Kinbote, the
delusional literary scholar and egomaniac whose hilariously off-kilter interpretations of the eponymous
poem, "Pale Fire," lampoons the solipsistic myopia that can attend close-reading. Modeled in Nabokov and
then amplified in Pynchon is, as I have suggested, is an anti-epiphanic narrative art that is also a rebuke of
interpretation as an exercise. There is a turn away from transcendent, structuring meaning and a turn toward
accommodating formal, technical processes as a way of thinking about truth claims.

suited to the task of presenting reality) as well as Jameson's conception of innovative realism, an insurgent aesthetic program seeking new representational strategies to express what cannot be seen, understood, or conveyed in the terms of a prevailing epistemology. What David Shields identifies in *Reality Hunger* as a persistent drive to "admit more reality into the work of art" is commensurate with such an investigative project bent on recording and reportage. The artist is thus considered to work on behalf of a vaguely imagined reading public or body politic who would benefit from receiving visceral pieces of reality well expressed, and the artists is enabled in this project by their liminal status as insider-and-outsider with respect to the polis so imagined. While the detective in a sense works "for" the greater good in the same sense as a policeman - - enacting or inflicting justice, as it were, and contributing to an 'official' account of different affairs - - the conventional detective is also an individualist, a charismatic outsider. The detective aligns, in other words, with a romantic conception of the socially-minded hero author – the seasoned, hard-boiled detective works in solitude and seeks out the truth on their own to report back to interested parties. In her introduction to the English translation of Roberto Bolaño's *Los Detectives Salvajes* (1998), Natasha Wimmer suggests the author's self-styled brand of a politically-oriented, gritty high art novel must be understood around his favorite organizing trope: "[the detective] is a witness, a watcher, someone who gets to the marrow, the literal bloody core" (xviii, 2007). The investigator reiterates the modernist flâneur by imagining a similar figure in the detective that approaches the quest for knowledge from meaningfully different exigent circumstances. In each a quiet commitment to individualism runs alongside a conception of the artist as a passive receiver of information as it is encountered by the exceptional mind – each is a medium,

"a sensitive" as John Nefastis will coach Oedipa in *CL49* when dealing with the idealist fantasy in the novel that is Maxwell's Demon, an entropy-defying machine that "connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow." (84) It is worth drawing attention to how the creepy quasi-spiritualist and physicist Nefastis decrees the sensitive must enter into a sort of reciprocal perception with the technical object to make the machine work in tandem with the user: "at some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive these staggering set of energies, and feedback something like the same quantity of information" (84, 85). The ideal sensitive physiologically interfaces with the technical artifact as well as the physical, molecular substance of the exoteric world – perception (reception) of information is framed as a remediating, ongoing exchange.

The detective is here, in a sense, a recording technology sensitive to under-acknowledged or often indecipherable frequencies. In the manner Henry James proposes in "The Art of Fiction," the talented artist sees and perceives with heightened vision and imagination what others will miss. More to the point, the type of civic-minded sensitive posited in this type of discourse about art is perfectly distilled by Ezra Pound's interesting if rather self-congratulatory assessment that "artists are the antennae of the race." Here again the artist as heroically imagined by Percy Shelley remains "the unacknowledged legislator of the world," but Pound's iteration of this sentiment via thinkers like James emphasizes that art's social significance and consequent justification is commensurate with the project of *detection*. Where the modernist flâneur is necessarily divorced from that which they observe, their idyll station and leisurely walks enabled by affluence, the detective's work responds directly to a standing problem or mystery and thus the stakes

for detective's work more tangibly courts an implied civic ethos. The astute flâneur may intend to offer social commentary from a place of insulation and autonomy, and thus produces a paradoxically bourgeois and belletristic social art, but the detective's embeddedness in an economy of social work and even political power heightens (as well as circumscribes) the significance attached to an aesthetics of detection and reportage.[69]

Detective fiction, at the level of definition, assumes a detectable reality that, however obscured, can be discovered and disclosed. Reality, or at least the reality that matters, can be represented. The act of discovery and disclosure is then imagined to have tangible as well as abstract implications related to justice, truth, or the "common good." *CL49* and, later, *Gravity's Rainbow*, contest the semiotic assumptions underlying this arrangement as well as interrogate the detective work as a homology for literature and specifically literary realism. As I have argued previously, for all Pynchon's self-reflexivity, over-the-top style, and grab-bag of formal hijinks, his fiction tends to work structurally in the vein of social realism.

The meta-detective novel also must be understood alongside the rise of contemporary "paranoid thrillers" in the late sixties and early seventies as well as avant-garde fiction from the same timeframe. As Francis When states in his cultural history of the decade, *Strange Days Indeed*, "slice the Seventies where you will, the flavor is unmistakable – a pungent mélange of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fever" (9, 2009). Shadow interventions, secret operations, mass surveillance, and infrastructural oppression defined the age – all yielded a "fertile ground [of daily paranoia] in a polity

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[69] *The Crying of Lot 49* was first published in installments in *Esquire*, the day's leading New Journalist magazine. This venue helpfully characterizes how readers might have initially reacted to the novel's specific engagement with knowledge and knowledge production.

whose citizens were obliged to suspend disbelief every time they opened a newspaper"
(12). The Watergate era witnessed the crash of sixties counter-cultural politics and
oversaw a multifaceted paranoia grip with equal measure a number of different
viewpoints. William Pierce's vast right-wing conspiratorial epic and white nationalist
treatise, *The Turner Diaries* (1978), for instance, followed in a certain sense the
conspiratorial sweep and grandeur of Ishamel Reed's postmodern masterpiece and
polemical counter-history of White hegemony, *Mumbo Jumbo*. Whereas Pierce calls for
better (more racist) types of proper History, Reed, not altogether unlike Pynchon,
advocates in his work for a new epistemology by rejecting neo-liberalism and its vaunted
techno-scientific positivism as a hegemonic system. Reed and Pynchon both call for a
new historiography, a new way of accounting for and describing social reality. Pertinent
to this analysis is Reed's deliberate play with fiction and non-fiction along these lines.
Like Pynchon, Reed's novel looks to destabilize the grammar of the real.

Though the detective story continues to function more often than not as a
conservative form of realism, a number of prominent texts circulating right in and around
the time *The Crying of Lot 49* reorient the genre around an anxiety inherent in securing
evidence. The formal calculus of the detection story itself becomes a target of suspicion
at the same time it is employed more regularly. By extension, the social program implied,
saved, and reassured in the resolutions of most detective stories also come under renewed
investigation. Oedipa is in many respects a useful figure for tracing this changing genre
orientation in the detective story as it corresponds with a shift in historical sensibility.
The glorified cultural ethos guiding Oedipa's white, middle-class lifestyle in suburban
California [long the domain of popular fiction] comes to be identified in the counter-

cultural and civil rights movements an extensive fiction and hegemonic social formation coextensive with oppression.[70]

CL49 is one of several prominent entries signaling the rise of a media-intensive attitude in mainstream popular art. It is significant that a substantial number of these media-intensive novels and films coalesce around detective tropes or involve investigations in some form or another. Stepping back for a moment, it is worth noting that crime and policing begin to take over the cinematic and televisual imaginary around this time. Police dramas and gangster films were always staples of the early studio system in Hollywood; popular and even controversial, 1940s and 50s film-noir popularized a stylishly titillating rendition of the hardened PI working in a corrupt and seedy world; but the sixties and seventies saw an explosion in the production of detective and crime genre content in film as well as serial television programming. A bevy of cop drama tropes come into the fore of mainstream American culture around this time. The gritty crime thriller in particular emerged from the seventies as a culturally dominant popular form for imagining social realities and envisioning interpersonal conflicts. Any number of these predictably fetishize or obliquely critique (or fetishize via oblique critique) hyper-individualistic models of white masculine conduct: *Bullitt* (1968), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Taxi-Driver* (1976), *Death Wish* (1974), *Chinatown* (1974). No small amount of self-righteous firearm discourse and gun fetishizing courses through these types of films. The investigative thrillers identified here operate in a relatively straightforward way as racially-coded vehicles for a white reactionary politics.

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[70] Important to my reading is that the novel's structure retains a certain faith in fiction's role in bringing about (moderated) social change via epiphany. By the time of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a deliverance from false consciousness as a justification for literature vis-à-vis realism is gone.

A small but substantial subset of popular detective stories circulating in the sixties and seventies, however, offer a less politically straightforward social vision from within a similar generic architecture. These texts, curiously enough, tend to be the most formally media-intensive in that they take up as a narrative problem the role mediation plays in determining truth. These films do not necessarily divest themselves from the more conservative vestiges of detective fiction that obtain in the likes of *Dirty Harry*. What I am identifying is a subset of media-intensive investigative thrillers address at the level of plot the problem of producing information as a crisis of knowledge. *Wait Until Dark* (1967), Alan Pakula's "paranoid trilogy" - - *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974), and *All the President's Men* (1976) - - *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and *The Conversation* (1974) all express a range of personal and political anxieties cultivated by surveillance technologies. At the same time, the genre-orientation of these films suggests that a media-intensive style and thriller format exercised in this context a new and unique purchase in depicting all manner of fictional and non-fictional stories.[71]

The Conversation is especially helpful for illustrating the types of media-intensive formal techniques that come about in detective fiction in the wake of texts like *CL49*.[72] The *type* of heterodiegetic narration in the film's opening establishes a pattern of restricted storytelling that typifies the movie and generates suspense throughout the

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[71] If a descriptive genealogy is to be constructed out of convenience, one could easily see these films, beginning with Michael Snow's grainy, experimental ur-realist documentary *Wavelength* (1967), culminating in the types of media-intensive documentary realist style popularized in found-footage films and novels and refashioned in contemporary melodramas like *The Wire*.

[72] Much of my commentary here came from discussions with Prof. Christine Becker, whose lecture on the film and subsequent discussions have been immensely helpful to my own thinking about the topic.

story's progression; it also highlights the imbrication of a popular political epistemology with the material fact of mediation.[73] In the sequence, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) and his team of recording technology specialists document from a number of strategic positions (and with a bevy of different tools) a targeted ongoing conversation between a couple walking together in a crowded public square at midday. Though the camera provides a diverse, effectively panoramic shots of the targeted pair as they move in the setting from a number of different vantages, the scene is nonetheless shot through with provisionality and, more specifically, media-generated noise. Each viewpoint implies the gaze of an onlooking member of Caul's team, but only a few of these viewpoints are actually confirmed to have a corollary in the form of a diegetic character (one is a cameraman whose telephoto lens, in an ominous and incidentally rather Kittlerian fashion, looks like a rooftop sniper). Similar to how the narrating camera later in the film mimics with its repeated panning gazes the monitoring sweeps of a security camera, the editing in the opening sequence mirrors the team's efforts at the same time it connotes a system-wide surveillance network in excess of the what can be said to be motivated by plot. The objective, third-person world is characterized and takes shape through the way it pairs with sources of information gathering - its reality is contiguous with the grammar of its communication in technological media.

The film's soundtrack complements how the sequence's cinematography augurs a media-intensive reality. Throughout the scene, Caul and his associates "listen in" and

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[73] As many commentators have suggested, the opening alludes to the Kennedy assassination – the grainy telephoto lens looks out on a populated public square before zooming in on Mark (Frederic Forrest) and Ann (Cindy Williams). A cut reveals that these shots are from the perspective of a rooftop cameraman whose posture and equipment resembles a sniper aiming a rifle downwards at the square.

catch different parts of the conversation from their different points of recording. As the sequence cuts through different audial information streams in the manner of an assemblage - - wherein pitch, volume, fidelity, static interference all change accordingly - - another distinct, electronically-induced garbled noise plays periodically in the background throughout the sequence. It remains unclear if this sound is diegetic, non-diegetic, or perhaps even a focalized expression of some or all of the recording crew as they go about their work. As is the case with free-indirect discourse in literary fiction, where the narrative perspective assumes a heteroglossic form that is both "in" and "outside" of different characters and their subjective purviews, focalization in *The Conversation* implies that individual experiences (in media-enhanced observations) and machine-based communication environments are, recursively, the stuff of the world's objective substance. The garbled sounds convey a condition of meaning rather than implies an identifiable operator or medium, and the garbled audio file works rhetorically as a figure for a technicity that is influencing and effecting the world-at-hand but cannot take shape in a legible form except by way of metonymic compression.

Figure 2.1: Shots like these collapse in the film an easy distinction
between views supplied by objective narration and those which imply a
diegetic (or extra-diegetic) source in terms of surveillance

Mirroring one of the film's primary themes, encapsulated in the plot in Harry Caul's

moral dilemma which stems from his suggestive reading of an imprecise recording, the

opening sequence asks the audience to question the source of narrative information. Yet

the film is perhaps less interested in the simple fact of subjectivity and provisional truth

than it is interested in exploring what it means to know when and where technological

reality underwrites what is knowable and nonetheless resists knowability. Thus the

stylized granularity of the garbled sound-effect. Divorced from any direct plot level

motivations the sound deconstructs the common syntax of sound-effects. It does not

signal a story event or narrative object. Nor does it serve as part of an ambient

soundscape by implying a realistically motivated profilmic audial environment in which

depicted story actions are contained. It is a present but sourceless noise; it is meaningful

but carries no meaning, communication free of communication. As Caul's manic

breakdown in his apartment makes clear in the film's final moments, his own antagonistic

monitor has no obvious objective stature or plausible origin – like the narrating camera,

that which surveilles him cannot be identified in the diegetic environment even though it authors clear effects on said world. What the sound instead conveys is something like a world noise as a statement of reality.[74]

Though different in several respects, particularly where Pynchon's novel pinpoints a specifically literary set of problems concerning realism, *CL49* similarly mobilizes a whodunit plot to question how exactly knowledge is produced, arrived at, secured. Like Harry Caul's meta-detective inquiry into the fidelity of his own procured evidence in *The Conversation*, Oedipa's quest for truth concerns detecting information as well as detecting the impressions of a media architecture operating beneath a legible, discursive surface. Both seem to be grappling with an idea Hansen discusses in *Embodying Technesis*, that "technologies mediate the material rhythms of cultural life" even where they remain below and before the act of representation (39, 4). One of the novel's dominant motifs, the enigmatic Trystero symbol, divulges the narrative's abiding interest in extra-discursive knowing. Depicting a muted horn, the pictograph insinuates secrecy and possibly discloses, as we come to learn, an alternate history of the republic. It also communicates another kind of alternate reality, a semiotic order operating below the threshold of discourse.

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[74] Not entirely incidentally, Jameson's description of nineteenth-century realism and the extra-discursive affect it secures manages a permeation of individual bodies with "more globalized waves of general sensations" (28). If, as Jameson suggests, realism cultivates a bodied and pre-linguistic category for knowing that has not yet been circumscribed by majoritarian discourses, a text like *CL49* makes the point that a linguistic and textual consideration of this situation fails to consider the ways media technologies generate material-semiotic environments that cannot be reduced to convenient metaphor.

Figure 2.2: The Trystero pictograph, a muted horn

The Trsytero is infrastructural. It possibly describes a real underground communications network at the same time it bespeaks an as of yet unrecognized information environment. Like other "hieroglyphic" arrangements Oedipa keeps encountering in her search through California - - applying equally to texts and objects as well as cityscapes and architectures - - the symbol conveys a "sense of concealed meaning, an intent to communicate" (24). The image also expresses an entropic model of communication by privileging a technological a priori. The instrument signified in the image does not 'speak' because it is muted, but the symbol's meaning is not simply achieved in the negative through negation – it denotes more than the absence of sound (information) or the failed exchange of signals. The pictograph illustrates a condition of incipient communication, one that de-emphasizes a concern with the instrument's discrete function(s) as a communicative object. Thus the pictograph all at once intones secrecy, suggests an unofficial history, discloses an alleged underground mail network, and renders in positive terms states of dysfunction, disruption, dis-use as a theory of communication. On this last point, the image encapsulates the ideas articulated by Claude Shannon and Michel Serres, that noise and the possibility of a signal's disruption are mutually constitutive with that which is traditionally thought to be communicated in and by a signal. Beneath intelligibility or understanding is the quiet infrastructural fact of transmission, recording, mediation.

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One of the central programs of thinking the novel engages with and pulls apart in its deconstruction of the detective story is empiricism, or at least the types of empiricism fetishized in neo-liberalism under the premise of "rational" discourse. A central tenant of Pynchon's early work resides in the author's stringent and through critique of the military industrial complex and its correlative, abetting business ontology Mark Fisher has recently termed "capitalist realism." Yoyodyne industries in *CL49*, a massive aerospace company, is a scary and absurd amalgam of these forces: run by handsy corporate leaders and self-satisfied engineers, and reliant on its pool of minimum wage earning black employees (who, not incidentally, sing slave chorus tunes to reiterate the continuity of structurally racialized economic difference in postwar America), the company is a nightmarish vision of a normalized, neo-imperialist American economics (36).[75] Present as well in the depiction is a strong rebuke of techno-scientific achievement and western metanarratives of cultural and moral "progress." To say that Oedipa finds in the halls of the tech-industry giant a creepy, insular, and very white boys' club (many employees singing the Cornell alma matter!) rather than a pinnacle of intellectual and social achievement is to partake in massive understatement. Contained within the novel's rather broad critique of the military-industrial engine is a more specific argument with a neo-liberal epistemology that fetishes the concrete, the factual, the world of dollars and cents.

Pynchon notes the undue and not necessarily preordained conflation of techno-scientific rationality with corporate calculus. Thus the novel tackles a discursive

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[75] The way the company features in the novel is important regarding the issue of representation: Yoyodyne is a factory-like enterprise, itself a "machine" that is constitutively part of, as well as represents, the larger "machine" of American-authored capitalism. Yoyodyne's unfeeling (and unthinking) production of increasingly efficient war machines is intended to suggest a new capitalist American fascism.

preference for the self-evident and verifiable. Empiricism presupposes the coherence of

the world and intelligibility of its phenomena in the face of its measurement; it requires

logically that representations more or less directly correlate to their referent. The way

empiricism appears in detective fiction espouses a conception of reality coextensive with

a (stable) scale of human perception. Media records are understood in this arrangement to

store the truth rather than play an active role in producing meaning – they in turn register

as "media" only as instruments of inscription, of "forms of capture of the real" (Hansen

35, 2000). Oedipa's investigation teases this apart.

> Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances
> for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only
> some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct,
> epileptic Word, the cry might abolish the night. (95)

Referring to her earlier moment of vivid (anti) epiphany, Oedipa considers the failure of

her subsequent research and findings to convey information or reliably relate to or

describe other objects or events. Her desire for intelligible, self-evident evidence

contrasts with the interpretation her investigation demands. "Shall I project a world?"

takes on additional meaning beyond its solipsistic valence. What Oedipa desires is

metonymic details, "realistic" synecdoches to link together by way of clarifying,

contiguous reference evidence that bridges different types and scales of data in the

interest of concretizing a larger, more complete "picture" of the whole. The fantasy is that

the really existing world can physically accommodate and reflect back to Oedipa the

designs she "finds." No such world is to be found in *CL49*. In the absence of self-

contained crystalline texts (mystical, fantastic "gems") that would shed light on the whole

of her mystery, Oedipa necessarily has to suppose relations between objects, events, and

people that may or may not ever be verifiable and may or may not bear any relation to

something like the truth. Simultaneously, she has to imagine a self-referencing, virtual data topography with a correlative "world" to contain and accommodate her findings should they prove true. Deduction might reconstruct what "really happened" from sufficiently communicative pieces of an integrated whole. If the "whole picture" remains elusive, the forensics-minded detective can assume that reality is reliably catalogued in material evidence. Evidence is here a medium, an artifact that is equally storage device and text, for its content correlates directly with that which it records and represents (the now absent object or event). Oedipa's investigation challenges these precepts. Her accumulating evidence works only to confuse her interpretations as each data point admits subsequent confusion rather than works to clarify with increasingly sharp resolution the communicative integrity of a larger picture.

CL49 does not relinquish an interest in finding or depicting reality per se in the interest of dramatizing the provisionality of knowledge or staging the relativistic nature of truth (though it also does these things). Oedipa's investigation involves the ways language, perception, and media-generated environments mutually determine how meaning and unmeaning are alternatively construed. Representing this itself is difficult and prone to logocentric estimations of both perception, technology, and technology's social and physiological "effects." It is significant that Oedipa considers her (anti) epiphany as an "epileptic Word." Her bodied paroxysm is reified as an irretrievable holy Word in spite of the fact that her revelation seems to have little to do with texts or textual data. Her formulation reiterates an early moment in the novel when Oedipa looks out from her parked car at all of San Narcisco. Coiling suburbs in all directions around her,

she recalls from her youth the first time she opened up a transistor radio and examined its circuit card.

> Though she knew even less about radios than about South Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out) ; so in her first minute of San Narcisco a revelation also trembled just past the threshold her understanding. Smog hung all around the horizon, the sun bright on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (14)

As in the case with the epileptic Word, Oedipa discerns she is on the edge of coming into knowledge about some deeper, concealed meaning in the world around her. She imports the language of hermeneutics to make sense of this near-revelation; the world and its designs are not objects but texts, hieroglyphics, linguistic signs to be decoded. As with the truth she later envisions as a tactile contact with a now lost "epileptic Word," the religious connotation here again suggests an exogenous understanding of epiphanic understanding, truth is thought to contour language. he novel ends by truncating this Pentecostal conclusion, finishing before a divine Word can be disclosed to Oedipa as she "awaits the crying of lot 49" (152).

For this reason it is important that the passage I have cited moves to espouse a different type of understanding. The radio Oedipa recalls pulling apart ceases to be a functional conveyor of language through mass distribution of electronic signals. Anatomizing the technical object and examining parts disarticulated from their operation in radio transmission, she nonetheless discerns another kind of message. The moment restages Heidegger's famous broken hammer, an anecdote which foregrounds a non-

instrumentalist account of material objects. Oedipa surmises that the fact of the circuit card and its physical layout communicates or is communicative, but this is something she can again only conceive of in terms of speech– "what it could have told her." The self-similarity between the circuit's coils and the smog-obscured patterns of building developments Oedipa observes on the hillsides of San Narcisco speaks to an awareness of the disassembled radio pieces as grammatical units within an infrastructural media semiotics. Metonymically, the circuit both represents and is constitutive with an extra-linguistic, even topographical semiotic regime in which it is embedded. Indicating a key element of the mystery-plot to follow, Oedipa at this stage considers that her body, if tuned correctly to pick up the right frequency, might feel "words being spoken" unto her skin – this is her metaphor for perceiving the truth of the world around her. Oedipa physically ontologizes the fact of mediation via a literary trope. Like radio waves or other frequency-based energy streams that serve as information in their own right at the same time they are equally atmospheric conduits for the delivery of messages, what Oedipa imagines as an "immediate" truth making direct, unmediated contact with the human body from outside the body is both text and environment. Oedipa's fantasy, reiterating literary realism, is that the body feels and perceives truth in terms of words. Intimated in this instance is a problem that guides the novel and which is vocalized in the plot by the frustrated scholar and theatre director Randolph Driblette. Having witnessed the portentous *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play which purports to dramatize the alternate history of the Trystero network but does not provide answers about the group's existence or current activity, Oedipa tracks down Driblette backstage after the performance and plies him with questions about different manuscript versions of the play. She is convinced

that the truth of the Trystero mystery might be evidenced in the discrepancy between different adaptations of the play's original script. Irritated by her inquiries and no doubt hurt by the rather academic nature of her interest in speaking to him, Driblette responds coolly, "why is everybody so interested in texts?" (61).

Early in the novel Oeidpa's husband, Mucho Maas, personifies an extra-textualist approach to knowing. Mucho is a "sensitive" of another sort. Mucho is a broken man, traumatized as it were by the fact of capitalist machinery and prone to "[suffer] regular crises of conscience about his profession" (3). Now a radio disc-jockey for the channel KCUF (yep), Mucho formerly worked for as a salesman at a used-car lot which exposed him to "unvarying gray sickness" of mechanized daily oppressions – "the lot on the pallid, roaring arterial" (6). Constant nightmares disturb Mucho's (and Oedipa's) sleep. Oedipa surmises that Mucho's occupational traumas are perhaps like what "the Second World War or Korean Wards were for older husbands" (6). Discussing how the case is progressing at one point, Mucho interrupts Oedipa's account of her case to assess the Muzak he is listening to and which Oedipa had until that moment failed to notice – "it has been seeping in, in its subliminal, unidentifiable way" (115). Mucho, in the spirit of an appreciate aficionado, notes that the responsible musician is not a "studio artist … he was real. That wasn't synthetic." Later, when talking about the allure of his job, he adds "the songs, it's not just that they something, they are something, in the pure sound. Something new" (118). Haunted by his former work, the "much too sensitive" (4) Mucho eschews commercial pop-culture and focuses instead on the infrastructural components of his profession as it relates to networks of distribution - - "you're an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night" (118) - - as well as media-generated

environments, Muzak being a perfect crystallization of the latter. Muzak is a not-artistic art because it goes out of its way not to be noticed as an object of attention, but it engenders a designed, even manicured sense of being in place. It is an engineered soundscape. Thus "Pure sound" is esteemed of and before music. Mucho emerges in this respect as a sort of under-articulated bad-Kittlerian interested for his own reasons in an intoxicating, stochastic media 'real.'

Mucho's nightmares about the used-car parking lot correlate with Oedipa's own feverish dreams about the unfolding Trystero mystery. Throughout the novel Oedipa has a number of encounters with mirrors when she either cannot see her reflection or her image of herself is otherwise obscured in some form or another. Encoded in the name San Narciso, of course, is the pathological possibility of an endemic, environmental narcissism threatening to destroy the validity of Oedipa's case. The Trystero enigma might, after all, be a solipsistic projection. Worse yet, it may have an objective presence in the story's reality but is confined in its objectivity to a system of self-reference. One nightmare in particular focuses on the role the mirror plays in Oedipa's search for meaning and complicates an either/or question of the Tystero's internal (psychological) or external (exoteric) status. Oedipa keeps waking "from a nightmare about something in the mirror across from her bed. Nothing specific, only a possibility, nothing she could see" (81). The mirror represents a representational logic; it is a tool that signifies what it "sees," reflecting perfectly the objects discernible in its purview. Oedipa's nightmare espouses an alternate expression of mediality – this is a media that produces possibilities of meaning that, quite literally, have no content and thus cannot readily be "seen." Where Oedipa spends a considerable portion of the narrative pondering whether or not the

conspiracy is real or whether or not she is losing her grasp on reality and submitting to delusion, the nightmare clarifies the matter by rejecting either of these possibilities. Mirrors permit the internalizing of one's exteriorization: the external image comes to constitute one's self image, the way one, in Lacanian terms, comes to define oneself as an individual because they have seen themselves represented and discern that the image is an image and not oneself. This is the production of oneself in a media imaginary.

Gravity's Rainbow in many respects amplifies the stakes outlined in *CL49* and offers a more cynical reading of America's postwar history than the earlier novel. As many Pynchon scholars have noted, there is a modicum of optimism to be discerned in the moments before we are left with Oedipa's suspended sentence. There is something enticing, alluring, and maybe even liberating about the possibility of an alternate world order. Not so in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Whether or not this change in approach can be directly attributed to Pynchon's waning enthusiasm for the political potential of counter-cultural movements as the sixties wore on is difficult to confirm but not hard to imagine. In any case, it appears that whatever hopes Pynchon might have held for a relevant alternative to mainstream American political life in the form of ongoing counter-culture and civil rights movements is gone by the time of writing his next novel. In addition to referring to the V2 rocket strikes terrorizing Western Europe and England in particular during the blitz, the novel's famous first lines announce a fallen world: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now." Telegraphing a formal and thematic interest in metalepsis through its syntactic play, the lines crucially emphasize that the current state of world affairs - - if they are, in fact, current – are not only fallen but inexpressibly fallen. "It is a judgment from which there

is no appeal," and for this determination there is no comparison, even the face of

precedence. History itself has lost its coordinating value of relation or comparison

because a mainstream epistemology predicated on linearity, causality and forms of

progression fractures in the face of a new technologically constructed reality. *Gravity's*

Rainbow is adamant on the point that technologies change what reality is.[76] Roger

Mexico senses as much when he witnesses a V2 rocket strike – "the entire fabric of the

air, the time, is changed" (60). Mexico's intimation is suggestive of what Bernard

Stiegler proposes in *Technics and Tim*e (1994), chiefly that the human experience of

something like reality is a recursive, epiphenomenal aspect of a crucially technical

relation. Thus the disconsolate WWI veteran and British intelligence officer Colonel

Pudding feels the constitution of the world changing around him as his media paradigm

falls away. "The newer geometries confuse him," and he laments that the grounds of his

existence are "changing out from under me" (78). If so, how then to know and how to

represent truth, especially when the stakes, as they are in *Gravity's Rainbow*, are so high?

Evident in the structure of the novel is a self-reflexive concern that abandoning

representation means foregoing a politically tractable epistemology. Pointsman considers

Mexico's techno-determinist inquiries accordingly as a problem in narrating reality:

"What if [a] whole generation turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but "events,"

newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is this the end of history?" (49). The

same problem is then posed another way under the organizing rubric of a film-based

media metaphor:

> Imagine a missile one hears approaching only after it explodes. The
> reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out… a few feet of film run

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[76] See introduction for a discussion of "operational constructivism" and the ontology v.
epistemology debate that has organized criticism in postmodern scholarship on Pynchon for decades.

backwards… the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound – then growing out of it the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning… a ghost in the sky. (49, emphasis and ellipsis from the original)

For these and many other reasons borne out in the experience of reading the novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* has often been read as an experimental form of historical fiction bordering on mythic dark parable. This is by no means the wrong way to approach the novel. But it is nonetheless worth reiterating some of its structural continuities with conventional realist literature and especially investigative fiction. If the novel is an expansive, digressive and frequently difficult extended disquisition on what it means to know, it can be reductively summarized as dealing with three different sets of questions dealing with this larger question of knowing.

1.) How and why do V2 rockets strike, within a matter of 2-3 days, the exact locations where one American Lt. Tyrone Slothrop has had sex? What information about the character and his peculiar origin story can explain the connection?

2.) What schools of thought might best be able to understand or productively theorize the Slothrop-V2 connection? How best to represent what the problem is to begin dealing with it?

3.) What in these schools of thought needs to be posited, a priori, as physically true (objectively real) about the world for their attendant theories to work as explanations? Shall I project a world?

I want to suggest again that the novel's epistemological concerns structure its project in realism. One surprisingly unacknowledged aspect of the novel concerns this very point – the novel begins with a striking invocation of realism. Later disclosed to be a dream, the novel's "establishing shot" depicts the horrors of domestic refugees searching for shelter in war-torn London, teasing for a moment in its macabre presentation of the decimated city a formal tactic and narrational consciousness in conventional realism the

novel soon abandons. The effect is to imply an identifiable literary tradition for the purpose of reworking the formal grammar and narrational ethos of said tradition. We can see in this moment how *Gravity's Rainbow* negotiates realism as a formal logic and cultural praxis by working through what it means to produce socially-minded representations under exigent political circumstances.

What proceeds from the novel's enigmatic opening lines is an extended sequence of an elegiac lyrical realism, a sobering re-issue of a Dickensian social scene. Nighttime London during the blitz is described as a fatalistic, anonymous urban panic:

> It's too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre. There are no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere… He's afraid of the way the glass will fall – soon – it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing.
> Inside the carriage, which is built on several levels, he sits in velveteen darkness, with nothing to smoke, feeling metal nearer and farther rub and connect, steam escaping in puffs, a vibration in the carriage's frame, a poising, an uneasiness, all the others pressed in around, feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time: drunks, old veterans still in shock from ordnance 20 years obsolete, hustlers in city clothes, derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone, stacked about among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation. (1)

The passage offers a portrait by way of a describing a 'representative' social setting. Moving ambiguously through different levels of exposition - - between third and first-person as well as free-indirect discourse - - the scene establishes an objective setting as well as communicates a character's (Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice's) experience of observing said place. Synecdochic details sustain the scene: the narration discloses a general sense of environmental, machine-induced "uneasiness" that is at once atmospheric and discernible to the narrator in the immediate confines of the carriage.

Many of the passage's subsequent details are similarly metonymic where they offer qualitative expressions of the surrounding world by way of condensed, material self-similarity between foreground and background. These are descriptions understood to have a precise referent in the diegetic environment, but they are also simultaneously generalizable statements of larger social conditions irreducible to a moment of observation implied through the expression of said details. The account of masses fleeing imminent destruction amidst the rain-soaked ruins of London fails, in the manner of Luckac's and Dickens's social realism, to individuate specific characters or even describe the presence of actual group of characters identifiable as such as a group: WWI veterans, exhausted mothers, drunks. Metonymy via synecdochic detail abounds in the interest of anonymous panoply and social portraiture. As the huddled collective moves along and about the city streets looking for shelter, rain falls down upon them through the old lift girders, trestles, and stoops above them. "Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into – they go in under archways, secret entrances of rotted concrete…and it is poorer the deeper they go…ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose names he has never heard" (4). The account of the London's fleeing citizens begins to reflect back and incorporate the rhetorical function of same descriptions. Just as the metonymic "drunks, old veterans…" operate less in the manner of direct reference (though an experience of observation warranting a direct reference is implied) and works more as a matter of style in the vein of social portraiture, the refugees come to comingle with the infrastructure of their environment. Staged here is a dramatization borne out by the Greek root of the word "text," which means "weave" or to "weave together." Narrative people are interlaced in the physical constitution of a world

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infrastructure accordingly. This is one of several moments early in the novel wherein realist style is shown to be formally amenable with a posthuman theory of personhood. Further underscoring how the passage invokes a realist-based reformist aesthetics through the staging of what Jameson calls a "discovery process," Prentice's movement into the heart of the city accompanies the narration's perspective as it documents the undocumented – his traversing diegetic space occasions reporting an encounter with the fact of discursive blindspots here taking the form of the unseen, the unknown, and the un-named. The sequence embeds a straightforward reference to the putative work of social realism: exploring marginalized and under-represented aspects of 'reality' to a readership for whom the "secret cities of the poor" are objects of fascination as well as sites of the unknown.

Famously, Pirate Prentice awakes from his dream and its literary-realist London to another estimation of London entirely: an urban refugee-camp/apartment bed-and-breakfast. In short order the reader is submerged in Prentice's odd, partially bombed out tenement flat which hosts, on this particular morning as well as many others, it is implied, a number of Prentice's still asleep military intelligence colleagues as well as a cadre of peripatetic drifters drawn to the colorful tenant's luxuriant and entirely banana-based cuisine. The content of the dream, whose content is not "false" or subsequently pilloried in the novel's allocation, is nonetheless marked off through the dream precisely because of the attitudes toward knowledge it supposes and enacts through forms of omniscient narration is consolidated and bracketed as such. Gesturing to a mode of literary reportage that would offer a macro-level description of the wartime city as it is interfaced through

the observations of an individual, the abrupt transition in narrative registers indicates the type of meta-realist formal play the novel has in store.

Preparing to make his signature banana breakfast for his itinerant mess of squatter roommates before they wake, Prentice looks out on the sea and discerns a thin vertical cloud rising across the sky from the horizon. Like Oedipa who sits in her Chevy overlooking San Narciso meaning to decode through her physical person in linguistic terms the frequencies of an extra-linguistic "truth," Pirate Prentice looks out at a cold London sunrise and imagines being struck by a missile he will never hear. Each scene parodies vision and by extension occularcentrism, an epistemology of the visible where to see is to comprehend and know what is seen. The scenes of quiet observation mock a corresponding commonplace deriving from the romantic tradition wherein quiet moments of scenic observation correlate with an experience of understanding and interbraided fantasy of individual empowerment: the sublime, the miraculous, the transcendent comes in this figuration to the sensitive vessel. Controverting this ideology and its pat affirmational symbolism, the act of looking out on expansive spaces in Pynchon only begets statements of unknowing. To be more exact, the scenes do not depict "unknowing" as much as unmeaning. Important to this analysis is the way these scenes decouple a vision-based understanding of perception from a naturalized corollary with linguistic understanding. Pynchon's characters deconstruct the notion that a hermeneutic approach to truth means seeing well. Prentice's anxiety stems from the idea that truth will arrive without understanding – the murderous strike can never for him be information, as he will never receive or perceive its signal and only experience without knowing it the blunt force of technological alterity.

Gravity's Rainbow proceeds to extend the types of questions posed in *CL49* framed around plots of investigation. Like Oedipa, Tyrone Slothrop undertakes a mission in self-discovery, one that entails uncovering his origins as well as concerns his attempt to find rocket 00000. But the world in which he means to find answers is so intractable to this mode of inquiry that his mission is thwarted and he himself, constitutionally, disintegrates. The protagonist in this case goes from being a bizarre, parodic instantiation of a techno-epistemological messiah ("bearing a cross") and becomes a "cross-roads," an object, an element of a landscape, a medium or conduit of meaning. Mexico, statistician under duress Ned Pointsman's intellectual rival, theorizes Slothrop's unique ability accordingly as its represents a condition of meaning. He intuits that Slothrop's extra-sensory capacities do not relate to events, as such, but rather index "something in the air right now," suggesting in his understanding an interpenetration of personhood with generalized technological conditions; this is the imbrication of the human with its techno-semiotic milieu (101). Mexico's position jettisons Pointsman's almost religious commitment to etiology and involves hazarding "the next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle" (91).

The novel of course pokes fun at techno-scientific rationalism and its theory of the human via Pavlovian mechanics, that which presumes a regular relationship between one subject (stimulus) and another (response). This is the positivism of binaristic thinking, the domain of zero and one, of "not-something" and "something" that the novel moves to deconstruct in its decoupling of cause-and-effect and its effacing of any clear linkage between objects and events. In this respect Slothrop's condition levies an assault

on the western philosophy of selfhood – the formal calculus of individualism via liberal humanism. At several places in the narrative different characters issue statements to this effect: "he has been brought up a Christian, a Western European, believing in the primacy of the 'conscious' self…" (156). For Pointsman, the closest he comes to abandoning a mechanistic understanding is to entertain in the abstract a deconstruction of the coherent subject by positing a symmetry between outside and inside, between Slothrop's psychophysical condition and the condition of a world technological system confused in the other as a displaced and erroneous mirror-opposite. Such a symmetry is in his thinking a definitional fallacy regardless of how striking the coincidental interrelationship might appear. The appearance of continuity between the two is just that, albeit a "haunting" one for Pointsman (146).

Conclusions

As with Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), Pynchon's fiction scrutinizes description as a cultural practice as it features traditional realism. I want to underscore that Pynchon's now quite popular iteration of postmodernism does not reject mimesis. Rather, from a point of anxiety, Pynchon's early novels contemplate mimesis against literature's unstable cultural station in a strange, new democratic epistemology of 1960's America. As I have suggested through my analysis of *Wavelength*, we can see how a media-intensive maneuver in direct mimesis becomes a detective plot at an informational level. The epistemological argument Pynchon forwards in opposition to the coincidental highlight of *New Journalism*, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), is especially telling. Capote's literary non-fiction secures a liberal humanist calculus and enthrones a democratic (conservative) estimation of literary reportage as a forensic activity. As I have

argued, Pynchon's skepticism toward social reportage derives from a realist, rather than strictly "postmodernist," set of political and artistic commitments. Pynchon's work forecasts how detection, as a genre and a theory of literature and its cultural work, has since categorized how socially-minded "art" is conceived.

CHAPTER TWO

PRODUCING THE BLURRY PHOTO:

REALIST METAFICTION IN DON DELILLO'S *LIBRA* (1988)

AND KATHRYN BIGELOW'S *ZERO DARK THIRTY* (2012)

> An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-of-yet unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. (What in the last half-century, has been more influential than Abraham Zapruder's Super-8 film of the Kennedy assassination?) Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation… a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real
>
> - Roland Barthes via David Shields, *Reality Hunger*

This chapter discusses media-intensive style as a form of historical sensibility in new realism. The accurate reporting of historical material is less important than a convincing *realization* of said materials as they become legible in media. Historical fiction in this style stages and represents what Joseph Vogl describes when he discusses "media-events," events that "are communicated through media, but the very act of communication simultaneously communicates the specific event-character of media themselves" (16, 2008). Any object or event represented implies the technological media that makes it discernible. By contradistinction, technologies are instantiated as "media"

by and through the phenomena they make visible. This reciprocal determination drives realist technique. New realist texts formally approximate what Dirk Baecker has described in "The Reality of Motion Pictures" (1996). Revisiting Kracauer, Baecker accepts that film is a vehicle for the "registration and revelation of realities that were previously out of focus." Baecker adds, however, that media *do* something to the nature of reality. "The camera's registration and revelation [of reality] makes a difference to the original reality – it becomes a different reality, consisting of itself plus its registration and revelation" (561). The reality depicted, in other words, is the reality of its communication.

The two works of fiction I assess in this chapter both re-enact in their stories a major event in American history. Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* (1988) and Kathryn Bigelow's film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) might be thought to characterize two rather different storytelling traditions. In the case of *Libra*, DeLillo's speculative restaging of the Kennedy assassination is a monument of high postmodernism, a quintessential example of "historiographical metafiction." Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, by contrast, offers itself as a docudramatic project in ur-realist cinema verité. I argue that these projects are not so far apart at all. Implicitly positioned against a prevailing "official account" of the events in question, each text cultivates an insurgent sensibility in evidence gathering and on-the-ground reportage, so crafting a democratic exigence for political storytelling at the level of information. They posit a crisis of knowing, a narratological premise which is folded into their plots as well as reiterated formally though an emphasis on the mechanics of detection, capture, and composition. Each furthermore generates suspense through metaleptic storytelling, re-enacting events the

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audience is expected to already know about and which, on some level, are meaningful or pleasurable for readers to experience as these events unfold in an intensified, overburdened present and "become history."

I want to suggest that *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* index two poles of an important cultural constellation, one wherein realistic historical fiction has emerged in cinema, fiction, and television as the dominant middle class American art form. *Libra*, *The Tears of Autumn* (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976), *JFK* (1991), *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper* (2014), *13 Hours* (2016), and many, many more, all speak to a cultural fascination with crafting a broad-strokes, "non-fiction" political history through a media-intensive style that conjoins verité docudrama techniques with familiar genre templates. *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* invoke an investigative thriller format to structure its preoccupation with the incipient formation of knowledge. Both are detective stories about finding, collecting, and reading evidence – they each solicit a positivist fantasy in realism they proceed to negotiate in different ways.

I argue that *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* ground their plausible, realistic-feeling versions of historical events in an aesthetic register and narrative structure preoccupied with the incipient formation of knowledge as it *becomes media*. This move encompasses more, I argue, than what can be described by "self-reflexivity," "self-awareness," or "meta-fiction," concepts frequently linked to postmodern art and understood to be opposed in kind to 'realistic' representation. Working from this premise, my analysis pressures a mindset that differentiates documentary realist techniques (associated with non-fiction discourses) from the non-mimetic, meta-textualist practices attributed to high postmodern literature. The data-rich worlds of *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are infused

with a simulated "unartiness," with an unfiltered noise and "rawness," an unrehearsed quality inscribing "history" as an unstable, contingent media-event in Vogl's sense of the term. This style conveys a new realist stance toward demarcating historical truth: it foregrounds the process of procuring the blurry image, that which is evocative and meaningful rather than communicative or intelligible – it is a media artifact that expresses the fact, time, and instrument of recording rather than the integrity, accuracy, or completeness of the information conveyed.

Historical New Realism

The separate controversies attending the publication of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and the release of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) attest to the imagined civic dimension subtended within new realism. In both cases these texts were evaluated with regard to their relationship to public discourse, to the terms of consensus politics and their disputed reference to a shared external reality.

The early acclaim exalting Bigelow's film and which propelled its initial campaign for awards season triumph quickly gave way to a far more critical environment. Weeks after stunning critics and garnering a first wave of glowing reviews, *Zero Dark Thirty* subsequently touched off a well-publicized series of debates in mainstream news media. The film's extended torture sequences were especially divisive amongst viewers and critics alike. Several reviews accused Bigelow of endorsing the rationale for the Bush administration's detention and interrogation policies. Emily Bazelon of *Slate* asserted in her review, "the filmmakers didn't set out to be Bush-Cheney apologists… [but] they adopted a close-to-the-ground point of view, and perhaps they're in denial about how far down the path to condoning torture this led them" (Dec 2012). Other critics rejected

outright any linkage between the operation that killed bin Laden and intelligence collected by US forces through torture, as if one of a few unambiguous and possibly cathartic 'victories' in the ongoing War on Terror should be delineated from the legacy of abuse and scandal that so publically compromised the political capital and moralist directive bolstering American-led military operations in Afghanistan and then Iraq right after 9/11. One high-profile and voluble critic of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Senator John McCain, charged that the film was "grossly inaccurate" in depicting that torture (may have) yielded key intel leading to the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. With a small group of Congressman and fellow Senators, McCain composed a letter to Sony Pictures Entertainment articulating their concerns and seeking public redress. The letter's argument underscored the film's perceived responsibility when it came to authoring history: "you have a social and moral obligation to get the facts right."

We can understand the pointed responses to *Zero Dark Thirty* through the terms of its stated project in realism. The film's attempt to visualize in as realistic and compelling a way possible "the greatest manhunt in history" established the basis for its reception and valuation. The film's promotional materials reiterate how Kathryn Bigelow has previously discussed her work and described the political orientation of her art. Remarking on her controversial, award-winning Iraq war film *The Hurt Locker* (2008), Bigelow suggested, "If you hold up a mirror to society and you don't like what you see, you can't fault the mirror. It's a mirror." Bigelow offered a similar response to the criticism of torture scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty*, issuing in defense of the sequences, "representing is not endorsing." The statements disclose a reformist and conventionally realist figuration of art. Bigelow's recent war films are action pictures vaguely critical of

the geopolitical reality encompassing the narratives at hand. One gets the sense watching

The Hurt Locker or *Zero Dark Thirty* that these films, in addition to telling a specific

story in each case, are intended to "realize" in a hard-hitting, compelling cinematic

language the harrowing experience of US operatives in the Middle-East. They enclose a

cinematographic idiom steeped in realism, a convincing, unofficial iconography for

visualizing the American 'War on Terror.' If they are critical (rather than 'political' or

polemical), Bigelow's recent projects are also pleasurable, exciting movies. We might on

this basis complicate Bigelow's stated agenda in realism. *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark*

Thirty, issuing as they do immersive high-octane realities, have thematically more in

common with *Strange Days* (1996) then one might at first imagine in terms of offering

virtual reality. *The Hurt Locker* in this respect is a forerunner for *Zero Dark Thirty* where

the latter subsumes the former's critique and exploitation of war as fodder for an

"adrenaline-junkie" culture. Which is to say that both commodify the same visceral

stylization of war as an edgy media syntax and *visual template*, one that it treats

simultaneously as an inherently critical view of American foreign policy. The

cooperation of action drama spectacle and documentary realism makes for a curious

visual register. It is important to parse out the ways the film is all at once a docudrama, a

character-based political thriller, a detective story, and, of course, an American revenge

fantasy credentialed under the respectability of a prestige drama.[77]

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[77] It is a telling that during the 2016 Presidential election, Republican candidate Senator Marco Rubio told audiences at a political rally that he wanted Special Forces to wear helmet cameras during their operations against terrorists for the purpose of documenting and visualizing American military superiority. In addition to scaring would-be terrorists with these videos, Rubio's pitch to Americans evinces a clear desire to make real and accessible as widely available information the fact of American exceptionalism and military omnipotence (*The Guardian*, January 11th 2016).

We can then understand how the marketing for *Zero Dark Thirty* counsels its viewership on the basis of its purported immersive realism, inviting film-goers to "witness" an event that was being declassified and brought into the arena of public knowledge and, by extension, matriculated into the atmosphere of mass media and visual culture – a dominant motif in the film's promotional materials consisted of blacked-out images and text being revealed (image below).
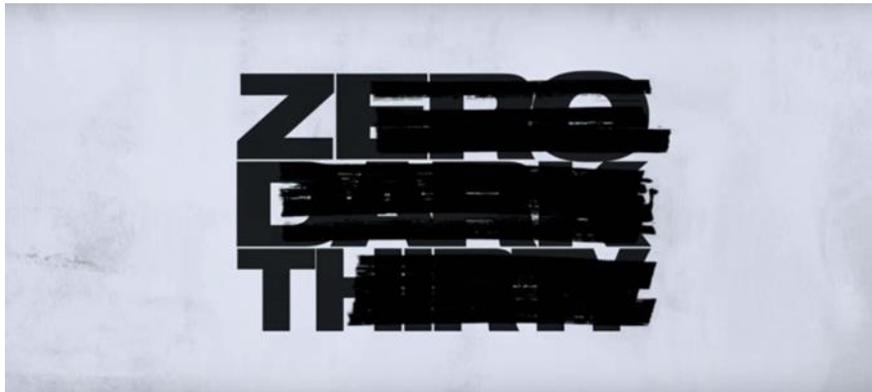
Figure 3.1: Title-card for the first Zero Dark Thirty teaser trailer

An emplotted rhetoric of demystification courses through the film's advertising and marketing, promising that a coherent "truth" was being brought out of darkness and into the light for the first time. Witness "the story you think you know." "This is how it happened." Presupposed in these taglines, of course, is that the story existed as such: a story. The event's reality to be expressed, on some level, is its being tailor-made and constitutionally pre-formatted for its translation into an action-packed, investigative thriller. Thus the priority in its communication and its becoming communicated.

Figure 3.2: Still image from the teaser trailer

The trailers convey how the film invokes a documentary-like approach to its subject matter, fusing diegetic footage with a variety of non-fictional materials, including news media content, reconnaissance data, satellite images, and heat signature maps of the bin Laden compound in Pakistan.[78] The teaser-trailers and trailers also demonstrate the hyper-mediated nature of the film's effort in cinematic realism. The reality submitted is a multifold composite, an assemblage that bears simultaneously the marks of different media inscriptions and their diverging scales of reference: backdrop satellite-generated topographies are obscured by jetting black lines, super-imposed photos of suspects, and in-frame displays of diegetic footage. Small, indecipherable lines of numbers and text stream across the screen, almost suggesting the digital coding motifs that signal virtual reality in *The Matrix* (1999). The first teaser-trailer ends with a striking intimation of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s interest in hyper-mediation.

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[78] It's worth noting that the first two trailers under-emphasize the film's overt fictional qualities, chiefly its characters. Maya's storyline is barely hinted at, as is her crucial significance to the film as a structuring device, in favor of prioritizing the "fact" of the event and those leading up to it and stressing its mediation.

Figure 3.3: The camera lingers on this last still

As its dramatic score crescendos and fades out to silence, the trailer lingers quietly on a still satellite image (above). The silhouetted outlines of two inbound helicopters enter the frame and close-in on the compound, their arrival coupled with an understated sound of helicopter blades just audible over the trailer's silence. This sound is not realistically motivated with respect to the satellite map, and this oblique mix of non-diegetic and diegetic detail typifies the whole of the trailer's hypermediation. The last shot not only implies the "event" of the SEAL team's strike and promises its visualization in the film's narrative, it stages that event's accruing media-granularity, its assimilation into the information structure of a world surveillance system and grammar of military optics. This is the event's becoming information, its becoming visible *as* evidence. Concordant with this stylistic element, the U.S. government's involvement with the film's production lent more credence to the notion that it was in some manner an 'official' account of the events culminating on May 2nd, 2011. But if *Zero Dark Thirty*'s historical realism courted rebuke along the lines of its own promotion, Don DeLillo's less clearly 'realist' *Libra* garnered similar criticism on account of its realism – or lack thereof.

DeLillo's speculative reimagining of President John F. Kennedy's assassination encountered a similar civic-minded reproach to *Zero Dark Thirty*. This, in spite of the fact that *Libra*, now a tenant of high postmodernism, would seem to stand apart from the impetus organizing *Zero Dark Thirty* and guiding its attempt to render history as accurately as possible to provide for its audience a grounded, immersive, and even authentic-feeling experience of the historical event. DeLillo's novel partakes in a fundamentally different project. One might even argue that the novel is not mimetic. Lars Ole Sauerberg attests that, in contrast to "documentary realism," a set of techniques stemming from and naturalized in different non-fiction discourses, the metafictional mode thought to define postmodernism "[rejects] mimesis altogether as a foundation for writing" (14) And *Libra* often does look like metafiction more than a novel interested in documentary realism. It thematizes the constructedness of historical knowledge by addressing the artificiality of narrative and narrative forms. Peter Boxall has suggested in this fashion that the novel expresses the author's fascination with "a moment in history at which narrative fails to cohere" (133). DeLillo scholars and critics of contemporary American literature have tended to coalesce around this type of reading. Construed as "historiographical meta-fiction," *Libra* contemplates the (re)mediation of history and considers history and historical consciousness as effects authored by and contouring the edifice of a governing media-epistemology.

DeLillo's coda to the novel, a succinct if internally conflicted "author's note," discusses *Libra*'s intended pedagogical task in this light:

> I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some blank spaces in the known record.

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The note recuses the novel from building a plausible alternate "case" about Kennedy's death. Grounded though the novel is in well-researched detail, verifiable facts, and plausible reconstructions of past events, the appearance of "history" via the historical record is not intended to counter or correct that record as much as complicate the distinction between fiction and non-fiction forms where these forms together bear on the country's political imagination. So if it retreats from the arena of empiricism it invokes, the novel does have ambitions to "fill some blank spaces in the record," offering an experiential reenactment-as-interpretation of the assassination. *Libra* is written with the knowledge, in other words, of its place in the ephemeral archive that is collective consciousness and cultural memory. The "blank spaces" metaphor turns on rendering in positive terms dimensions of an informational world yet unrepresented, unformed, by the language of the existing record. Okay, fine. But what are we to make of the novel's cultural work, its truth claims, or its claims about truth claims? After all, DeLillo's commitments in the coda are notably contradictory: artistic license and a responsibility for providing truth stand in uneasy opposition.

If the novel can be said to be interested in an idea of the assassination as a cultural signifier and mass media sensation more than it is concerned with offering a new theory of Kennedy's death, *Libra*'s narrative does contradict the Warren Commission's findings. It is an ambiguous novel, concertedly so, on several salient points. Yet it refutes the commission's official "lone gunman" interpretation of the assassination and represents as fact in its diegesis a plausible counter-reality. The novel discards the commission's thesis and, arguably, rejects outright its operative sense of forensic 'physics.' DeLillo jettisons any faith in positivism as an epistemological basis for social order and political

affiliation. The murder in *Libra* is not an event planned and executed by a knowing actor (or actors) but a plot initiated from afar by disgruntled quarters of the CIA. It is an increasingly figurative "plot" that outpaces the designs of its authors, a plot in whose energetic, diffuse, and recursive autopoietic momentum Oswald comes to play an important but not singular role.

In *Libra*, Oswald's place in the assassination is, on the one hand, marked with ambiguity; his varying accounts of his own motivations are indeterminate, confused, and contradictory. Reiterating the novel's titular symbol, Oswald's station ruminates the poles of contingency (accident) and conspiracy (intent), caught as he is in a cosmic scale between "entering" or "exiting" the inexorable course of History. Oswald is a character starring in various "plots," structures beyond his knowledge or his ability to see let alone author. His identity is fluid and exogenous. Citing a letter from the real Oswald to his older brother, the novel opens by framing his identity with external systems of meaning that constitute "who" he is. "There is no borderline between one's own personal world," Oswald muses, "and the world in general" (1). As many critics have pointed out, DeLillo's Oswald is a literary character whose constitution in text revisits conventional ideas of "character" and stages a poststructuralist theory of personhood.[79]

The letter prefigures how *Libra*'s Oswald narrates himself in the third-person in media. Media and media forms recurrently shape Oswald as well as frame how he can know his identity as its being (re)formed. Oswald recurrently "sees himself" doing things,

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[79] Oswald embodies the principle James Paul Gee in "What is Literacy?" (1989), through his reading of Foucault, suggests when he says that "it is not individuals who speak [or act], but rather historically and socially defined discourses that speak to each other through individuals" (3). Gee's sense of discourse, as is Foucault's, is a linguistic one. DeLillo pushes in interesting ways toward technical expressions of extra-discursive cultural formations.

usually abetted in his stylized third-person visions of himself by films and newspapers.

He uses film-noir forms to envision his life and narrativize his actions. His affinity for

John Dillinger bespeaks a fascination with charismatic media images (foreshadowing his

obsession with Kennedy) and inclination for a genre-based scripting of identity. This

"seeing himself" in the third-person epitomizes the prosthetic nature of Oswald's

personality where he has internalized participating in the construction of himself by

media. It is in this sense that the conspiracy in *Libra* is always bigger than Oswald, more

than a question of his decision to act or not. A soft determinism inheres in the novel's

logic. He acts in the present and is aware of already being written, personifying the

simultaneous and recursive registers of happened and happening.[80]

Media metaphors abound. Semi-retired CIA agent Win Everett, the initial author

of the plot to galvanize public support against communism by staging a failed

assassination attempt, considers that he will create a walking "fiction" for his culpable

would-be assassin, a figure borne of paper (179). Everett sits alone at night in the early

stages of planning, "putting together a man out of scissors and tape," assembling a person

in the language of material evidence (145). Even before the plot spins out of control and

moves toward its deadly conclusion, Oswald is, logistically speaking, "redundant, strictly

backup. His role was to provide artifacts of historical interest, a traceable weapon" (386).

The day of the assassination Oswald feels the weight of this determination, intuiting that

an unknown, Pynchonian "They" are "running messages into his skin" (383). "They," of

course, designates no one person or party. The perforation of Oswald's body by text is a

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[80] Oswald's arrest in a movie theater in Dallas on November 22nd eerily resembles the way the Dillinger was famously captured (and killed) by the FBI.

metaphor for a semiotic situation the novel struggles to represent in positive terms: the intermediation of forms of personhood with techno-epistemological fields of potential. The physics of narrative people, of the text-based "characters," falls apart. What proceeds in *Libra* is a study of subjectivity, agency, and different types of determinism.

But if *Libra* interrogates "character" as a concept and literary form and proceeds to challenge character-driven models of agency in history, the novel's presentation of the assassination is nonetheless relatively clear: Oswald fires three shots at the motorcade, two of them miss their target, and one (non-lethal) shot strikes Kennedy low on the neck, just above the collar-bone.[81] A fictional figure, Raymo, an ex-CIA paramilitary associate and veteran of the Bay of Pigs fiasco working for the arch-conservative clandestine group, Alpha 66, fires the killing shot from behind the now-infamous wooden fence in Dealy Plaza. It is also implied that other snipers were at the scene and fired at the motorcade. Oswald is involved in the murder but he is at the same time, as he insisted on live-television, "a patsy."

On these grounds, several early reviews of *Libra* treated the novel as an incendiary contrapuntal history. Critics were quick to charge that the novel took advantage of its controversial subject matter and knowingly exploited its ready-made avenues into intrigue and public fascination by peddling in half-truths, embellishment, and speculation. Columnist George Will attested *Libra* was "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship." The imputation of criminality, however imprecise, is revealing.

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[81] This is meant to correlate with the frame in the Zapruder film when, after a first gunshot has clearly been heard by several bystanders and possibly even the President, a second shot unfolds and Kennedy leans suddenly forward, awkwardly lifting both his arms to the level of his head.

Will insinuates the novel's fraudulence and criticizes it on behalf of the American reading public; *Libra* constitutes a breach of contract, a dereliction of duty in civic letters. Other critical reviews were similarly couched in terms of DeLillo's wanting literary patriotism. Jonathan Yardley surmised that the novel's self-satisfied aesthetic treatment of a pivotal juncture in recent American history was "beneath contempt." Others critiqued DeLillo's project from a different point of view with respect to the novel's civic significance. These reviews took less seriously *Libra*'s thesis about the fact of the assassination and instead lamented that the novel's "artistic" and overly intellectual thematizing of an important historical topic indicated a regrettably solipsistic postmodern turn in contemporary literature, a symptomatic expression of an ahistorical "loss of external reality."

At first glance, these two sets of responses appear to communicate different views on the matter of the novel's realism. The former privileging its argument in realist terms while the other laments that the novel further destabilizes realism as an important cultural practice and politically worthwhile art. But both positions testify to the social stakes attributed, almost categorically, to the work of popular, realistic historical fiction.[82] From either vantage *Libra*'s offense is reducible to the perceived injury it levies to a body politic and the sense of historical "reality" enframing that body's cultural memory.

The terms of these debates reproduce a long standing reformist figuration of socially minded narrative art; well-crafted texts artfully (re)present with judicious fidelity a social field of referent consecrated in hegemonic discourse, a familiar "reality"

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[82] I would suggest that these are on some level categorically inextricable, being historical fiction's perceived social significance and that genre's attendant cultural cachet on the one hand and the coherence of the genre as a form consecrated in bourgeois circles of consensus politics on the other.

that is recognizable and also just beyond and in excess of stable and sustained

signification in communication. It is worth clarifying that realism is not mistaken for

reality or presumed to perfectly represent or capture reality as it "really is." Instead,

conventional realism works by assuming an extra-textual reality which may be

communicated in media, and that "it is possible and valid to create self-sustaining

fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality" (Sauerberg

1).

The critical responses to *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* evince the compact-based

premise of these projects where they are based in something recognizable as realism. In

her treatment of the nineteenth-century realist novel, Katherine Kearns explains the

paradoxical situation that drives realism's consummate interest in description and

fastidious attention to local particularities, that same interest which suggests the

provisionality of its detail-oriented forays and therefore solicits reader attention and even

scrutiny. Kearns surmises,

> Unlike the productions of historiography… fictional realism's oxymoronic
> status ensures that both the realist's faith and the reader's faith in the
> judicial body – that which moderates the acceptable and unacceptable, the
> sane and the insane, the real and the unreal – will be overtly contractual,
> contingent on the reality under scrutiny… The experience of reading,
> which the critical discourse smooths out, translates at least as much
> anxiety as complacency in regard to the real: in realism, one is given to
> understand, in understanding the contractual and consensual nature of a
> given reality, that there is always a possibility that the terms will shift, that
> the bank in which one has deposited one's life savings will fail, that the
> currency may change. (9)

In the case of the texts being analyzed, the contract-based adjudication of reality is on full

display. And the stakes are quite high. Bigelow's film remains for the moment the most

complete and captivating depiction of bin Laden's death, a fact that is all the more

important when we consider that little to no footage or photographic evidence has yet

been provided to the mass media to present, confirm, or emblematize the event.[83]

DeLillo's celebrated novel similarly correlates with a perceived civic exigency. Implicitly

justifying literature as a socially germane way of knowing, *Libra* pronounces itself as a

unique and meaningful entry in a shared cultural archive on Kennedy's assassination.

Both texts communicate their pedagogical imperative and furthermore commodify

aestheticized re-enactments of significant historical moments, offering to willing readers

plausible engagements with knowing history *as* a mainstream social ritual.

We might also think about the contractual nature of realism at the level of formal

composition. To reiterate Kearns's finance metaphor and extend it for a moment, a text's

cultural purchase obtains in a historically situated and media-specific economy of forms.

In new-realism, this awareness influences the project of realist representation in

description. The reality to be rendered and presented as such suggests its provisional

nature and its sense of becoming information in media. New realism tends to embody

Joseph Vogl's assertion that, "everything [media] store and mediate is stored and

mediated under conditions that are created by the media themselves and that ultimately

comprise those media" (16, 2008). A constructivist theory of reality comes to be reality's

discernible signature as expressed through an appropriate formal articulation. New

realism is interested in presenting the ways that information is collected, stored,

organized into narrative, and disseminated. And yet it is also attempts to depict in

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[83] Meaningful to this analysis, is that perhaps the most famous image from the event is of President Obama and his staff in the situation room watching the operation unfold on a screen (or set of screens) that are "offscreen."

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different, medium-specific ways how information comes into intelligibility in the first place in the moment of its present mediation. This sense of 'immediacy' is a positive, extra-referential aspect of the realist text whose provisional, becoming character mingles with the 'reality' of the objects being representing.

The pointed reactions to *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* suggest a phenomenon beyond the way realism as a cultural commonplace referees subjective particularities and countervailing interpretations of history. The pertinent critical opinions tend to admit, tacitly or otherwise, the purchase and validity of their operational *forms* of realism. In other words, there is no detectable concern with the ability of these texts to create an authentic 'reality,' socially legible as such, in their media domains. Media and 'appropriate' media tropologies are granted a certain license toward this social endeavor. Of course, such license is not granted as much as necessitated, always already in place (or coming into place) in the interlocking sinews of art, visual culture, mass media, and the grammar of consensus politics. The impetus for contesting the realities of *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* largely on the basis of their content can partially be explained by this fact. In what follows, I address how and why media-intensive realist style works as a form of historical consciousness in the genre of popular historical fiction. I would argue that the public nature of the vociferous and even outraged responses to *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* indicate the degree to which the media-intensive formal language of historical realism predominates the way we know and imagine political history.

"Paper Everywhere" - Text as World Texture in *Libra*

> The notes are becoming an end of themselves. Branch has decided it is premature to make serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history. Maybe it will always be premature. Because the data keeps coming… The past is changing as he writes. (301)

If contentious at the time of its publication, *Libra* has since taken its place in the high postmodern canon and remains one of the most commonly assigned texts in contemporary American fiction courses. The novel's approach to the construction of history, and the production of a historical sensibility in language, is in many respects quintessentially postmodern. *Libra* testifies to what Simon Schama describes in *Dead Certainties* as, "the teasing gap separating a lived event and its subsequent narration" (320, 1991). This gap drives the novel and features prominently in its narrative structure. Juxtaposed with Oswald's story running up and through November 22nd, 1963, is the story of Nicholas Branch, writing in the 1970s and 80s, a CIA analyst submerged in the agency's proliferating and growing multimedia archive on the Kennedy assassination, who struggles to compose a coherent "secret history." Branch has all the information he could ever need, far more, really, but access to data is not the problem. Imposing order upon the facts necessitates interpretation and speculation, actions which violate Branch's desire for self-intelligible evidence, information that maps unto and verifies a regularly ordered, knowable physical world.

As many scholars interested in *Libra* are quick to point out, the novel anticipates the world of big data and assumes for its central organizing metaphor the figure of the archive. The archive in turn stands in for the capacity of the novel form at the same time it signals the defeat of the realist imperative to represent social totalities – the

'encyclopedic' range of fiction smashes against an infinitely larger body of materials whose "truths" cannot be accommodated by novels or expressed in a book-based, novelistic document. The twenty nine volume Warren Commission, Branch thinks, is the megaton novel "Joyce would have written if he had grown up in Iowa in the 1940s" (183, 184). In addition to establishing DeLillo (via Branch) as a novelistic successor to Joyce's brand of maximalist high modernism, the thought conveys two important ideas:

1.) It attributes a realist prerogative to modernism and to modernist formal innovation, reminding us that *Ulysses*, after all, is in parts a very mimetic text bent on capturing with new techniques life as it is really lived and experienced through individual perception. Many will recall that Joyce wanted readers to be able to fully reconstruct Edwardian Dublin from the novel.

2.) The passage posits the convergence of fiction and non-fiction discourses by suggesting that the next iteration of high modernist formal innovation (via Joycean maximalism) might have ventured further from "literary" signification into encyclopedic reportage via documentary realism.

The archive is therefore a metaphor for and expression of a condition of meaning more than a proxy for the novel as a curatorial historical narrative. "It is impossible," Branch intones, "to stop assembling data… the stuff keeps coming" (59). A story object and media architecture in and of itself, the archive as a device, a medium, assumes its own autonomous reality in addition to that which it is thought to represent, store, capture or contain. Branch's frustrated and interminable meandering through the ever-growing archive in the CIA's secret library makes plain that one's experiential path *through* information, rather than the collective content of that information in its entirety, is what constitutes the archive's 'meaning.' Linkages, connections, pathways and sequences generate content, content that exceeds what any text of piece of evidence might be thought to typically convey or express in a typical sender-message-channel-receiver

communications model. In *Libra*, the communicative integrity of documents and data

falter, as does the project of preserving history through its documentation.

Laid bare is a situation where the intelligibility or communicative potential of

stores of data overwhelm and exceed human analogue. Because a deep knowledge of the

entire archive is impossible, the physical and organizational structure of communication

forms what knowledge is or can be. Much in the manner described by Cornelia Vismann

in *Files: Law and Media Technology* (2008), the archive in *Libra* is at once a method and

a medium, a system of interacting levels of mediality that invokes and conjoins persons,

things, and actions in the construction and dissemination of information. The structure of

this communicative system becomes its own type of message. The novel also destabilizes

the straightforward communicative function of information in the 'opposite' direction of

big data. It is not only the impossibly large scale of data - - "impossible" to a print-based

theory of the reader, anyway - - that proves troubling for Branch to impose order upon

and synthesize. Data also fail at a more local level. Discrete texts, and the "facts," they

might have been thought to reliably report prove nothing definitive and only generate

successive ambiguities. Poststructuralist readings of *Libra* argue that the novel moves to

present différance as tangible element of physical reality. As I will discuss shortly, this

might be productively reconsidered. I do not take this line of thinking to be wrong or

unproductive, but it reflects a longstanding methodological priority that textualizes

images and imports a linguistics-based semiotics to the study of photographic and filmic

signs. DeLillo importantly presumes the alterity of technological media for the novel's

examination of extra-discursive knowing. *Libra* takes for a point of narrative concern the

crucial difference between photographic and text-based mimesis and considers their

unique if occasionally overlapping epistemological characters. The novel seems to solicit a critical method that can account for its literary examination of media-specific constructions of knowledge. Critics, and literary critics in particular, have been quick to "assimilate images to words more than the reverse," a tendency that also informs how critics consider literary treatments of visual media (Bolter and Grusin 36). One of the things I'd like to emphasize is that the novel dissembles logocentric valuations of history, a fact frequently misrecognized in the prevailing critical emphasis.

DeLillo scholars and critics of postmodern literature have largely tended to discuss the novel in terms of its self-reflexive maneuvers and meta-textual style. Reflecting a priority understood to be poststructuralist and/or postmodern, *Libra* stages a presentist and constructivist orientation toward social reality. The novel formally accommodates the sense of history's becoming history in the course of its narration in text, Branch's sense that the reality of the past is changing as he writes. This is borne out in the novel's structure. Though it follows a series of parallel threads and presents a range of different characters leading up to the assassination, the narrative's major structural conceit poses a diachronic juxtaposition between Oswald's and Branch's plots. The novel cross-cuts between Oswald's unfolding 'story' in the fifties and sixties and the story of Branch's frustrated attempts to write his 'secret history' for the CIA through the seventies and into eighties. These story planes are recursive and mutually constitutive, making true in the diegetic physics of *Libra* a heterogeneous, metaleptic account of historical sensibility.

It is not hard to see why *Libra*'s arrival as a literary hallmark in American fiction pairs with a critical idiom in postmodern scholarship that has fashioned critics with a

helpful, if now shopworn, vocabulary for describing the novel and articulating its cultural work. As I have discussed, *Libra* epitomizes certain tenets of high postmodernism. It also arrived at a critical juncture for English and literary studies in the late 1980s regarding postmodern theory, and this context has shaped how the novel signifies as a 'literary' text and still influences how it is read and taught today. On the heels of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1985-1991) and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and the debates that ensued, Frank Lentricchia's influential 1991 essay, "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique" played a significant role in shaping how the novel is discussed within this critical framework. Lentricchia's essay begins by dismissing Will and Yardley's concern with a purported 'loss' of a transcendent historical referent, arguing that the novel is instead really about the invention of postmodern America, "where the charismatic environment of the image prevails." *Libra*, Lentricchia asserts, "depicts an emerging postwar society of spectacle… [a world] lived totally inside representations generated in print and visual media" (206). A loss of the historical referent is reconfigured in this read as a loss of the linguistic signifier and its operative media environment, a paradigm shift that metafiction encases in its composition. Assumed is the stability of "literature" as an essentialized technology to represent other media and media systems.[84]

One might easily overlook that DeLillo's novel, for all its self-awareness and recognizably 'literary' complexity, offers an eminently readable suspense story. Penguin Books' 25th Anniversary edition of the novel (2006) predictably markets the novel as an

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[84] This is, for the moment, not an argument I mean to follow-through on or "prove" in any definitive way, but the type of thinking I am critiquing posits a logocentric subject and presumes, incorrectly, the airtight connection between language and thought.

entry in popular fiction. Prominently displaying its "*New York Times* Bestseller" bona

fides, the back cover's lead promotional blurb, from *USA Today*, reads, "*Libra…* [is] that

true fictional rarity – a novel of admirable depth and relevance that's also a terrific page-

turner." This balance of sophistication and accessibility is then transposed in the book's

promotional materials into an evaluative statement of the narrative's laudable realism.

The summary begins, "In this powerful, *eerily convincing* fictional speculation on the

assassination of John F. Kennedy..." (my emphasis). The novel is packaged thusly:

> A gripping, masterful blend of fact and fiction, alive with meticulously
> portrayed characters both real and created, *Libra* is a grave, haunting, and
> brilliant examination of an event that has become an indelible part of the
> American psyche.

The summary-as-advertisement points out an aspect of the novel that many readings of

Libra frequently disregard: it is a dramatic tragedy. Though it harnesses Hayden White's

major points about tropology and critical historiography, the narrative communicates a

history that is *essentially* tragic. Self-reflexive style here coincides with sincerity. The

novel is self-aware about the way it employs literary tropes and genre conventions, but

this does not preclude its attempting a plausible rendition of the events leading up to and

culminating on November 22nd, 1963.

The restaging of the assassination plays out in the manner of a speculative non-

fiction docudrama, comparable to the likes of Errol Morris's own reformist, media-

intensive project in the acclaimed non-fiction film, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Morris's

film is at once a documentary and an investigative crime drama, a text that enfolds its

forensic arguments within a compelling whodunit design. *Libra*'s version of assassination

resembles the narrative techniques used by Morris – the novel restages in short order a

successive series of temporally overlapping descriptions of the event from different

vantages in and around Dealy Plaza. Contextualizing these brief and focalized glimpses of the event is Oswald's more expansive view, which contains these different segments and reframes the space and time of the assassination before the narrative transitions to another more contained, erratic simulation of the event from a certain character's perspective in the plaza. Presented in frenetic, detail-laden free-indirect discourse, the accounts from different vantage points approximate the documentary camera's focalized third-person narration. The narration restyles filmic jump cuts and overlap editing; there is a general sense of steadily progressing diegetic time, but it is parceled, bracketed, and not altogether linear. It seems to slow down, speed up, and occasionally repeat. Kennedy's death in *Libra* is a pluralistic expression of heterogeneous metalepsis, the scene yielding an intensified proscenium abounding with perspicuous detail and Auerbachian particularities. A stereoscopic perspective via the rifle scope of the shooter, Oswald, gives way to a multi-dimensional vantage. The reporting of sensory materials attributable to an individual character and their direct observations disperses outward form their perspective and becomes a more generalized "view," indexing a contingent, becoming quality of a shared, diegetic third-person reality. Truth, as in Morris's film, is a multifaceted arrangement arrived at through an archive containing multiple simulations the event or object in question. And as in *The Thin Blue Line*, forms of re-enactment are dispatched in *Libra* to work through and know in new ways a crisis of knowledge stemming from an original question that is also a point trauma.

I want to suggest that *Libra* has resonated with popular audiences in large part because it fuses elements of detective fiction, investigative journalism, and non-fiction biography within its more ambitious intellectual experiment. The power of the novel

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derives from its awareness of how certain media forms have a sanctioned discursive purchase on consensus reality. This is why *Libra* demands epistemological study. It remains to be articulated how the novel explores via metonymy the nature of representing in a literary text a representational problem. And the novel pursues this inquiry at the same time it offers a poignant (re)presentation of the assassination with sufficient emotional and dramatic integrity. Much like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Libra* formally partakes in kind of realism whose reality accommodates "the property of being unassimilable to meaning, to verbal and intellectual abstract (names) and to rational conceptualization as such" (Jameson 37, 2013). But unlike Bigelow's cinematic project in stylized documentary realism, DeLillo's project must confront a more troublesome semiotic situation where language and linguistic signifiers tend toward idealism and, therefore, nominalism.

The novel does more than mobilize constructivist axioms in the wake of thinkers like Simon Schama, Hayden White, and Michel Foucault. *Libra* transfigures the conceptual problem Schama describes and re-styles it as an exigency for writing fiction. As Timothy Melley attests, almost restating Schama to the word, Kennedy's assassination and the subsequent investigations of the President's death produced "a crisis of knowledge…a crisis epitomizing the condition of knowledge and history in postmodernity because it turns on an unbridgeable gap between historical events and historical narrative" (96, 2000). The emphasis as stated here typically pivots to discussing the textual nature of the historical referent in print-based narratives.[85] Leonard Wilcox

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[85] DeLillo himself has encouraged reading his work in this fashion, suggesting in interviews the primacy of language as a field of human action before "history" and "politics" (Cowart 2002, 92).

has recently suggested that this line of criticism, largely influenced by Linda Hutcheon's method in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, has had the effect of prescribing how scholars read the novel's engagement with a more fundamental problem, being "the limits of representation" (2005, 340).

Contrary to how the novel is often read, I argue that *Libra* is not a primarily intellectual exercise in ontogenetic play, flattening as it were all historical experience and knowledge of historical events to the stuff of narrative and text.[86][87] The novel instead foregrounds the technical reality of mediation as this informs the directive to provide social knowledge and furnish forms for doing so. Referring to the primacy of mediation in *The Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski suggests, "knowledge and genre are inescapably intertwined, if only because all forms of knowing — whether poetic or political, exquisitely lyrical or numbingly matter-of-fact — rely on an array of formal resources, stylistic conventions, and conceptual schemata" (23). *Libra* is predicated on

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[86] This type of reading, while not inherently misplaced or unproductive, retreads a critical commonplace in literary scholarship that produces a reliable payoff: a celebratory essentializing of literature as a media technology. The accomplished novel is thought to dissimulate the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, making an implicit case for literary knowledge and, by extension, "literature" as an important cultural station and venue for political commentary and even activism. The task ahead is to provision critics with a new vocabulary for describing the novel and its cultural work. Here again my aim emphasizes epistemological and formal concerns by foregrounding in my analysis an emphasis on technological media and media-specific representational strategies.

[87] In the case of DeLillo, there is a masculinist culture of reception that obtains in this style of criticism that I want to address as such and avoid. DeLillo's stature as a popular avant-garde literary figure continued to gain traction throughout the late eighties and early nineties. In the wake of *White Noise* (1985), which was still just being reckoned with by readers and scholars alike, *Libra*'s provocative take on its haunting historical subject, and the outcry it inspired from some quarters in mainstream literary reviews, seemed to bespeak the arrival of a major American novelist. I want to suggest that the countenance of DeLillo's work aligns his texts with a ready-made mode of literary appreciation and culture of readership, one that is in large part informed by the terms of social realism. This is the masculinist template of the socially-minded and historically conscious artist, the male literary figure as privileged social anatomist and esteemed cultural commentator. The enthusiastic reception and valuation of *White Noise*, DeLillo's "breakout novel," can be seen to partake in a recognizable cult of personality, celebrating as it were the prophetic thesis of postmodern culture. *Libra* acknowledges and reproduces such a framework by invoking a national register and nation-based epistemology; a sense of nation and national consciousness together constitutes the operative cultural imaginary in DeLillo's fiction.

such an orientation. The narrative acknowledges and dramatizes, however, that "all forms

of knowing," in addition to being anchored in different genres and social contexts, are

also determined by technological environments and coordinated by media constellations

that, very often, evade understanding and exceed knowability as such. *Libra* displays, in

other words, an interest in media generated forms of knowing, particularly where they

may or may not align with a representational idiom. As indicated by the crisis of

knowledge the Kennedy assassination has come to signify in consensus culture, the

traditional site of reportage-based bourgeois realism, this issue has a tangible political

corollary.

     I agree with Leonard Wilcox reading the novel "as an exploration of the relation

between trauma and [the elusiveness of] representation, [giving] us a powerful metaphor

of the historical project itself" (337.) I want to investigate the vestigial commitment in

Libra to realist technique, for the novel partakes in a recognizable mimetic project at the

same time it explores the limits of representation. Thus representation in *Libra* bears a

"stigma of provisionality," embodying the principle that media yield self-referencing

forms of evidence and create realms of visibility while "every visibility [they produce is]

surrounded by an ocean of invisibility," rendering any new visibility "questionable,

endangered, risky…riddled with uncertainty, dependent on coincidence… and relativized

by its segmentarity" (Vogl 22, 2008). Here we can see that Jameson's linguistic and

specifically "literary" sense of realist affect has an important structural homology in the

condition Vogl terms the double-becoming of media. Highlighting this connection

restores to realist affect a consideration of non-linguistic semiotics and an attention to

media paradigms absent in Jameson's otherwise compelling formulation of realism.

Many scholars have studied how different media appear in DeLillo's fiction. These studies are often well executed and insightful, but they tend to reify the media being discussed rather than treat them as text-based, "literary" instantiations of a given media technology. I want to emphasize that the novel examines the situation Mark Hansen describes in *Embodying Technesis*: "if it is true that technologies cannot exist outside social systems, that in no way precludes them from having effects that cannot be captured by the interpretative tools germane to such systems" (3, 2000). "Technology," Heidegger says, in a rare moment shedding his logocentric view of human cognition, "prevents any knowledge of its essence" (42, 1936) The novel recognizes and tries to represent this condition in a literary idiom, a task that productively pressures such devices as metaphor, metalepsis, and narrative perspective. Thinking again of realism's pedagogical motivation to "show aspects of reality hitherto unseen or unreported," the contemporary realist novel means to invoke via representation a felt intensity without relinquishing these moments to reification in language. *Libra* demonstrates how technesis both augurs and guides the formal expression of the realism's imperative to represent and not mean.

Evidence in *Libra*: Communication Breakdown

One of the major ways the novel moves to incorporate noise and suggest mediality is by demonstrating through Nicholas Branch, historian and frustrated realist, the fault lines in representational thinking where representationalism functions as a cultural logic and basis for social knowledge. Branch's trajectory in the narrative is relatively straightforward: he moves from despair about his inability to know the event in the question toward an understanding that his original guiding epistemology - - informed

by technoscientific premises and, no doubt, his internalizing detective story epiphanies - -

fails to correlate with the nature of the information environment he desires. This coming

paradigm shift is signaled early in the narrative, and it, importantly, is formally linked

with a scrutiny of measurement and description.

> Nicholas Branch in his glove-leather armchair is a retired senior analyst of
> the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret
> history of the assassination of President Kennedy. Six point nine seconds
> of heat and light. Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our
> lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each
> crowded second. We will build theories like jade idols, intrigue systems of
> assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories
> backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in
> their dreams. Elm Street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the
> grass, bloodspray all around. Tenth Street. A witness leaves her shoes on
> the hood of a bleeding policeman's car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that
> is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the
> heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things. (14)

The inclusive, plural first-person narrator fuses the novel's project with Branch's task,

conjoining their shared sense of audience. It denotes Branch's diegetic, institution-level

efforts for the agency as well as implies a wider readership, reifying through its implied

project in collective history a consideration of a larger political body. Branch's covert

station in the CIA belies the fact that he, not unlike DeLillo, is a socially-minded author

whose project hinges on assembling and construing public truth(s) for a (largely

imagined) reading public. Conveyed in free-indirect discourse, the passage's final line

indicates a shared project in collective understanding and the (re)establishment of a

tangible baseline reality.

"Let's regain our grip on things." Branch's suggestion ensconces two attitudes

that the novel entertains for a time and then proceeds to tease apart. The first presumes a

loss of control over or contact with real, knowable entities (dematerialization thesis). The second espouses an instrumentalist view of technology through liberal humanist attitudes; it enshrines the individuated, rational subject and promotes a willful mastery over tools and tool-generated social environments. "Let's regain our grip on things" reveals a desire for a world that can be controlled, known, and represented. This is what Bruno Latour, in "Drawing Things Together" (1990), describes as the modern cultural topography coordinated in media and consecrated in scientific discourse since "Cartesian persepctivalism." Latour suggests that mathematized space naturalizes linear perspective and "enables visual representations to be transported from one context to another without being altered or distorted" (26). This episteme finds its exaggerated but natural corollary in a supersubstantivalist theory of space, one wherein the physical constitution (the "substance") of space is not only homogenous and regularly ordered vis-à-vis Newtonian geometry but also ontologically commensurate with geometric structure. This is either a pure idealism, the consummate matching of concepts with their referent, or, rather, a naïve mimesis. Branch longs for a stable physical reality amenable to and continuous with the language of science and rational inquiry. More precisely, perhaps, Branch desires a media-episteme suited to his task in investigative historical realism. The problem is that the evidence available to Branch offers little in terms of tractable forensic information. Yet the data, however intransigent for his specific aims, do verify something tangible about the event and the nature of its reality. Thus the component pieces of evidence before him accrue fascination as autonomous, non-signifying objects, totems that demand an aesthetic, almost religious character. Unable to participate in a positivist

economy of facts, the materials surrounding our would-be historian come to assume, exert, and testify to an alternate semantic field of force that cannot easily be classified.[88]

Expressions of and metaphors for this present-but-uncommunicable alterity punctuate the narrative. This is *Libra*'s text-based impression of noise and novel-based depiction of noise as a semiotic milieu. *Libra*'s world is an energetic environment coursing with "heat and light"; it is a topography comprised of and shot through with technics-based signatures and an extra-discursive physics. The estranging frequencies of mediation come to the fore as an index of something incipient and truly real lurking behind the discourse-generated landscapes enframing human activity. A discourse consecrated "reality," a political culture and spatialized social logic, "the heartland of the real," is thrown into relief against this alternate signifying order. Branch's musings demonstrate that the deconstructive elements of metafiction assume the constructive framework they move to destabilize. Nineteenth-century literary realism, Sauerberg notes, assumes "an extra-literary reality which may be verbally communicated, and [presumes] it is possible and indeed valid to create self-sustaining fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality." Metafiction is necessarily premised, in other words, on a predominately realistic literary tradition and its structural reliance on a translatable consensus reality. This is the reality Branch means to recover and which, on some level, the novel also assumes for its diegetic bedrock. Reality here looks just like the type of print-based worlds naturalized in realism as well as non-fiction

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[88] The artifact becomes a fetish. The obsessive quality attribute to the investigation is telling where it calls to mind the oft-criticized and dismissed culture of the "conspiracy buff," a derisive term usually employed to describe the viewpoints of persons whose countervailing interpretation of a standing political reality effectually mitigates their political efficacy within that system

discourse. In *Libra* this world is acknowledged to be a text-based construction, albeit a functional and generally operable one. Statements of this reality's provisionality and media-specificity thereby appear in the form of metaphor and figurative language: these are the "electric" impressions of an energetic, inexpressible alterity that effects or impinges upon the reality of the text-based fictional world.

This is one of the key ways we might think about *Libra*'s literary attempt at media-intensive style. Whereas film or photography may, plausibly, be said to "capture" elements of reality because these technologies record impressions of external phenomena (reminding us that cinematography is "light writing" or "writing with light"), reference in writing is almost exclusively generated within linguistic systems and sustained by discursive communities. Different media thereby maintain different relationships to the cultural forms that interact with and shape human perception. Friedrich Kittler argues in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) that the advent of photography and film concluded poetry and invented "literature." Adopting Marshall McLuhan's prosthetic, biotechnical definition of media - - technologies that extend the human, alter the dimensions of human action, and change the ratios of sense perception - - Kittler surmises that photographic technologies relativize poetry's historically specific relationship to the human sensorium. Poetry exercises in pre-photographic media environments, Kittler argues, a unique semiotic capacity to explore the extra-discursive edges of human knowability. The arrival of the camera and it's the cultural assimilation of photographic art confines the expressiveness of writing to "linguistic signs that have been reduced to their bare materiality and technicity" (15). Poetry is not necessarily devalued in this view as an

artistic practice. Rather, it becomes "literature" because its expressive capacity is on some level relegated to its linguistic character, its text-based register of self-reference.

By contrast, the camera's ability as a medium is couched in terms of its similarity to 'unmediated' human vision. Kittler's reiteration of Lacan's tripartite Symbolic-Imaginary-Real model of psychological development as a configuration of historical media (writing-film-phonograph) also has to be understood as a trajectory in media-based realisms. The phonograph, for Kittler, "regardless of meaning or intent, records all the voices and utterances produced by bodies, thus separating the function of words as well as their materiality from unseeable and unwritable noises… [it] produces extra waste or residue that neither the mirror [ie, film] nor the imaginary can catch or reproduce" (79). Media-intensive realism in *Libra* can be considered with this in mind, and it manifests in the novel in two distinct ways. The novel formally approximates other media technologies in literary formal idiom – parts of the novel are visually oriented and stylistically "cinematic," while other sections pursue a documentary realist style: it incorporates the clipped syntax of real radio transmissions, often typographically; reproduces entire letters; mimics newspaper style; translates radio exchanges and emergency response calls into extended blocks of italicized text, etc. *Libra* also invokes a sense of noise and posits in its diegesis an immanent "world noise," expressions of a generalized workings of a techno-epistemological environment, often invoked through metaphor or metalepsis.

Thinking back to the electricity charging through *Libra*, we can see how the novel dissembles traditional models of communication and enfolds this deconstruction into the fabric of its story world. Here again, DeLillo presumes a naturalized, recognizable

literary reality and adds to it "extra" expressions of that world's "registration and revelation." In *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999), John Durham Peters contends that "communication" does not refer to a situation where information is transmitted from a source through an environment to a receiver. Communication can be better understood, Peters argues, as a media-enabled environment in which individuated acts of expression must be understood as second-order productions of this underlying structure.[89] Kate Marshall in *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction* calls this governing substrate the techno-epistemological configuration underlying the discursive surface of media (18, 2013). Expressions of pre- and extra-linguistic technological conditions feature in *Libra* as a constitutive aspect of the diegetic environment. Oswald, his CIA handlers, the increasingly large and distributed network of conspirators, and a host of other characters, all perceive a fatalistic, static charge humming with inexpressible presentiment.[90] The world of *Libra* reverberates, brimming with "lightning storms" (334), "heat and light" (339, 383, 398) and a sense of "something in the air right now" (68). This atmospheric electricity is for co-conspirator and quasi-spiritualist David Ferrie an inaccessible but portentous extra-historical force complicit in authoring the assassination (339). Rendered in the limited third-person present, the crowds awaiting the President at Dealy Plaza, we are told, sense this electric charge

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[89] Significant here is that Peters's attention to media technologies bridges constructivist approaches in discourse and media-discourse analysis. Linguistic-inclined discourse analysis, even when mobilized by materialist critics like Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1973), emphasize how space is composed, mathematized, and abstracted in the grammar of predominant linguistic categories. Discourse and political organization is inseparable, which allows little room for a consideration of the techno-epistemological and extra-technological aspects of discursive formations.

[90] Anticipating the way Zadie Smith describes a "realism after realism" in her discussion of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, the narrative "zings," its spaces alive and quivering with incipient potential ("Two Paths for the Novel," 2008).

pulsing through the glistening city scene: "the crowd brought itself into heat and light. A knowledge charged the air, a self-awareness…Loud and hot and throbbing" (394). Such a disarticulated energy is in the narrative an objective part of the exoteric environment, an expression of McLuhan's precept that media technologies "produce worlds" by altering the ratios of human sense perception and therefore changing the environment of human activity and intellection. As in *Gravity's Rainbow*, we witness in *Libra* the planar interpenetration of bodies and technologies, the imbrication of human topographies with a techno-semiotic milieu as it is rendered in literary space by metaphor.

The way impressions of a technological substrate feature in the narrative are important for how they indicate the limits of metaphor as well as suggest the operations of that technique. Metaphors work by linking together concepts, or linking concepts with objects, "carrying across" as it were connotative meaning from one semantic unit to another. They mediate, in other words, various nodal points in a linguistic system by "bridging" their network of associations. How do metaphors speak to something outside of language, something before or in excess of language? And how does this correlate with literary description, an aesthetic act that similarly tries (especially in realism) to forge meaningful connections between language and objects of reference that may or may not easily be approximated in words. Primary mediums, the "heat and light" coursing throughout *Libra*, express several concomitant layers of meaning that together work to destabilize the operation of metaphor, particularly where it pressures in its representation of media technologies and their cultural and social effects the tie between "method and machine" (Marshall 18). We can examine the novel's central trope, "heat and light," in accordingly. Libra's scales provide an apt symbol for the novel's emplotted theory of

history, weighing whether or not people can decide to act or not in contexts that may or may not be determined. Libra is also the sign of air, a symbol of atmospheres and the atmospheric, air being all at once a force, a medium, and an environment. On the one hand, "heat and light" designate a metaphoric expression of an incommunicable and disarticulated energy via technology or, even, History, that acts upon the world through impressions of an electricity-like incursion of "reality." "Heat" and "light" are also, like air, fundamental mediums, material dimensions that 'carry' the reality framing and enabling human perception and activity. Critics like Stiegler would insist further that "heat" and "light," in addition to prefiguring and sustaining the core dimensions of human life, need to be addressed as Promethean suggestions of a primary technological horizon. Far from being "extra" or invasive element of consensus reality, "heat and light" suggest in Libra the forgotten and well-disguised historical reality of technology's originary role in shaping human development. The fact of this condition is so overwhelming, and the imbrication of people and tools so naturalized, even at the level of physiological and cognitive patterning, that it becomes invisible, eliding as it were its representation. Heat and light also serve as an expression of and literary shorthand for a weird, affective admixture of cameras, flashes, gunshots, blurs, and noise. Here too, media signatures, impressions of technological inscription, are not discrete objects but a sensibility and even an environment. On several different levels, then, we see the novel's guiding metaphor disintegrate into a trope that represents, and possibly describes something, but it does not "mean" in the sense of conjoining connotations. It is hard to tell what "heat and light," in other words, is really doing in the narrative.

This (productive) limitation of metaphor, in turn, is one of the ways we can understand how an epistemological concern with technological media influences the types of mimesis we see in new realism. The novel represents the ways that media technologies as a generalized set of conditions permeate and, possibly, constitute the very dimensions of lived experience. Assumed in the first instance is that there is a coherent reality, a logocentric human scale of livability prior to contemporary technological media, that is being impinged upon and altered, systematically, by the coming of a new system. Impressions of technological otherness are a trope, an abstraction made "real" in the narrative through figurative language. This manifests as a problem with description, that rhetorical process containing the dually objective and subjective nature of perception in realism.

> Struggling to define what he can say to "know" with any certainty, Branch
>
> > questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, to be able to what happened. (300)

Branch's problem is with representational discourse and its corollary landscape. A desired environment, regular and ordered by positivism and its amenable mathematical laws - - positivism emerges here as a premise for collective understanding, for knowable "truth," and even a rational basis for democratic political filiation in the vein of John Stuart Mill - - comes apart in the face of a different semiotic reality, one that destabilizes something so fundamental as the grammar of mechanical dynamics, the technoscientific language ordering "our" generalizable and reproducible knowledge of everyday actions. The constitution and legibility of the physical world comes into question, a crisis in

knowledge reconfigured as a social and political problem in *accounting for* and

describing.

Libra takes up this problem as it correlates to a heritage of descriptive techniques

in literary realism. Articulating the ways nineteenth-century realism indicates the

ascendance of middle class cultural forms, Franco Moretti tracks in *The Bourgeois:*

Between History and Literature (2013) the historical formation of a novel-based literary

idiom based in detailed-oriented descriptions. Moretti suggests that description comes to

constitute a distinct narratological drive, bespeaking a religious respect for facts, "where

coming to terms with reality becomes, from the necessity it always is, a 'principle,' a

value" (88).[91] Scenes of proliferating detail "lose the last vestige of narrative function to

become simply – *style*" (emphasis in original, 79). Branch's situation in the archive

revisits this tradition and transfigures it into a point of epistemological conflict. If the

novel uses metaphors to present reality in terms of inexpressible alterity, it also pressures

the mechanics of linguistic reference where description features as a form of taking social

measure. Branch's efforts to find definitive, explanatory facts hinders rather than helps

him; his analytic vocation mirrors a semantic aspect of nineteenth-century realism,

wherein "details themselves begin to resist understanding" (Moretti, 85). Thomas Kuhn,

among other philosophers of science, formulate in terms of defining "operations." For

Kuhn, "measurement does not lead back from the world, via quantification, to the

construction of theories; if anything, it leads back from theories, through data, to the

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[91] A conservative reading of realism necessarily inheres in this type of argument, for realist description as formal expression of a cultural drive looks a lot like policing reality. See Amy Kaplan and Katherine Kearns for an alternate reading of realist description as a formal enterprise with an inherent politics.

empirical world." Operators build a bridge from concepts to measurement, and then to words. "The definition of a given concept is not to be found in the properties of that concept," Kuhn suggests, "but lies within its actual operations." The novel dissimulates how description works as it is tied to reference and the imperative to index stable objects. Description as it is linked to perception is divorced from sensory exchange, highlighting how technical operations preform concepts to be described in words.

If we return again to the "lets regain our grip on things passage," we can see its staccato prose offers a series of declarative descriptive sentences, punctuated with fragmentary clauses and the blunt expression of irrefutable "facts." It chronicles stray details with no ready-made meaning. The list-like format underscores that form's premise and then indicates its defeat; this is not a collection of discrete, known entities with a knowable or even guessable series of predictable interrelationships. Regardless of the data available, the larger "picture" remains meaningfully *out of focus*, a metaphor I will continue to emphasize for how it foregrounds media-determined articulations of intelligibility and nonintelligibility. Rather than accounting for or imposing a interpretative, controlling order over these specific elements in their being comprised together in the act of writing *as* recording and accounting for - - bullet trajectories; "Tenth street;" a woman sitting in the grass; "bloodspray all around;" her shoes on a police car - - the list enacts something traditionally realist, a description-based profusion of contingent, non-symbolic details that transmit a signal or sense in excess of linguistic communication. These details are not sense-based descriptors of a ready-made discursive concept, but radically compressed metonyms for processes they cannot sufficiently index. The data, as information that can have an explanatory or descriptive function, falls apart,

and with it the project of historical reportage. As Branch comes to realize later in the

novel, again in the inclusive plural, "we are beyond documents now" (297).

The aforementioned passage works to cultivate a sense of what Roland Barthes in

Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography calls "punctum," the element of a

photograph that evokes an affective sense of reality in excess of, and not reducible to, the

"content" of an imagistic text.[92] A Latinate term derived from the Greek word for

"trauma," punctum designates an unexpected personal, subjective reaction to an

unexpected and unwonted feature of a photograph. It is something that "pricks" or

"wounds" the viewer – "it shoots out of the image like an arrow and pierces [the reader]"

(23). For Barthes this effect derives from the seemingly random, the spontaneous, and

stylistically unaccounted for aspects of a given image. It is the unnerving or uncanny that

is a testament to contingency, to the improvisational moment of recording and becoming

recorded, an *immediacy* borne of and in *mediation* which seems more real than reality

being depicted. This is one of the major paradoxes the novel works to describe, formally

accommodate, and, in a manner specific to its print-based medium in the novel form,

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[92] Barthes's primary project in the book is articulate a new semiotics of photography, something he says is necessary on account of its mechanically different mode of mimesis (vs. language). He is concerned with the fact that photographs as media are hardly if ever distinguished from its content, its referent, that which it depicts or represents. For Barthes, there is an alarming ontological flattening of the photograph as an object with the object that it depicts. This is due primarily to the self-similarity of the photographic signifier with that which it indicates. Anticipating the types of statements made by Joseph Vogl about media making things visible at the same times they make themselves invisible, Barthes wants to provide a way of "seeing" the photograph and camera itself as a rhetorical object that, in interplay with subjective and emotional responses, construe a sense of the real. For Barthes, this is always a universal signifying element of the indexical photograph (meaning that, unlike language, it is based in a tie with an external referent) as well as an intensely personal reaction. The standard critique of *Camera Lucida* has rightfully pointed out that Barthes assumes a generalizable human subject. Anticipating some of the problems that contemporary affect studies encounters, Barthes in *Camera Lucida* envisions a subject that is at once deeply personal and also generalizable and possibly even universal, failing to distinguish how and where discourse enframes the purview of the affective and shapes how the affective can be known or expressed.

represent in positive terms. For Wayne Elko, a key member of Alpha 66 who pushes the assassination plot past the intentions of its initial authors, it is the eerie and hard-to-describe sensation one feels shooting another man with a high-powered rifle with a telescopic lens – the body can be seen moving in such an unpredictable, uncanny way upon being hit rescues the action from a sense of remove that might otherwise be inaugurated by physical distance and layers of mediation. This is the sense that "guns are their own language, their own memory" (277). Rather than insulating the viewer from its viewpoint by way of the technological object, the object assumes a primacy, its own scale, a semiotic existence that supersedes its operator's knowability.

The problem with description gets us to back to the blur. Branch is fascinated with blurs and obsessed with the series of paradoxes they indicate. As a unit of would-be evidence, the blurs in the Zapruder film reliably communicate the material fact of the data and expresses the fact of the data's collection, but the do not provide information in a straightforward sense. This is one of the major themes of *Libra* understood as a text dealing with an epistemological crisis inextricable from the problem of representation. Empiricism and scientific rationalism, the bedrock of consensus politics in a technocratic democracy, relies on the observable self-evidence of physical truths; the truth can be known and presented and (re)presented as such. This regularity and representability is mutually constitutive with its quality as truth. And it impels frequent demonstrations. Shannon Herbert suggests in her reading of DeLillo that Branch's "radical objectivity… demands that facts speak for themselves… the empirical and scientific tradition requires facts to remain innocent of interpretation" (290, 2010). Toward this end evidence is periodically called upon to instantiate the regular workings of the world it designates.

We might think about this epistemological crisis by, for a moment, considering a non-fiction book on the Kennedy assassination, Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone's *New York Times* Bestselling project in investigative journalism, *High Treason* (1989). Published just one year after *Libra*, *High Treason* rebukes the Warren Commission and states directly that the president died at the hand of a conspiracy, arguing that since 1963 a massive cover-up has been perpetuated on the American people to obscure this fact. Groden and Livingstone's book forwards an impassioned, heartfelt plea for justice. Kennedy's death is considered an assault on democracy, and no less than the principles of popular sovereignty and the course of a shared national future are at stake in attempting to solve the "case." For the authors, the fact of Kennedy's death by conspiracy is distressing. More urgent, though, is the sense that "truth," the extrahistorical lynchpin of consensus politics and popular government, has been denied.

The argument proposed in *High Treason* is expressed on the basis of evidence made newly available after New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's attempts to indict businessman Clay Shaw for conspiracy charges in 1969 indirectly led to the establishment of the House Assassinations Committee in 1976.[93] Including "186 dramatic photos – some never before seen," *High Treason* is a book-based archive in-miniature. Groden and Livingstone are painstakingly detailed in their analysis. The book's central argument centers on the "shocking," then newly revealed official images (shown in the

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[93] Garrison's efforts were pivotal in having the Zapruder film released to the wider public.

book) from the President's autopsy, photographs and official tracings of photographs that the authors argue have been doctored.[94]

High Treason focuses on this cover-up where it regards the manipulation of physical evidence. Groden and Livingstone demonstrate how official images are inconsistent with the Zapruder film as well as incompatible with initial reports filed by the doctors who saw Kennedy immediately upon arrival at Parkland Hospital. These inconsistencies correlate with questions arising from the events in Dealy Plaza. The single-shooter thesis, Groden and Livingstone argue, must be dispelled in the face of new data:

> utilizing the most advanced computer techniques, scientists were able to isolate the echo patterns of the shots on November 22, 1963, to test firings the [House Assassinations] Committee had performed fifteen years later. The results were:
>
> Shot #1 – From behind.
> Shot#2 – From behind.
> Shot #3 – From the right-front, from the Grassy Knoll
> Shot #4 – From behind. (iii)

The grisly images shown in the book depict the President's head and skull largely intact; the Warren Commission's three shot account of the attack is accounted for, "proven" in the material evidence as it were, in these images. One such image from the official medical report, showing the right side of Kennedy's head, all of his face intact, "is completely incompatible with the X-ray of the side of the head, which shows the right front of the face and eye missing" (306). The argument is that the lethal shot, which the

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[94] The authors interviewed Floyd Riebe, the photographer who helped take the autopsy photos, who attests that the images are forgeries. Groden and Livingstone emphasize at several different points in the book that "an examination of the medical evidence was never undertaken by the Warren Commision" (306).

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authors claim came from the right-front of the President's motorcade and which entered

Kennedy's skull and blew out the back of his head, has been carefully doctored out of

existence.

This official illustration of the back of the President's head is an exact tracing of the alleged autopsy photograph released by the government. This picture disagrees with all accounts of the head wounds by the Dallas medical staff and autopsists.

The same photo with an outline of the matte line. This shows where a composite photo was made by combining two different photos to make the forgery. The matte line is visible to the naked eye.

How the wounds actually looked.

A pictorial representation of President Kennedy's head wound as described by Dr. Robert N. McClelland of Parkland Hospital. It was verified by every doctor, nurse and eyewitness as accurate. The exit wound was described as being almost squarely in the back of the head (the occiput).

Figure 3.4: Reproduced from *High Treason*, pg. 306

More suggestive still is one of the truly perplexing mysteries lingering at the heart of the

assassination: the unprecedented removal and subsequent disappearance of the

President's brain during the initial autopsy. To this day, no source in the CIA, Secret

Service, or medical staff at Parkland can or is willing to account for this curious and

unfathomable development. For the authors of *High Treason*, this unconscionable

destruction of evidence proves conspiracy and a cover-up.

Groden and Livingstone's project openly expresses a commitment to a national,

public history steeped in positivism. The authors place an inordinate faith in empiricism

as a foundational principle of social organization and theory of historical progress: "In

the end, the truth will emerge. Slowly, painfully perhaps, but it *will emerge*." (xi) The

book is premised on the assumption that once all the facts are collected and disclosed to

the public, the truth can be known and widely accepted as such.[95] At the level of genre,

we can see investigative journalism quietly installing itself as a template for cultivating

knowledge and disseminating a public sensibility. Recalling Woodward and Bernstein,

and perhaps even channeling the mythical Lois Lane and Clark Kent, Groden and

Livingstone's book evidences the rise of investigative journalism as a romanticized

American ritual, one that glamorizes a civic-oriented, detective-style sleuthing as a means

of conscientious political reporting. Thought of as a genre, this non-fiction template

assumes for its operations certain techniques relying on an empirical theory of

knowledge; truth can be accessed (seen, known, discerned) and represented (proven,

verified, communicated). *High Treason*'s argumentative force falters on the basis of this

representational logic and its ensuing vocabulary. The book's actual "findings" are vague

and speculative. Groden and Livingstone ably demonstrate innumerable problems with

the official narrative of the Kennedy assassination as they appear in the Warren

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[95] Enlightenment-era attitudes and democratic directives underscore several of the author's major
positions and inform the book's sense of its intended intervention. Assuming the representability of
observable physical phenomena, Groden and Livingstone can insist that the "truth" is real and it will in
time be known accordingly.

Commission, but no comprehensible summation follows from scientific attention to newly available evidence. *High Treason* struggles, in the final analysis, to articulate what the evidence can be said to really *show*.

Put another way, Groden and Livingstone's assessments fail to indicate much beyond evidence-level findings. However desirous they are of intelligible information, the project of fitting appropriate materials and evidence within a coherent narrative of that "real" event breaks down. One moment in *High Treason* is especially telling on this matter. Like many studies of the assassination, *High Treason* scrutinizes the Zapruder film and carefully plies its grainy testimony in search of definitive answers about what truly happened on November 22nd, 1963. I have reproduced here (as cleanly as possible) the author's presentation of a blown-up still image from the film as it features in their argument.

Z335-(blowup) This frame from the Zapruder film shows that the back of the President's head was missing. In front of the ear is a large flap of scalp and bone in the right temple. This was the entry for the shot from the Grassy Knoll and was closed by Mrs. Kennedy when she was "trying to hold his hair on and his skull on" and was therefore easily overlooked in Parkland Hospital.
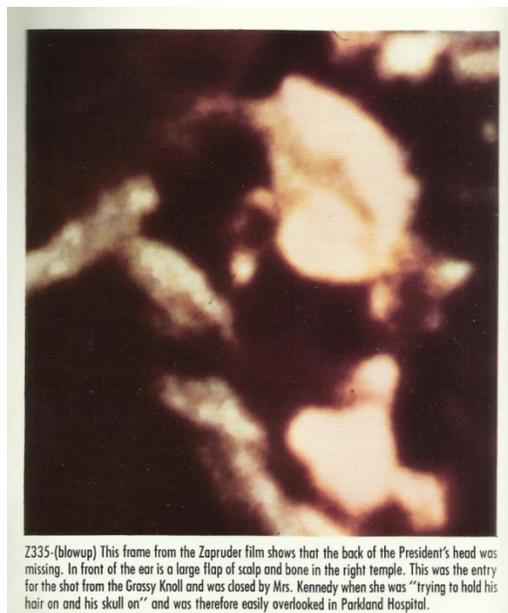
Figure 3.5: Still from the Zapruder film reproduced from *High Treason*

The authors claim the image "shows that the back of the President's head was missing," verifying as it were the book's claim that a second sniper fired at Kennedy from the front of the motorcade and that steps were taken after the fact to conceal the nature of the fatal wounds. In spite of what Groden and Livingstone suggest in their caption, the image "shows" very little; it is practically indecipherable. The image's potential forensic value is subsumed by the image's granularity. This is in no small part because it is a slowed down, blown up still image, a syntactical unit excerpted from a filmic syntagm in which it functions as one iteration in a sequence of successive images creating the illusion of natural movement. Shorn from this context, from the mechanics of its medium, the film's grainy utterances disintegrate farther into an illegible admixture of shapes, blurs, and shadows.

Becoming Evidence in *Zero Dark Thirty*

> There is just us, and we are failing. We're spending billions of dollars; people are dying; we are still no closer to defeating our enemy. They attacked us, on land in '98, from sea in 2001, and from the air in 2001. They murdered 3,000 of our citizens in cold bold. And they have slaughtered our forward-deployed and *what the fuck have we done about it*?! [slams hand on table, now yelling] *What have we done*?! We have twenty leadership names and we've only eliminated four of them. [pauses, looks around the room] I want targets. Do your fucking jobs – bring me people to kill. - "George," Senior CIA supervisor, *Zero Dark Thirty*

As with *Libra*, the history narrated in *Zero Dark Thirty* suggests a way of telling history that is beyond documents and documentation. But what does this mean in the context of a mainstream film purporting to the work of historical non-fiction? After all, the film employs documentary techniques and takes for its organizing premise the aim to document an accurately restaged historical event as realistically as possible. I want to

scrutinize the film's formal character, its genre-based structure and cinematographic style, with respect to its stated project in "realism." For the camera in Bigelow's film theorizes its own status as media. The reality is makes visible carries clear signatures of its documentation in film, a stylistic aspect of the world's diegesis employed to authorize its reality. A sense of Vogl's media-event is incorporated, in other words, into the film's formal idiom. The effect reproduces in cinematic terms what Jameson describes of an earlier realist style: this is the generative binary of objective and subjective propelling realism as an aesthetic strategy, wherein immediate "perception" is codified under the rhetoric of description (47, 2013). Bigelow's camera actively cultivates such a sensibility, fusing as did *Libra*'s narrator forms of observation and individual perspective with objective description. This becomes an especially "media-intensive" strategy in *Zero Dark Thirty* where the narrating camera is highlighted in the film's cinematographic rhetoric (rather than elided) as an inextricable feature of its heightened representational presence. In the matter of documentary realism or found-footage movies, the positive sense of the recording device in the world of the film lends credence to the world being recorded. In contrast to an earlier mode of Hollywood realism that meant to disguise the narrating apparatus and let its fictional world wash over audiences, *Zero Dark Thirty* fuses documentary technique with what David Bordwell has called "intensified continuity" (17, 2002).[96] Bigelow's reality is a very filmic one, a reality communicated, as Baecker states, through its communication in film.

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[96] Bordwell argues in "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film" (2002) that, in opposition to a "post-classical" paradigm, as many film scholars have tended to allow beginning in the 1960s, we might think about how formally similar contemporary studio films are to conventional Hollywood narration, that formal arrangement concretized in an industry idiom as early as the 1920s and 30s. Bordwell asserts that contemporary films lean into and intensify existing norms rather than

Comparable to *Libra* in this respect, *Zero Dark Thirty* engenders an important

paradox through its media-intensive style. Its attempt to procure a grounded, immersive

cinematic experience illustrates the dynamic interplay between 'immediacy' and

mediation. Immediacy as a representational ethos is implied through the direct presence

of media instruments and their provisional, limited views of profilmic space. There is a

tactical harmony in Bigelow's film between the camera's constrained, unrehearsed gaze

and the plot-level suspense generated by restricted narration. "Immediacy' in the world of

Zero Dark Thirty does not suggest "outside of mediation" or "prior to mediation."

Immediacy instead describes the direct impressions of a profilmic world as it is

encountered by a present, narrating camera.

As I suggested earlier, taking cue from Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, there are

ways in which it is productive to think about *Zero Dark Thirty* as a cinematic exercise in

self-referencing virtual reality. We might think again of the promotional materials

imploring audiences to "see what *really* happened." Implicit is the promise of a vivid,

immersive experience. This becomes all the more clear in the film's climactic sequence:

SEAL Team Six's raid of Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May

2nd, 2011. My analysis will center on this pivotal scene, an extended sequence formally

marked off within the film's overarching history as an enclosed exercise in immersive

narration. Segmented from the naturalist historical narrative in which it is framed, the

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discard them. The result is a very filmic mainstream cinema "realism." Important to this discussion is the prominence of intensified continuity as a visual idiom in pop culture. Paul Greengrass's work in the *Bourne Supremacy* (2004), working from Doug Liman's *The Bourne Identity* (2002), popularized hand-held intensified continuity as a form of mainstream realism, an important point for this argument considering that Greengrass's *United 93* (2006) is a stylistic antecedent for *Zero Dark Thirty* in the post-9/11 documentary realism/investigate drama genre.

film's media-intensive finale escalates *Zero Dark Thirty*'s gambit in realism. Immediacy takes shape through a diverse formal repertoire in intermediation. The narration moves between first-person and limited third-person perspectives, cuts between night vision goggle-based focalizations and natural lighting shots, and synthesizes a kinetic video-game style with journalistic war footage tropes. Smash zooms, jump cuts, and an unsteady hand-held camera furthermore indicate the reliable presence of the documenting narrator.

One of the truly remarkable aspects of the scene is how hard it is to see what is happening at certain moments throughout the raid. Darkness and a sense of obscurity, of course, constitute what *is* happening. As was the case in *Libra*, we can see in Bigelow's narration a thematic investment in rendering noise where it bears on realistic style. If Hollywood narration, as it is has been described, is an "excessively obvious cinema" inclined toward clarity, exposition, and well-articulated plots with casually-linked progression, *Zero Dark Thirty* strays from this model, at least during certain moments in the interest of immersive and intensified documentary realism (Bordwell). For the film's first eighty minutes, Mark Boal's well-paced script guides a succinct and clearly articulated, plot-driven account of the ten year search for bin Laden (focalized through Maya's investigation and emplotted against her story arc that takes her from a young CIA recruit to a confident, seasoned agent). The raid foregoes this clarity and proceeds through its duration with a built-in threshold for ambiguity that is largely expressed visually through camera-based versions of noise. Though the sequence as a whole is not especially difficult to follow, several of its component scenes are hard to understand because the characters and story environments are either cloaked in shadows or are

otherwise barely discernible.[97] But it is not so difficult to see that it estranges viewers.

The sequence is, in moments, just obscure enough to communicate mediality while

leaving the narratological machinery of intensified continuity in place. In conventional

Hollywood filmmaking, continuity editing places a premium on maintaining spatial and

temporal relations for the sake of clarity and cohesion, and this governs the how the raid

sequence is shot, at least to some degree. The effect is that the cinematography solicits a

heightened viewer attention as well as reinforces the audience's structural identification

with the SEAL team through the camera's restricted narration. In addition to conveying

the fact of the event's mediation before a light-dependent medium in the camera,

darkness also works to supplement other rhetorical strategies pertaining to media realism.

Decoupled from a clear visual referent and obvious corresponding source, the intensified

diegetic soundtrack, in the manner of Kittler's phonograph, comes to the fore as a mode

of stochastic, contingent representational presence: the team's communications with each

other, their breathing and the sound of their footsteps, the quiet but persistent din of

jostling equipment, miscellaneous sounds from the home, children crying, sheep bleating

in the courtyard, all these things together enact a rhetorical function.

In this respect, the scene's well-documented, controversial fist-person shooter

perspective has to be understood as just one of several elements guiding the scene's

media-intensive realism. Importantly, video game forms influence the restricted narration

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[97] An important but possibly interesting aside – when I saw the film in theaters and when, on three separate occasions, I have seen the film with a group because I assigned it to undergraduates, I have noticed that different people will, involuntarily, it seems, move their heads during these moments when content is especially difficult to see. This may be, in part, because audiences are acculturated to watching movies and shows on laptop and device LCD screens whose images may be seen more clearly by moving tone's position relative to a source of light. It also might be explained by the film's partial success in virtual reality.

at work in the sequence and underscore the degree to which we are meant to identify with the SEALs as they slowly move through winding passageways in the dark toward a violent confrontation with History. Other media and film-based impression of media signatures cross-index this identification and vest the film's marquee set piece with subsequent layers of compositional granularity.

The cinematographic style we see in the film's dramatic climax is foreshadowed in the haunting opening sequence preceding the narrative proper (it is "haunting" both for its arresting, emotionally charged content and for the unnerving way the film mobilizes this content via documentary realism through overt forms of propaganda and commercialization). *Zero Dark Thirty* opens on a black screen that frames a non-diegetic title card:
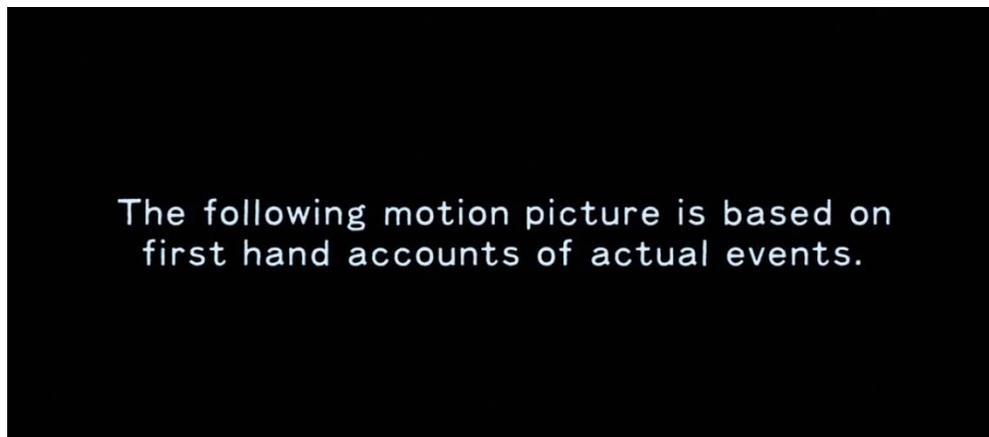
Figure 3.6: The film's opening title card

An extended assemblage of real audio recordings from 9/11 plays once this text has faded to black. For almost two minutes the screen remains dark while the viewer hears a garbled, edited-together bricolage of radio transmissions, phone calls, news reports, and emergency response communications. Positioning its fictional diegesis alongside the

gritty, 'unprocessed' stuff of raw historical record, the film opens by theorizing its historical realism through an ethos-in-narration deriving from an intensified documentary technique. More than providing an emotionally charged sense of "historical context" for the ensuing narrative, the opening sequence credentials the film's project and insists upon a formal continuity between this recorded history, legible as stylized non-fiction, and the narratized cinematic history to follow. The opening establishes, in other words, the film's intrinsic norms for tabulating reality by way of media-intensive reality effects. It is not insignificant that a film promising to visualize history, to *show* "what really happened," opens with static, screaming, darkness.

The opening sequence also crystallizes the film's underlying political identity and suggests the cultural work of media-intensive realism. We can see how something like realist affect can, in spite of its aim to evade signification, be mobilized to motivate certain pre-articulated political positions and, incidentally, suggest their innate "reality." In terms of genre, the film licenses its pleasurable action-thriller structure through its gestures in realism. The audial montage begins with noise and proceeds through its many dissonant utterances to a single, garbled "signal." It moves from what is, at the start, a multitudinous amalgam of confusion and fear, comprising of several panicked calls imposed over one another, toward a lone, representative distillation of the message to be conveyed in the archive-in-miniature. The film plays continuously for forty five seconds the cell phone recording of a woman trapped on an upper floor of the World Trade Center north tower as she communicates with an emergency response operator:

EMS responder: hello, miss?

Woman: (screaming) HELP! … Are they going to be able to get anyone up here?
EMS responder: Of course, we're coming up to get you
Woman: There is no one here yet and the floor is completely engulfed… and I can't see… Oh. my God… I'm going to die, aren't I?
EMS responder: (emphatically) No, no, no, no. We're coming to get you
Woman: I'm going to die.. Oh, God
EMS responder: No, no, mam, no
Woman: Oh, God
EMS responder: No, stay calm, stay calm
Woman: (breathing heavily, panicking)
EMS responder: stay calm, you're doing a good job, you're doing a good job
Woman: It's so hot… I'm burning up
EMS responder: It's going to be fine, we're coming to get you… can anyone hear me?... Oh, my God.

Beginning from this moment, the narrative introduces its history with an infusion of dread, a form of affect that shows again how realism's happened/happening dialectic exacts a poignant sense of immediacy from a position of historical knowingness. The scene personalizes historical violence becoming a fact in media. Further suggestive of this happening/happened technique is a segment of a phone call that plays in the audio sequence just before the final message: a man calls his mother, letting her know that he is safe and unharmed, clarifying that the (first) plane hit World Trade Center tower one and that he is in the second tower. The call is unspeakably sad. The audience knows that the man will likely die because the second plane is moments away from hitting its target. Imminence styles a certain affective gravity.[98] One cannot help but imagine the intended effect on American audiences that would experience this together in theaters in complete darkness.

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[98] One can see the popularity and effectiveness of this macabre sub-genre in documentary realism on youtube, where a number of videos reproduce audio recordings from 9/11. There are dozens of videos, many of which have over one million views.

To be fair to Bigelow and her stated intention to make a politically even-handed film, it is worth noting that the film abruptly transitions from this sequence, with a jarring smash-cut, to an extended torture sequence. For the next ten minutes, the viewer sees in (almost) real time an al-Qaeda operative savagely abused at the hands of CIA and military personnel. One might argue that the filmmakers move right away to complicate the reactionary and patriotic feeling incited in the film's preceding moments through the audio recordings. If a viewer might be inclined to endorse unreflective violence toward radical Islam after (or before) seeing this provocative opening sequence, *Zero Dark Thirty* possibly undercuts anything like righteous jingoism in its subsequent scenes. I would, to a limited degree, permit this reading while pointing out that the film cannot divest itself of the genre mechanics it proposes vis-à-vis documentary realism. The raid on the compound functions as an emotionally satisfying exercise in realization. The torture scenes that follow from the film's opening sequence evince the film's ambivalence on this question of balancing critique and entertainment. After several CIA operatives have violently interrogated their prisoner for several minutes, the lead interrogator (Jason Clarke) intones, "your jihad is over – this is what defeat *looks like*" (my emphasis). I want to identify in *Zero Dark Thirty* a desire to make real in a visually compelling, "realistic" cinematic vernacular a frustrated American revenge fantasy. We have to keep this in mind when thinking about realism as an aesthetic mode and tool of scrutiny as well as a commercial and ideological imperative.

Before analyzing the raid sequence and elucidating how the film's dramatic climax refracts a larger project in disseminating forms of historical knowing in becoming media, *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are structurally comparable in ways that indicate a

similar political epistemology and genre-based ethos. Restricted narration, immersive forms of reenactment, and a commitment to media-intensive representational style mobilize each text to different degrees. As I have argued, both *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* cultivate in their narratives an intensified representational presence by documenting significant historical events as they come to be in media. Each structurally relies on a narrative register that interfaces a sense of happened and happening, a deeply imbricated interplay that finds expression in forms of revealing *and* registering reality.

These strategies manifest in film and novels in importantly different ways. The camera's culturally privileged relationship to unmediated human vision, and the self-similarity of cinema rhetoric to the ritualized patterns of "live" television and news reporting prepares that medium to have a different association with mimesis than text-based realism does with a similar imperative in literature in the second half of the twentieth-century. Neo-liberalism and its enthusiasm for verifiable, technoscientific objectivity furthermore station the camera as a preferred instrument for documenting empirically suited realities. Critics ranging from Jean-Louis Comolli to Mark Hansen have suggested the camera's prime role in cementing "occularcentrism," a governing "ideology of the visible" (17, 2001). Representational logics appear to find in the camera an ideal tool, one that seems to always represent an objective reality. If, as we've established, realist literature works by assuming that an experiential reality can be communicated in language and represented by way of analogy in fictional texts, film would appear to be get past a requisite discourse-generated reality and, by extension, literary fiction's operation through analogic metonymy. This is not, of course, how

cinema or cinematic realism actually works at the semiotic or technological level. As

Dirk Baecker suggests,

> The communication of movies relies on second-order observation interfering with first-order observation. It is the communication of impressions of, and opinions about, realities that are, for the time being, accepted at face value. Actually it is the communication of a reality that seems to be bare of communication, being a mass-communicated picture of the world, on the one hand, and a perceived picture of the world on the other. It is a communication that lets communication recede into the background so that it functions simply as the vehicle of the registration and revelation of reality. Any doubt arising from the second-order observation meets with the self-evidence of mass-communicated perceptions which do not lend themselves to criticism. One has to reintroduce the distinction of communication into the picture in order to see it. (563)

For *Zero Dark Thirty* communicates its reality through analogy. Its attempts at

immersive realism do not actually produce an immediate experience for the viewer. As

Christian Metz famously argues in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*

(1977), no cinematic text works by inducing a hypnotic experience, completely breaking

down the barriers between viewing subject and screen. Working from his reading of

Lacan's mirror stage, Metz holds that the individual viewer posits an integrating

wholeness for the compartmentalized, segmented series of images that she sees in the

(cinema screen) mirror. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s premise is not that it can actually show the

reality of the operation that killed bin Laden. It is unlikely one would mistake Bigelow's

film for footage of the actual event. Committed supporters of Bigelow's and her brand of

realist aesthetic would also readily admit that the film only stages a compelling

simulation of the event and evokes, through this virtual re-enactment, an authentic-

feeling *sense* of that event's reality. It is more accurate to say that the film produces a

communication of that event in media-intensive realism that feels authentic because it

presents a series of culturally naturalized forms, historically specific and rhetorically evocative patterns of cinema-based seeing, that suggest how the event might have looked and felt like *if* it had been filmed like an action-documentary motion picture as it was happening. It assumes, like *Libra*, a pre-articulated reality to indicate through a specific media syntax. Thus, while the film attempts to show a world 'bare of communication,' its foray in immersive realism reverberates with calculated expressions of its mediation. A preordained "camera reality" manifests in the film's cinematography where the camera's presence is not elided or effaced (in the manner of Bazin's earlier cinematic realism) but made to be very present in the world being depicted. This is a world already *out of focus*. Bigelow's project is an extended exercise in cinematic self-reference, or hyper-mediation as a mode of realism. The reality presented to viewers is the camera communicating reality.

Media-Intensive Cinema Style

Running almost thirty six minutes long, the SEALs mission is presented almost in real-time (the helicopter flight to and from the compound is abridged through ellipsis) accompanied by a minimal extra-diegetic soundtrack. The sequence functions as the film's dramatic climax, but it also serves as its commercial and psychological "payoff," its reward for audiences eager to experience an immersive visualization of bin Laden's defeat at the hands of the US forces. The promotional materials for the *Zero Dark Thirty* and the film itself track a genre-formatted narrative drive for an immersive, cathartic rendering of the enemy's defeat. Republican Presidential-candidate Marco Rubio's recent campaign promise to film US military operations in the War on Terror for this very purpose suggests the tangible cultural and ideological purchase of documentary realist

technique.[99] The desire to submit for public view "high-profile, humiliating defeats"

clarifies the recursive interplay between aesthetic techniques, cultural forms, and political

discourse (*Guardian*, Nov 22 2015).

As with the Kennedy assassination in *Libra*, a drive for control or authority over

history's becoming history is evident in the premise for *Zero Dark Thirty*. It commodifies

the desire to see a "realized" visualization of American triumph. What Jean-Louis

Comolli has identified in cinema as the dually ideological and commercial drive for the

production of a purchasable, consumable reality comes to a very literal fruition in *Zero*

Dark Thirty. Its artfully crafted and genre-familiar experience of history is many ways the

product the film promises its paying viewers. "It is the mutual reinforcement of an

ideological demand ("to see life as it is")," Comolli argues, "and the economic demand to

make it a source of profit that cinema owes to being" (55, 1971). While it is perhaps

unfair to characterize Bigelow's deliberately ambivalent project as an exploitative and

commercially motivated revenge-fantasy, the desire to *see* an effective American military

response to 9/11 informs the film's formal composition and narrative structure. One of

the more conventionally 'cinematic' moments in the film articulates this desire for

realism, embedding the allure for realization within stated plot-level objectives. In a

melodramatic and rather theatrical example of dialogue standing in for exposition, a

senior CIA analyst (Mark Strong) berates a room full of agents and indicts the failing

effort to find and kill al-Qaeda leadership: "They murdered 3,000 of our citizens in cold

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[99] It also reminds us that in the ongoing War on Terror, terrorists tend to achieve their goals as they are abetted in garnering mass media coverage. By contradistinction, military, police, and intelligence community efforts are more or less invisible to the public at large. Rubio's pledge, taken alongside the fact of films like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *13 Hours* (2016) conveys a deep-seated political frustration as well as bespeaks a developing marketing for immersive realism as a strategy in political populism.

bold. And they have slaughtered our forward-deployed and *what the fuck have we done about it*?! *What have we done*?!"

The scene describes the film's relatively straightforward goal: to show something being done about 9/11. Because showing makes it "real," at least in terms of furnishing a politically attractive idiom in American visual culture. The covert, specialized, and distributed nature of the War on Terror has frustrated nationalist representational strategies in this key respect. Reflecting a new geopolitical climate in international neo-liberal capitalism, the War on Terror is a post-national conflict that is difficult to accommodate in the prevailing lexicon. "Victory" in this context often means that something has not happened precisely because it was prevented from happening. Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) in *The Hurt Locker* suggests this same disparity between conventional expressions of American military prowess and the reality of a new paradigm: "aren't you glad we have all these tanks, you know, in case we get in a tank battle with the Russians…" I want to suggest that an ancillary goal of *Zero Dark Thirty* consists of revisiting and tacitly verifying an anachronistic, national sense of American military superiority by validating in the language of cinematic realism the types of narrative forms enframing this exceptionalism in a dominant mass media iconography. In other words, Jeremy Renner's Hollywood-style soldier-as-action hero, the "wild man" Sergeant James, is recast in *Zero Dark Thirty* as historically true feature of geopolitical reality. Keeping this in mind clarifies the motivation to produce a commercial film in consultation with the US government. Both parties stood to benefit from the cooperative effort to produce a compelling, "historically accurate" visualization

of Bin Laden's death.[100] Few other displays of triumph are readily available, which is all the more significant when one considers the incredible surfeit of news footage and other mass media content related to different high-profile terrorist attacks in North America and Europe.

What I want to suggest here is that these cooperating imperatives inform how the raid on the bin Laden compound is filmed. Plunging the viewer into an immersive and often first-person rendering of darkness, the film's finale plays out as exercise in the *recording of* and *the making seen*. Bigelow's project imbues its representation of history with a sense of its becoming evidence. And commercial-realist environment surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty*'s production helps elucidate the curious dynamics subtended within the film's 'realistic' cinematographic style. The film's covenant with audiences presumes and reproduces the terms of the film's relationship to its own cultivation of a provisional, clandestine, and 'authentic' film-experience of real historical events as they may have been experienced by American forces.

Yet, one can argue that the realistic (re)presentation of the diegetic object is not the film's ultimate goal, a fact partially borne out in Bigelow's decision never to directly show bin Laden. Confirming the identity of the body after the raid, the camera frames Maya (Jessica Chastain) in a close-up as she looks down at the body (now off-camera) and nods silently to a senior Special Forces officer who is on the phone with the President's staff in the Situation Room in Washington DC. Similarly, during the raid, bin Laden's face is never shown and the viewer sees only fleeting, off-centered glimpses of

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[100] This is doubly true when we consider that the lack of representation regarding the assassination has led to innumerable conspiracy theories

his person. When it comes to representing bin Laden, the narration tends to imply the character rather than present him, suturing a further sense of provisionality into "bin Laden" as an elusive story object and characterized narrative directive. This suggests what has been structurally true throughout the story, bin Laden's invisibility. Focused through her trajectory, the film restricts all story information to what Maya knows. As she meticulously collects evidence and works through building her case, the audience shares in her knowledge and is given access to the pertinent information she comes by through exposition.

Figure Group 3.7: In these two successive shots, Maya is presented looking at the figure and verifying bin Laden's identity. In both shots the figure is obscured. In the second shot, bin Laden's face is in the foreground (lower-right) but the deep focus compromises the granularity of image and renders it more or less unintelligible as information, particularly of the sort Maya is able to read and relay onward to Washington DC. Bin Laden is a blur, a media-evocation

This situation is borne out in the formal strategies the film uses to depict bin Laden, who, via askew framing and careful editing, remains off-screen. The camera relinquishes in these key moments its organizing imperative to "show." Documentation takes another form. Whereas the first part of the raid simulates how the SEALs experience and see the

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compound, after bin Laden has been killed the camera foregoes depicting what the Special Forces see and instead shows them documenting what they are seeing.

This is a marked difference from the first-person shots that punctuate the raid sequence and which work to focalize the raid through the perspective of the different members of SEAL Team Six.[101] I have suggested that 'identification' operates in the scene at a structural level. This is also primed through characterizations that disclose the film's implicit axiology. Before the raid, Maya and a group of senior Pentagon and CIA officials meet the SEAL team at Area 51. In the briefing that follows, the SEALs serve as a final body to which Maya must make a case for her thesis about the compound. Even though they have no real "say" in whether the operation proceeds or not, the film makes a point of Maya interfacing with the team and convincing the SEALs of her plan and its viability. Responding to her charisma and poise - - as well as her apt mirroring of their ego-driven machismo; she says, "bin Laden is there and you're going to get him for me" - - the SEALs conditionally accept the thesis and, by extension, validate Maya in the film's narrative logic. After Maya has struggled with a series of indecisive bureaucrats and risk averse leadership, the SEALs extend to her the cachets of can-do masculine heroism. By affirming Maya and her work, work we know is historically correct, the Special Forces team ratifies a rugged individualist ethic (coded male) as privileged historical impulse. The team itself bespeaks this through its rhetorically salient construction of 'character' through typage, mise en scène, and physiognomy. Featuring the likes of Chris Pratt, Joel

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[101] As I will discuss shortly, this is an important feature of the sequence, both for its genre significance in generating suspense by remediating video-game first-person shooters (as a form of realism) and for its rhetorical effect of limiting what little visual diegetic information is known (and being brought into the light) at the same time this strategic furthermore solicits identification with the SEALs.

Edgerton, Callan Mulvey, and Taylor Kinney, the SEALs are a good-natured, handsome, and quite funny crew. They drink beer, play horse-shoes, and make a lot of jokes; Justin, DEVGRU operator (Pratt) cracks an especially funny line about listening to Tony Robbins on the helicopter flight to the compound.[102] "I have plans for after this," he says to his team, "I want to talk to you all about it." If the film, as I am arguing, undertakes a venture to 'realize' certain pre-formatted ways of visualizing the stuff of American military fantasy, we have to identify its quiet but insistent glorification of a white, blue-collar masculine ideal. A libertarian politics quietly pervades the film's narrative value system. This is just one of many less obvious ways that the film has participated in and augmented the cultural esteem accorded to the Navy SEALs in particular after bin Laden's death.

The characterization of the SEALs prepares the viewer for how identification will manifest formally in the raid sequence. Up to this point, the narrative has been focalized largely through Maya's story. 'History' as it appears is expressed through a character-driven, protagonist based diegetic purview. Only a handful of story beats do not include Maya prior to the raid sequence. Reiterating a common narratological structure from nineteenth-century realism, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s drapes its organization of reality on a "protagonist-explorer," a character and narrative device that interfaces different scales of story information. This is one of the ways that movies, generally, and Bigelow's film specifically, approximate something like literary free-indirect discourse; the subjective

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[102] Without wanting to over-read this, it is important that Chris Pratt appears in the film in the capacity he does. There is something rhetorically interesting about having the comic (albeit, physically transformed) Andy Dwyer-type winding through the dark corridors in the effort to assassinate bin Laden.

experience of reality becomes a feature of the 'objective,' third-person world.[103] For the

majority of mainstream Hollywood films, character-driven narration is not intended to

qualify the objective nature of the diegesis being presented. *Zero Dark Thirty*, however,

conveys a 'historical,' third-person reality as well as a perceptual reality, or reality's

being immediately observed. Or, rather, it moves to communicate an objective history

through its being observed and assembled in an intensified, immediate present. In terms

of narrative structure, the raid sequence is distinct from the rest of the film. But it

indicates an escalation of rather than departure from the film's established norms in

perspective. Instead of shedding its limited third-person style and throwing the viewer

into an immersive, first-person experience, as the sequence is often understood to do, it

actually does something more complicated through the escalation I am describing. The

film doubles down, as it were, on conveying an objective 'historical' reality through its

subjective narration – it embraces, in other words, an intensified coupling of first-person

and third-person perspectives as a way of getting to the other. This is one of the ways we

can understand how the film's playing with perspective influences the types of media-

intensive realist technique we see in the raid sequence via documentary realism.

The first stage of the raid cuts between different POV shots, some in natural

lighting and others focalized through night-vision goggles, taking on at different

moments the implied viewpoints of the different SEAL team members. One of the

striking things about these shots is that are frequently unmotivated in the sense of

classical Hollywood narration. The POV shots tend to convey little story information

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[103] Anticipating modernism's turn away from an interest in rendering external reality and its trying to find forms conducive to expressing perceptual reality through an interest in interiority

about either story space or the character doing the seeing. As with extensive, unaccounted

for description in Moretti's account of nineteenth-century realism, these frames operate

primarily at the level of style. Quivering with an amplified sense of presence, of what is

directly happening before the camera, the stylized, hand-held shots elide "meaning" in

favor of evoking "sensation" and "experience."

Figure 3.8: A focalized POV shot from inside the compound

The scene's POV shots are framed in the sequence within third-person middle-long shots.

But even these would-be establishing shots are dark and limited in their field of depth. As

with the more segmented first-person shots, minimal story information is indicated in

successive moments of cloistered third-person perspective, reiterating again the types of

restricted narration that have so far structured the film. In the cases where the camera is

not focalized through an obvious mediating device (like night-vision goggles), the fact of

mediation is divulged continuously through a 'stigma of provisionality,' a sense of that

what is being made visible is surrounded by a field of reference that remains just out of

view. Smash zooms and racking focus moreover suggest the provisionality of visual

information within the frame of discrete shots. Reiterating Vogl's axioms, the

filmmakers' visual strategy embraces that is view implies its technical construction. Media-intensive cinematography conveys in terms of *style* the insight of Vogl's double-becoming media: "affect is…present as a kind of invisible figuration, which doubles literal invisibility; a convex that shows through, as though reality itself blushed imperceptibly and some strange new optical illusion [permits]" a three-dimensional quality to an otherwise limited, stereoscopic view (Jameson 47, 2013).

The kind of identification the film espouses through its play in perspective complicates how one might consider subjective and objective vision via perception, a rationalization and codification of sensory experience in "the form of rhetoric under the rubric of description" (47) The camera stages what Jameson describes in *The Antinomies of Realism* as a doubling of perception. The narrator's view does not eclipse the more limited, provisional view of its "explorer-protagonist" but "release[s] its sensory material from any specific viewer or individual human subject, from any specific character to whom the function of observation has been assigned" (56). A one-to-one identification with a subjective viewpoint is less important than a multifaceted, pluralistic sense of the objective world as it bears the stigma of its provisionality. Reality here is not a stable, concrete entity to be recorded and observed from a fixed station in a positional geometry; it is a dynamic topography construed through multiple, moving vantages.

Like *Libra*, the world of *Zero Dark Thirty* is characterized by its sense of becoming. Allowing for the ways they are different, it is worth noting that the scenes of Kennedy's assassination and the bin Laden compound raid share an important formal similarity. Both reenactments craft a sense of intensity by integrating multiple detail-oriented, free-indirect viewpoints into the nature of the provisional third-person reality

being simulated. Subsequently, this similar starting point looks different in each text. The expression of becoming reality takes on an importantly media-specific character in *Zero Dark Thirty* where it concerns cinematic perspective. Unlike in fiction, where the source of 'objective' narrative information can be always be pressed and interrogated, the camera's gaze acts by default as an objective third-person narrator, one that relays without problems an illusion of a "mass communicated picture of the world." In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the first-person POV shots enable a curious doubling effect. First-person narration invites the viewer to identify with the perspective of a given character, seeing as it were what the character "sees." What the character "sees," of course, is a camera-based view rather than the character's actual sightline. Perceptual subjectivity in film here looks like restricted third-person narration, making true in the POV shot a situation where camera-perspective *constitutes* unmediated human vision and is self-similar to the biological instruments of perception. The viewer, in other words, is always already identifying with the third-person camera as a theory of subjective, human observation. The sense of bodied, perception-based 'immediacy' on display in *Zero Dark Thirty* derives from a sense of presence and place in a profilmic environment, but it is not the time or location of a human observer that matters as much as the camera apparatus and its semiotic system signaled via the occasion of the wandering "explorer protagonist."

In refusing to present anything like an illuminated third-person view of all available and relevant visual information, the restricted views in the sequence induce a claustrophobic sense of the frame's confinement and limitation. A sense of presence reverberates through the various shots precisely because they invoke a sense of what is in the present just now 'being seen' by the SEALs. It reminds us of the film's generic

filiation with films wherein the unknowability of space is integral to producing dread and focalizing a sense of presence by foregrounding the narratological importance of 'coming into information.' We see here a filmic iteration of Jameson's "heightened representational presence." It is the active presence of the narrating camera, its placedness in profilmic space, and its sense of readily recording information in the room in real time, bringing the objects of its purview into being at the same time the duration and physicality of gaze that is being communicated alongside the narrative's visual reportage of story content.[104] The viewer is keenly aware of what the camera can see and what it cannot, what it frames and what it leaves undocumented just beyond the edge of its gaze.

Once bin Laden is killed, an event that is difficult to see and which takes place out-of-frame, the camera adopts a different rhetorical strategy for presenting information as it is "seen" by characters involved in the sequence. The cinematography prefigures how Maya's confirmation of Bin Laden's identity is handled just a few scenes later; we are presented with several middle-close and close shots of the SEALs responding to the "sight" of Bin Laden's body and reacting to the gravity of his death as they come to perceive its historic significance, but the viewer no longer can access a first-person vantage. The SEALs can see clearly in the diegesis what the audience cannot. Integral to my reading is the way this tactic is presented through a visualized metaphor. Patrick (Joel Edgerton), one of two SEAL Team Six commanders leading the strike, verifies the

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[104] As I discuss in Chapter Three, such camera-based realism has become a common feature in mainstream market filmmaking, even in genres that stray from "realism." There is a curious impetus for filming 'fantastic' content in a way that suggests that the events being depicted really happened before a recording camera. For found-footage examples, see Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008), Josh Trank's *Chronicle* (2012); and more mainstream sci-fi films, J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013), Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013).

assassination by documenting it; he takes a photo of the body. This is the moment in the film where it is conveyed that the SEALs understand they have actually killed Osama bin Laden, "the third-floor guy."[105] From an over-the-shoulder shot presented in shallow focus, we can discern a blurry image of bin Laden on the diegetic camera at the same time the photo's referent, bin Laden's face and torso, remains mostly off-screen and otherwise obscured by the narrating camera's shallow focus.

Figure 3.9: Bin Laden's image on the diegetic camera

The production of the blurry image is a metonym for the film's entire project and a direct expression of its stylistic orientation toward media-intensive realist representation.

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[105] In the narrative, this is a major point of conflict preceding the strike. Prior to the operation, Maya makes a case to the CIA and Leon Panetta that Bin Laden is in fact the mysterious, unseen inhabitant of the compound she located and that the agency has since spent months trying, unsuccessfully, to verify its occupants. In the meeting, it becomes clear that many of Maya's (exclusively male) superiors believe, based on their calculations, that a high profile target of some sort is hiding in the compound; they hedge, though, and tend to express only a limited statistical likelihood that Bin Laden is there. Maya finally asserts, boldly, in isolation, that it is a "100% chance" he's there.

The filmmakers do not rely on putting before the camera the entirety what really happened, though an attention to detail and accuracy is otherwise manifest in the film's order of operations; there is no faith in effective mimesis alone to produce a sufficiently *moving* experience of the event. And thus the pro-filmic object itself is not the film's transcendent signifier, which may strike us as strange if we think about Bigelow's stated commitment to realism as well as *Zero Dark Thirty*'s posturing as an ur-realist brand of cinematic history. The sense of realism that the film promises and goes about procuring is one that feels real precisely because of the camera and the plausibility of its insurgent, seemingly inadvertent gaze that gains its own representational autonomy in affect.[106] Its intensity and presence in verisimilitude is inextricable from the sense of its world's becoming mediated. I want to suggest, in conclusion, that this autonomous and self-referencing rhetoric is not altogether different from the self-indexing truth claims common to "metafiction." *Zero Dark Thirty* does not, ultimately, concern the accurate representation of the operation that killed bin Laden. Rather, it works to retrospectively configure the event as something that could be filmed, and therefore known, as evidence for a historical event through an action melodrama spectacle framed in the language of documentary realism.

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[106] I am referring to Jameson's sense of "autonomization" in realism: "it seems to have no context, but to float above experience without causes and without the structural relationship to its cognitive entities which the named conditions have with one another. This is not to say that in reality affect has no causes whatsoever… but its essence is to remain free-floating and independent of these factors… and this is obviously a function of its temporality as an eternal present, an element which is somehow self-sufficient, feeding on itself, and perpetuating its own existence." (36, 2013)

CHAPTER THREE

CAMERA PASTRORALISM AND REALIST MYTHOGRAPHY:

THE TREE OF LIFE (2011), *NEBRASKA* (2013), *MAN OF STEEL* (2013)

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The kinds of new realism I have so far discussed are detective stories. These are

narratives that integrate a thematic quest for truth within an investigative thriller format –

their plots concern attempts to uncover and establish as fact a previously unknown

reality. *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Libra*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* all

organize their forays in realism through stories with detective-investigator protagonists.

In this chapter, I focus on another kind of new realist technique, one that retains

an interest in *detection* but mobilizes it toward a different end in social portraiture.

Tropes of discovery and revelation still obtain, but the search for truth is transmogrified

into a question of narrative focus and mimetic fidelity, where "realism" is taken to mean

finding "real" moments and rendering them with an appropriately authentic style suited to

their grounded, provisional view of everyday objects. Where *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty,*

for instance*,* are fascinated with procuring evidence, with producing hyper-real media

objects as they "become media" as emplotted information structures, another kind of

docudramatic realism looks to reveal reality *through* its unrehearsed registration, offering

a realistic depiction of reality as well as modeling its terms of seeing. This type of

narration seeks out moments or situations expressive of an ever-evasive reality, largely

because they are unscripted, impromptu, and even "unspeakable" – they resist

paraphrase, description, or ready-made signification. Detection as a narrative activity

diverges from the forensic approach to "media events" I described in the first two

chapters. The kinds of detection I discuss in this chapter instead focus on representing

conditions of meaning through their convincing discovery. Here the technics of realism

refers to a grammar of seeing whose viewpoints and objects of fascination generate

currency under the designs of cinema verité.

One of the defining features of conventional literary realism is its focus on

everyday living. The nineteenth-century social novel grounds its plausibility in a

descriptive register oriented toward familiar environments and common situations. There

is an emphasis placed on the unexceptional, the quotidian, on that which is thought to be

general, common, or "representative." An almost modernist emphasis on the particular

and immediate becomes a way of thinking about interconnections and conditions of

meaning that characterize the architecture of a greater 'reality.' As Franco Moretti has

argued, realism embraces a descriptive, non-expository narrational mode that fetishizes

details as a matter of style. In so doing, it simultaneously naturalizes and exoticizes the

domains of bourgeois life, suggesting all the world can be assessed through provisional

claims to truth. Erich Auerbach immortalized modernist realism in this vein through his

interpretation of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. For Auerbach, Woolf's locating

rich meaning within life's apparently insignificant moments and "low" details is

representative of the beauty and goodness that talented artists can detect and faithfully convey.

Auerbach's utopian estimation of realism a la Woolf in *Mimesis* perfectly predicts an artist like Terrence Malick. For a score of contemporary filmmakers, an impetus in lyric description motivates realist techniques across a range of genres. Returning to the lyrical style of neo-realist documentaries that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, the films I assess in this chapter employ a camera-intensive narrational style. In addition to offering a realistic account of their subjects, these films centrally concern communicating a realist iconography. They craft a docudramatic, retrospective pastoralism, seeking to disclose some primordial American idyll in a compelling cinematic vernacular. In so doing, they suggest the camera as a mnemo-technology, designating what Bernard Stiegler calls a "cinema-psyche." Terrence Malick, Alexander Payne, and Zack Snyder move to visualize the worlds of working and lower-middle class white America and credential its anachronistic economic fantasies under the rubric of realist description. They strive, in other words, to comingle realism with mythography. At stake is the verification of abiding national fantasies at the level of their grammatical constitution.

This chapter proposes through its organization an account of new realism in contemporary American cinema as it appears in both experimental films and mainstream fare. The formal features I identify in the films *The Tree of Life* (2011), *Nebraska* (2013), and *Man of Steel* (2013) bespeak a fascination with a documentary-style ethos as it correlates with an idealized vision of everyday American life. Form and content are importantly rendered through its expression in the other. This dialectic is in turn refracted through the camera's specific claim to a theory of sight. As in realist description, which

tries to base its "non-meaning" with techniques meant to simulate physical perception, docudramatic cinema attempts an extra-linguistic, affective semiotics. It is as if the optical materiality of everyday living requires an authenticating gaze to validate the 'reality' of the camera's purview as well as essentialize the camera-author as a direct recorder of the real. These films reproduce a traditionally realist situation, one wherein the nomination of experience to visibility transforms and reifies it – but the nomination deliberately avoids 'making meaning' or 'making sense.' (Jameson 34). This is what Mary Anne Doane has identified as the cinephile's drive "to represent the contingent within a tantalizing elusive present" (24, 2002). The camera's intimations of its own materiality - - referring both to the technical instrument as well as the crucial relationship of its images to their unfolding time - - emerge as an extra-linguistic reality principle. Though quite different in several important respects, the films I analyze offer a brief but suggestive range of movies that index the popularity of media-intensive realist cinema in different genres and across very different circumstances of production: Malick's high-profile and relatively expensive, $32 million dollar art film is, from a production standpoint, a different animal entirely than, say, the $250 million Warner Bros. tentpole feature and summer sci-fi epic that is Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel*.

Retraining literary realism's wandering, detail-oriented focus on everyday objects and quotidian scenes, the films I assess vest their mythopoetic projects with an air of grounded objectivity a la documentary realism. A romantic iconography finds a formal idiom as well as functions as a distinct, commercially viable visual brand. More than simply modeling a way of seeing or normalizing an 'authentic' perspective on reality or securing an accurate reproduction of "the visible circumstances of life," the films I

discuss offer an camera-intensive style whose ethos of immediate recording suggests the vitality of a new American pastoralism as a cultural form to be admitted under the domain of realism (2). For this reason, the chapter briefly discusses how Malick courts the 'cosmic realism' coined by Marilynne Robinson. *The Tree of Life* invites audiences to see the connection between imaginative intensity and renewed perceptual acuity as they correspond with beauty, thought of as a spiritually uplifting and educational experience. A mystical dimension organizes the realist imperative. Malick's mythopoetic film dramatizes a trial of Christian humanism as an epistemological system in the context of a middle-class American family.

Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* takes a concertedly different, artfully anti-aesthetic approach to camera-intensive representation. Like *The Tree of Life*, Payne's film is also a human-interest story and family melodrama embedded within a portrait of middle America. But Payne's camera emphasizes its documentary project – it is forthright about cataloguing a culture of economic immiseration. In this respect, Payne's bleak black-and-white cinematography calls to mind the self-consciousness of James Agee and Walker Evan's experimental foray in modernist photo-journalism *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Where *Nebraska* is frequently beautiful, albeit severe, the narration's staid disposition toward its subject refuses a picture of the American heartland to be ensconced as an affirmational vernacular form. Its narration bears the marks of this ambivalent approach to docudramatic semiotics. An examination of Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* concludes the chapter and is perhaps the most curious example of camera-intensive pastoral. Shot with a single camera in the manner of a low-budget indie film, Snyder's sci-fi blockbuster moves between Hollywood spectacle and Malick-like realism. Its

hybridized realist mythography wears openly the competing designs of its artistic inclinations and commercial strategies. Snyder's cinematography elucidates the cultural work of realism where realism designates conservative techniques in extra-linguistic forms of docudramatic reification.

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Cameras and Cosmic Realism in *The Tree of Life*

From a media-industries perspective, *The Tree of Life* is a unique film to assess owing to its protean disposition. It is hard to pin down the film's genre, just as its difficult not to read its high production values and the star wattage of its cast (Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, Jessica Chastain) against the grain of its art-cinema bearing. Produced on a $32 million dollar budget, The *Tree of Life* is all at once an experimental film, a spiritual exercise, a visual spectacle, a historical docudrama, an auteur showpiece, and family melodrama. It is at times operatic and others quiescent, if not quietest. Switching as it does between sprawling natural landscapes and serene domestic moments, the film summons to mind two very different aspects of traditional documentary filmmaking. Several stunning helicopter shots of waterfalls, forests, volcanoes, and other visually arresting scenes almost suggest in their composition the ambitious, high-definition IMAX-style cinematics popularized in professional nature documentaries. This is the height of a glossy and pyrotechnical visual grandeur, yielding over-produced and spectacular images ready for public consumption as vivid spectacle. On the other hand, Malick's oft-touted predisposition for natural lighting, tight-focus, gliding close-ups, and an askew, object-oriented attention to the materials of everyday life together suggest an immediate, unrehearsed, and possibly even amateurish technique. Through this interplay

in scales and change in narrative registers, the film interfaces macro and micro, splicing together panoramic views of the exoteric with intimate scenes of daily living.

The cooperation of cinematography with the narrative's progression necessitates thinking through the complex ways form and content communicate through each other in Malick's project. The *Tree of Life* is, in a sense, about itself and its communication of a distinct visual idiom. But rather than adopting a self-reflexive or metafictional attitude, the film's brand of realism unselfconsciously offers a camera-specific rendering of a visual Americana. Malick's signature cinematographic style, on full display in the all the film's promotional materials, serves as the project's justification as well as suffices for its imagined artistic payoff. Though the film was widely acclaimed upon its release, the few negative reviews based their critique in this light; the film sells its style as well as leans into its commodified theory of author-driven genius. Malick's brand of cinematic naturalism and his camera's striking and often minimalist exercises in mythic iconography is, as the trailers show, part and parcel of what the film simultaneously envisions and advertises as its product. The promotional theatrical poster tellingly advertises the film as a collection of images, an archival panoply of strikingly beautiful pictures (below)
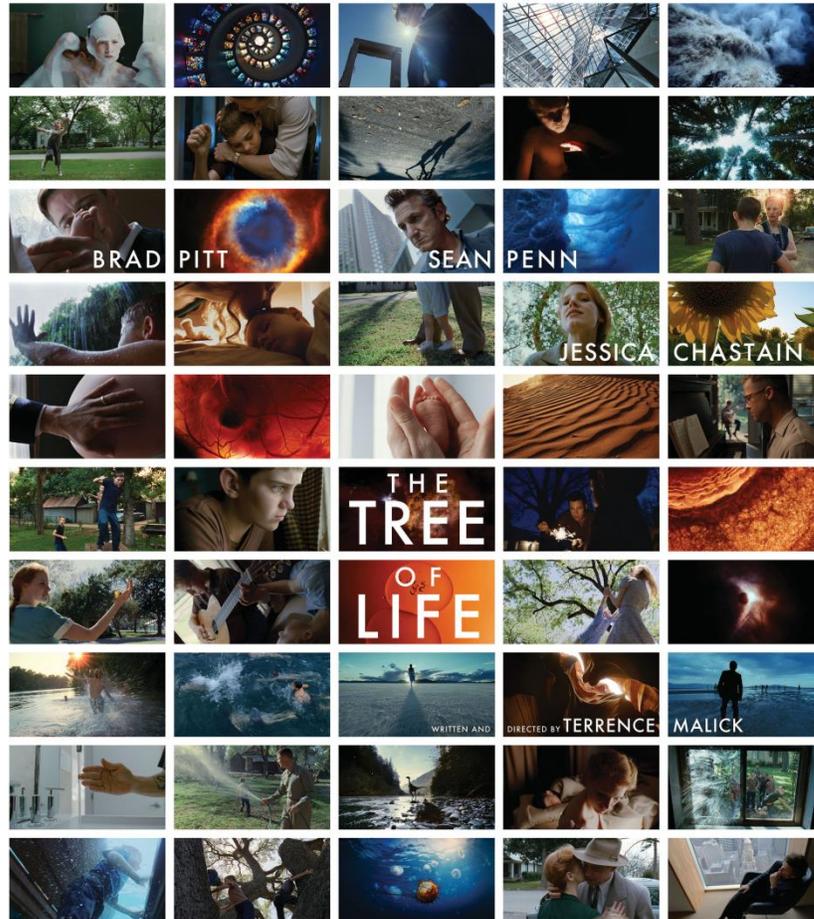
Figure 4.1: A promotional poster for *The Tree of Life*

If the film does in fact celebrate and sell "Malick" as a style or cinematic idiom, it is worth considering what exactly that means. How exactly has the director cultivated the terms of this industry cachet? What is on offer in a Malick film and what does a signature approach to realism connote in the context of something like *The Tree of Life*?

Malick's cinematographic style might at first glance appear to emphasize the profilmic, nature and the natural world as it is prior to its documentation and entanglement with human concepts. One discerns in his work a recapitulation of cinema verité, where the "filmmaker attempts to eliminate as much as possible the barrier

between subject and audience" (Mamber 4, 1974). There is an air of verisimilitude to all the director's projects. Even the surreal touch of *Badlands* (1973) and dark presentiments of *The New World* (2005) are grounded in a language of cinematographic fidelity. Malick's characteristic preference for natural-lighting, location shooting, improvisation, long-takes, and propensity for Steadicam filming all suggest a fluid, naturalistic cinematography designed for "capturing life." Mark Yoshikawa, the editor of *The Tree of Life*, reveals Malick wanted unencumbered cinematographic freedom to explore and capture the characters moving in real, well-dressed settings: "they shot it as non-fiction, as a documentary which then had to be turned back into fiction in editing… they wanted to catch things by chance" (358, 2015). Longtime Malick-collaborator and producer on *Tree of Life* Sarah Green similarly touts the marriage of a minimalist, low-tech aesthetic approach with an agile and responsive production model in terms of artistic freedom: "Terry [Malick] and director of photography [Emmanuel] Lubezki believe in the power of and beauty of natural light, so we are not tied down to sets, lights, cables, and generators, and that allows us to move very quickly and capture many variations of an idea on film" (298, 2013). Cinema verité, after all, imagines that the barriers to be removed between subject and audience "are technical (large crews, studio sets, tripod-mounted equipment, special lights, costumes and makeup)" as well as procedural (scripting, acting, directing) and structural (editing devices, genre conventions, etc.,) (Mamber 5).

Embedded in this kind of discourse is an imagined extrication from "machines" where machines of course refer to traditional filmmaking equipment as well as the abstract, industrial "machine" of Hollywood with its streamlined, studio-based

productions and codified narrative conventions. Reproducing a pattern often reproduced in Malick scholarship, this type of language envisions the director as a lyrical and even "poetic" auteur in the style of high romanticism. The film itself promotes reading its author in this fashion. Jack O'Brien's (Sean Penn) chic but sterile home and anonymous, Houston-based corporate workplace bracket his emotionally and imaginatively enervated adult life from the vivid, teeming world of his childhood. The quasi-angelic Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain), the story's moral center and spokesperson for an ethics of "grace," further underscores how the film contrasts urban and rural spaces, contemporary modernity and an idealized not-so-distant past. As Mrs. O'Brien - - her lack of a proper name is several respects revealing of the film's ideology and gender politics - - begins in voiceover to articulate the merits of grace and a life lived through love (in opposition to self-serving "nature," embodied by the insecure and tyrannical Mr. O'Brien, played by Brad Pitt) the film intercuts her monologue with images from her modest, bucolic childhood - we see in the sequence an energetic, gentle, and inquisitive young red-headed girl who smiles often, moves joyfully through verdant landscapes, and plays, delighted, with lambs and other farm animals. Significant is that these images are historically situated in the diegetic past at the same time they connote an ambiguous American "timelessness" through its primordial image system.

Figure Group 4.2: A number of shots during Mrs. O'Brien's voiceover depict her as a child interacting with animals. In addition to authenticating her gentle naturalism, these images suggest the film's cinematographic orientation toward the natural world throughout – this is made clear in several over-the-shoulder shots (lower left above) wherein the camera does not assume a point-of-view position (POV) but a third-person POV. There is something akin to literary free-indirect discourse occurring here. Mrs. O'Brien's voiceover itself has an unclear status in the diegesis; the source is unclear, as it is not apparent that she has actually "said" any of these things at any time, especially since her dialogue through the film is simpler, more 'realistic' and less speculative and insistently spiritual than her opening voiceover. Mrs. O'Brien functions largely as a narrative trope and bridge for something like the film's cosmic consciousness.

Transitioning away from her childhood, lingering on an image of the young girl embracing her kind-looking farmer father, Mrs. O'Brien's voiceover guides us to 1950s Texas. In contrast to the "way of grace," the narrator posits "the way of nature" as the camera pans to Mr. O'Brien as he lords over his young family at the dinner table. The narrator offers, "the way of nature finds ways to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it." The statement perfectly encapsulates the film's aesthetic and describes its project in cosmic realism. Writing for the *New Republic*, Francesca Mari helpfully restates what Marilynne Robinson first described as "cosmic realism" as it pertains to literary fiction - it encompasses a range of description-driven novels steeped in transience and obsessed with iterations of ephemerality. Their substance is more thought than action, and the thought is almost as much perception as it is reflection." As Robinson herself has argued in a number of different venues, cosmic realism is less about the exoteric and verifiable and more about vivid imagination and perception as a creative experience, an intensified presence in the world. Linking her spiritualism with her humanism, art described in this fashion is thought to enliven and amplify the receptive capacities of the human sensorium. Robinson's sense of the artist is not altogether new in the American context – Emerson of course described "the poet" as one who sees all things "in their right relation," a crystalline but not assumed ratio between the things of the world. Seeing in this tradition is always understood as a creative act, a beautiful and imaginative admixture of constructivism and alterity. Robinson has recently defined reality in similarly processual and humanistic vein, attesting *in The Giveness of Things* (2015) that the "given" in the world is something "that presents itself, reveals itself,

always partially and circumstantially, accessible to only tentative apprehension, which means that it is always newly meaningful" (215).

For all this Mrs. O'Brien is the representative and guiding figure in *The Tree of Life*. Importantly, we know from her monologue that Mrs. O'Brien was raised Catholic, as she tells us she has been instructed by nuns the difference between grace and nature. Where the film retells the Book of Job by locating it in postwar middle-America, Mrs. O'Brien's perspective organizes the camera's viewpoint, fusing a stylistic impulse in lyric documentary with spiritual dimensions in the manner of cosmic realism. Through Mrs. O'Brien the film expresses its moral argument and visual orientation as well as espouses a fantasy of white femininity. It is Mrs. O'Brien agrarian, working-class bearing that braces her role in the film's calculus as a type of moral repository; educated, imperious, and competitive, Mr. O'Brien's model of patriarchy bears all the trappings of hegemonic, white middle-class values. The camera plays an important role in 'realizing' the authenticity of Mrs. O'Brien's worldview. This is one of the reasons one has to address the economic romance *The Tree of Life* communicates through its media-intensive brand of 'realist' pastoral. The film offers in its formal constitution more than just a nostalgic, racially-coded national idyll set against a carefully rendered backdrop of mid-century American life.

Much was made in the press about the way *The Tree of Life* was produced and filmed. The film existed in the director's head for years prior to its production. While a number of studios expressed interest and a version of the film was almost set for pre-production in 2005, it wouldn't be until 2008, with a new production team and new cast, that the film would begin development. Malick struggled to earn the financial backing of

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studios largely because the project was deemed unfilmable as well as unlikely to command a profit. After a prolonged pre-development period lasting several years, Malick pitched the idea to Brad Pitt who, with Dede Gardner, mobilized their company, Plan B Productions, to have the film made. One of the reasons the film had been passed over by other studios, including the fact that Brad Pitt was not at that time attached the project, is because Malick had outlined an ambitious cinematography, including on-site shooting at number of exotic locales, to coincide with the film's loose narrative structure and minimal exposition or even traditional dialogue. Frequent Malick contributors and friends of the director alike intimated to the press that Malick was up to something "radical" (Lim, Fisk 2008). The consensus seems to have been that Malick was pushing the envelope with this signature cinematographic style and method. This impacted every stage of development and production; the film was always going to be an exercise in intensified vision *as* a spiritual experience.

Instead of creating and shooting 'scenes,' Yoshikawa contends, Malick organized the principal photography of *The Tree of Life* so as to "find scenes during shooting." In the manner of a small documentary crew, Malick encouraged his cinematographers to "follow the action" (359). The film's meandering narrator-camera accordingly bears an impression of unrehearsed discovery. Malick's shooting strategy reflects this as well; Yoshikawa stated in a separate interview that Malick encouraged his crew to avoid typical "coverage" shooting and that he furthermore dissuaded his editor from relying on shot-reverse-shot and match cuts (Desowitz 2011). Similarly, both Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain have said in interviews and express in the DVD commentaries that many of their scenes were largely improvised, including one rather emotional scene concerning

domestic abuse which comes through quite powerfully in the context of the story. While

the production no doubt emphasized improvisation, the emphasis on a free and

unrehearsed production is itself worth noting as it inflects the project. For instance,

Yoshikawa's account presents describes storytelling that, in its openness to chance

dynamism, is at odds with the storyboarded, tightly scheduled, and highly controlled

productions associated with studio-based Hollywood filmmaking. A number of

narratological forms coincide with the procedures and physical 'machinery' of studio

film production. In Yoshikawa's estimation, continuity editing and the Hollywood system

are conjoined and opposed in both aesthetic and economic terms to Malick's project. This

is all the more interesting when one considers that the film's cinematographer, the

acclaimed Emmanuel Lubzeki, has become famous in the last few years for bringing his

immersive, minimalist realism to a number of high profile studio films and big budget

visual spectacles such as *Children of Men* (2006), *Gravity* (2013), *Birdman* (2014) and

the *Revenant* (2015). Each of these films, of course, deploys in its narrative system a

"grounded" and even minimalist single-camera narrator to suggest a similar immediacy

and directness as is on offer in *The Tree of Life*.

As I have suggested, Malick's film moves in its visual register between intimate

proximity detail and a cosmic scale suggesting deep geological time as well as providing

a brief biological history of life on earth. Put simply, *The Tree of Life* is about the death

of the adolescent R.L., Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's youngest son, and the lingering pain the

death has caused for the family in the years since and is causing on one particular day, the

anniversary of R.L.'s death, for the now Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn) sometime in the early

2000s. The diegesis largely correlates with Jack's vivid if loosely associated memories.

Progressing through his childhood in an uneven but generally chronological order, the narrative proper begins after Mrs. O'Brien's epigraph has moved into a spectacular visualization of the formation of the world and coming and evolution of life on the planet. This is the preamble framing Jack's retrospective take on his childhood.

Throughout the film, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien operate as the poles of the children's inchoate worldviews: the father being the failed but aspiring capitalist figure and despotic patriarch. He is strict and authoritarian with his children and is inclined to bully others and criticize people and their fortunes, all the while strictly adhering to self-affirming platitudes about self-reliance and the value of hard work. Mrs. O'Brien cuts another figure entirely, the notion of the "figure" here being important with respect to the way each parent features to Jack in the present as types. In many scenes we see Mrs. O'Brien reading to and gaily playing with the children and teaching them words – she gives them language, reads with them, and encourages imagination and play. Even as the children grow older, the boys play with the youthful, lithe Mrs. O'Brien, who seems more like an elfin nurse (syncretism implied) and force for good rather than a disciplinary parent in the children's life. Several shots of the children running with their mother seem highly idealized in this vein.

Figure Group 4.3: Mrs. O'Brien plays with the children and, later, floats above them as an angelic mother figure.

Mr. O'Brien provides another sort of education. Arrogantly strutting around the property of their middle-class suburban home, he puts the children to work at mundane tasks around the house, 'teaching' them to fight, speaking at them of "the real world." The way the world works, according to Mr. O'Brien, bad Nietzschean, is by way of neo-liberal axioms and an ideology of robust individualism: he wants to "control his own destiny." The father says at one point, "your mother is naïve; it takes fierce will to get ahead in this world." This, is in turn thrown against the film's depiction of a large world scale, which on the one hand indicates evolution and violent contingency as well as speaks to the ethereality and fallibility of mankind's schemas.

By way of contradistinction, Mrs. O'Brien takes on a seraphic quality in the story, more than likely indicating that this representation in the film is in fact a deeply focalized image conjured up by Jack as he re-experiences his childhood from the sterile, isolating

confines of his contemporary office building in corporate America. The film here seems

to rely on a series of stock images of the sacred feminine, being the angel of the home,

the enchanted fairy princess, and, finally, the torchbearer of republican motherhood, all of

which are validated in Jack's thinking by associating his mother with virtue and "grace."

It is important, then, that Jack's loss of innocence concerns an Oedipal sexual rivalry

with, first, his brothers and, later, with his father. He says, in one especially tense

moment which confounds his father, "She only loves me!" Later, the object of Jack's

developing sexual desire - - and she is, truly, an object for Jack - - is conjoined visually

with the way Mrs. O'Brien has featured in the narration's iconography. Both women are

looked at and sexualized through an anatomizing gaze. Early in the film, Jack looks on in

detached and confused yearning when his mother lifts her dress to her knees and washes

her bare feet with a garden hose. Later, as an adolescent, Jack looks on from afar at a

dark-haired young woman as she hangs her and her family's laundry outdoors. Her face

is never shown. Before she enters the home, the camera cuts to close-up of her legs as

she, like Mrs. O'Brien earlier the film, adjusts her dress to wash her bare feet under a

garden hose. Later, Jack breaks into this woman's home and steals a lacy undergarment –

it is implied that he masturbates and then throws the garment away in shame,

relinquishing his token of guilt by tossing the lingerie into a nearby river.

The Oedipal nature of this "loss of innocence" refracts the moral dyad presented

by Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien. Earlier in the film, Mr. O'Brien introduces Jack to the concept

of private property and tells him to respect the home's borders with those of their

neighbors. A little later, Mr. O'Brien brags of his patents and his entrepreneurial designs,

those which signify "ownership, ownership of ideas." Jack feels that he has lost his

innocence in the eyes of his mother, ultimate moral arbiter, although his trespass against the neighbor is unspoken and never referred to openly. Jack's crime is never discovered or known by his parents, but Mrs. O'Brien senses something is amiss and appears, at least in Jack's recollection, to offer him a cold and disproving look when he returns home from discarding the garment at the river. The loss of innocence registers as such only when Jack believes his mother knows what has occurred. It is important that this moment is couched in terms of a violation of property (a middle-class home) and the stealing of material goods (the garment), a move which furthermore highlights the degree to which the nameless and faceless woman in question has likewise been objectified in a proprietary logic of male sexual economy.

This speaks to a larger question the film broaches in terms of perspective. In the final moments of the movie, Jack seems to enter into an ethereal, extra-dimensional dreamscape, one wherein he reunites with his family as they were in their prime, in his eyes, including his deceased brother who appears as a small child, the same gentle boy we have seen the entire film. Love, or grace, in the liberal humanist sense, are the forces that enable this sort of transcendental plane - but it is unclear whether or not this place has its own reality or whether or not it is a simulated solipsism, in which case the "closure" that the film offers reads differently than closure for all concerned. I would suggest that Mrs. O'Brien's grace, and the apparent mastery she assumes over the trauma of R.L.'s death by giving her son to God, is not something like Brooks's "mastery" over a point of trauma but rather a simulation performed by Jack's psyche. In which case, Mrs. O'Brien is less a character or personality in the film rather than an instrumentalized

feminine figurehead, even if that figurehead guides the film's moral alignment and is, in the last instant, indicative of the subject position the film advocates.

In thinking about the connection of the film's thematic interests with its formal and technical design, it is worth addressing Malick's style as lyric docudrama. In many ways, *The Tree of Life* appears to reiterate an earlier moment in film history via 1970s documentary realism. Thomas Waugh asserts in describing a stylistic return in the 1970s to an earlier moment of realist enthusiasm,

> The original impetus for the cinéma vérité, as is well known, had been a technological revolution…Upon the first introduction of the handheld cameras and portable recorders in the late fifties, there was a sudden burst on both sides of the Atlantic of nonfiction films celebrating the new accessibility of truth – truth in the surfaces of audiovisual reality, in the immediacy of present time, and in the nuance of spontaneous behavior. (234, 1975)

For Waugh, the realist inclination in seventies documentary films coalesces a "caméra-stylos," akin to what I have been calling camera-intensive technique. The theory of the objective in this style openly avails of its cinematic or televisual character – the formal and technical features of filmmaking, where they are legible at the level of style, assume an ontic quality as they concern recording, becoming a sort of objective-correlative or reality-effect in and of themselves. As I discussed in chapter one, there is a corollary movement in mainstream fiction filmmaking as well. Camera-intensive cinematography is an important and perhaps even defining feature of a prominent subset of investigative and psychological thrillers like *Wait Until Dark* (1967), *Klute* (1971), The *Conversation* (1974) wherein an urgent story-based imperative to find "the truth," shape by longstanding genre conventions, is also complicated by various formal and thematic suggestions of reality's unrepresentable, contingent, and unknowable nature. And as I suggested in chapter two in my discussion of *Zero Dark Thirty*, a bevy of contemporary

docudrama, historical fiction, and found footage titles indicate a now quite normalized deep cooperation of documentary technique and intensified continuity.

The Tree of Life represents a larger development in the history of cinéma vérité and camera-intensive style as it appears in realistic, fictional films. In particular, Malick's documentary approach produces a mythic register through a methodology associated with de-mythologizing. The Tree of Life shows how the director's work subsumes, in other words, the analytic imperatives of realism within an ideological drive for the mythological. Malick's aesthetic in a fashion recapitulates that of documentary filmmaking legend Richard Leacock, whose intimate if stylistically baroque documentary films attempted in the 1970s a poetic brand of social activism, mixing in the manner of New Journalism creativity and objective reportage. As any number of critics have pointed out, Leacock and coterie "were far more involved in the mystique [of documentary filmmaking] than the social issues they dealt with" (Waugh 236, 1975). From its inception, just about all forms of cinéma vérité have, theoretically speaking anyway, inclined toward a descriptive mode of social analysis and political interrogation. Of course, as has been clear since Marxist film scholars rightly eviscerated the kinds of naïve mimesis advocated in Andre Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1960), any objective, politically-responsive analytic cinema could not be without aesthetics or free from the technical manipulations inherent to the medium. Taking cue from artifice-broadcasting artists like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Einstein as well as embracing more conventionally "naturalistic" documentary practices a la John Grierson, postwar cinéma vérité looks to "break through" the tropologies and ways of looking naturalized by prevailing ideological conditions. In essence, the goal is always to de-

mythologize, to perforate unconscious and uncritical vision with a new, more viable and more "real" viewpoint of how things actually are.

Malick's lyrical project is quite different. Taking the lead from Leacock and pushing the earlier director's documentary techniques further into the realm of aestheticism, Malick's art-cinema style of working through assemblage "extends and elaborates an event by intuitively circulating around it, accumulating a wealth of random detail into a decoratively mythologized whole" (241). The cited statement describes *Happy Mother's Day* (1963), a thematic and stylistic predecessor to Malick which could just as easily describe the narratorial ethos of *The Tree of Life*. I want to suggest that we consider the latter film as a nostalgic return to a prior mode of realist aestheticism. If, as I've implied, the universalist and elegiac nature of Leacock's films belie a reformist rather than radical perspective, I would suggest that a similar aesthetic approach in Malick, filtered through the spiritualistic demeanor and Christian worldview undergirding *The Tree of Life*, is perhaps better suited to the later director's less obviously political project in lyric realism. Random, incidental, and seemingly unrehearsed moments accrue meaning for their implied interconnectedness – commentators and critics alike celebrate Malick's ability to locate and represent the "wonder in the everyday." *The Tree of Life* film moves radically outward from its central, organizing point of trauma to suggest the infinitesimal linkages connecting all aspects of world history from the beginning of life on planet earth. The central storyline is framed as a gateway to the universal. Where invocations of deep time work in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to suggest the provisionality of human experience and the arbitrary nature of cultural constructions and social configurations across time, in the "big picture" as it were, the mystique of deep

time in *The Tree of Life* is construed through an artful gaze, "the way of grace," thought of as a means of seeing objective, world-harmonizing unities across the cosmos. Arguably, an ecologically-minded polemic can be discerned from this position. After all, the film does intercut its proximate shots with expansive, high-definition helicopter shots of magnificent landscapes, giving it at times the flavor of a world-cosmopolitan nature documentary: waterfalls, erupting volcanoes, waves crashing, towering redwood trees, dramatic cliffs and other geological formations, pace and wondrous galactic starscapes – all these sweeping, IMAX-ready images punctuate the narrative and import a pedagogical artistry according to that style of didactic documentary.
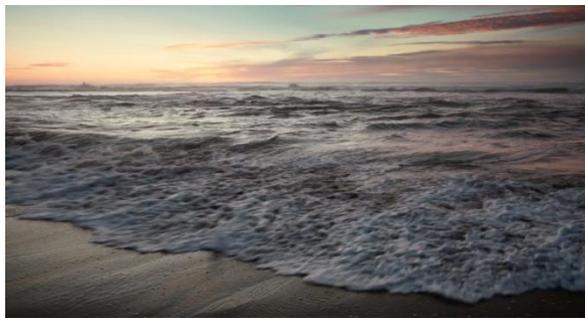
Figure Group 4.4: Each of these are the shots appear through the montage sequence

Yet it is a mediated relationship to the natural that supersedes the natural as such.

We can understand the role that conventional humanist plotlines play in the film's overall

narrative logic; *The Tree of Life* is a story about a family, but it is more accurately a

focalized epic about personal redemption, shame and forgiveness, and striving for psychological and spiritual mastery over external circumstances and hardship. Heterodiegetic though the narration is, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's worldviews shaping what is presented in the story in addition to a cosmic, truly "God's eye" third-person narrator, most of what is presented in *The Tree of Life* is material refracted and emplotted through Jack's consciousness. The often unannounced inflection of Jack's perspective shapes the narrative as he recollects his childhood and reconstructs his emotional identity in the present through vividly reimagined memories of the past. Nothing in the film suggests the third-person objectivity of its many analeptic episodes. Rather than being "unreliable" or false, the story content afforded through flashbacks accrue meaning in their unrehearsed presentism – matching the cinematography's sense of spontaneity and intensified representational presence, so the story invites an experience of depicted events rather than a retelling of already determined events and actions. It is unlikely that specific fascinations, the camera floating for what seems like an extra few instants on a fencepost at dusk, are to be solely attributed to Jack's memory alone. Again, this is not a straightforward recitation of historical facts but a camera-specific performance of nostalgic reenactment in seeing. Jack's consciousness does shape the diegesis in other more palpable ways. After all, Mrs. O'Brien is less of an actual character with a believable psychology or set of motivations then she is a trope or figuration, a paragon of loving grace and model of virtue in the landscape of her son's psychodrama. As important as the fact of her figurative identity, she also serves as a statement of the camera's guiding axiology, stating its visual conscience as well as testifying to the metaphysical stature of the reality rendered; Mrs. O'Brien is a mouthpiece for the

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camera's preference for the incidental, minute, and unrehearsed, where these are all thought to be sites of beauty as well as uncharted reserves of the real. The film's enigmatic conclusion enunciates this point. Holding her hands to the sky and shrouded in white light, she mediates the family's collective trauma (anchored in Jack's mind though the scene is) by offering to God, "I give him to you. I give you my son." Jack's cathartic moment - - visualized as a moment of transhistorical contact and interpersonal understanding with a number of people from his past and present - - is paired visually with the apotheosis of his (still) young and now decoratively virginal mother. It is worth noting that the film's visualization of transcendence is, concordant with the film as a whole, at once universal in its ambitions but personal and possibly even solipsistic in its proceedings. Neo-liberal individualism finds its spiritual, 'real' validation in the camera's proceedings. The truth Jack finds is for him. He forgives his father's weaknesses and accepts his love, offering his own in turn. He recommits to his mother's words about the saving power of love and, aligning with the film's implicit orientations, he the solitary man lost in thought and trapped in the alienating confines of his high-rise Houston office, experiences his spiritual and emotional trials alone before returning to the comforts of his affluent suburban home at the end of the day. The visual patterning of the catharsis sequence further emphasizes individual salvation rather than a more general kind of collective truth.

Figure 4.5: Jack's epiphanic moment is framed as an individual experience
with an alternate plane of being

At the level of plot, the story's humanist commitments function practically in the film's design as a formal premise for enshrining the procedures and scenes of white bourgeois realism as an inquisitive, sacred mode of knowing. The truth to be gleaned is that of God's immanence and the fact made literal in the camera that beauty is everywhere in the world. I am not in a position to evaluate this position as a matter of belief. However, from the view of a literary scholar studying the film's deployment of realist technique, the film elevates the oft-romanticized unit of postwar American cultural hegemony - - the white, middle-class nuclear family - - as an iconography and tropological medium for interfacing the personal with the world and thus the individual with the divine. As an epistemological argument, the film enacts and encourages a high-definition, camera-specific sight as a model of grace put into practice.

Foreclosed Elegy in *Nebraska*

> Now the neighbors come from near and far
> As we pull up in our brand new used car
> I wish he'd just hit the gas and let out a cry
> And tell them all they can kiss our asses goodbye
> -   Bruce Springsteen, "Used Cars," *Nebraska*

As I have been suggesting, the cinematography in *The Tree of Life* credentials under the grammar of realism an affirmational if nostalgic account of everyday American life. The camerawork in Alexander Payne's equally nostalgic *Nebraska* (2013) partakes in many ways in a similar endeavor. Payne's narration quietly imparts a mythic dimension and dramatic gravity to its subject. But where Malick's visual idiom intends to chronicle the magic of the everyday, Payne's film is less about disclosing the grandeur inherent in the familiar and more about plainly visualizing under-reported realities. Whatever fondness might be read into its depiction of agrarian small-town life, the narration ultimately inclines toward a critical rather than lyrical view. The formal terms of the film's realism needs to be assessed in this light. *Nebraska* eschews a mythopoetic visual syntax in favor of an ethos of observation. In concert with the film's wry, black humor Payne's documentary-like camera stays trained on the uncomfortable: awkward moments, absurd situations, and unflattering shots of characters. At times, the cinematography is quite beautiful, although its more aestheticized moments quickly retreat to bleak scenes and a severe gaze. Filtered through a black-and-white lens suggesting a process of documentation already, I want to suggest that *Nebraska*'s vivid imagery belies an anti-nostalgic mode of pastoral. Payne's is an affectionate but not affirmational story. And this disposition is communicated formally. *Nebraska*'s iconography is decidedly metaleptic in its approach to documentation: the ethos of

"immediate" recording, so pivotal to the task of authentic and grounded social reportage and consciousness-raising, is conjoined with a visual aesthetic that precludes present identification with the image.

One need only try a brief Google Images search of "Nebraska" to see the tradition Payne is working against – referred immediately to "Nebraska landscapes," a user finds an elegant gallery of pristine, supersaturated high-definition photographs. These are icon-ready landscape brimming with color, dramatic lines, and set in deep, well-focused space. Also popular among the selection: low angle, wide-focal length lens shots boasting perspective-bending curving vistas; almost suggestive of motion, these images strike the eye as a panorama in-miniature, indicating the ways the "cinematic" tracking or helicopter shots have influenced photography design. One could easily imagine seeing these types of images in a positive political ad or educational IMAX film.
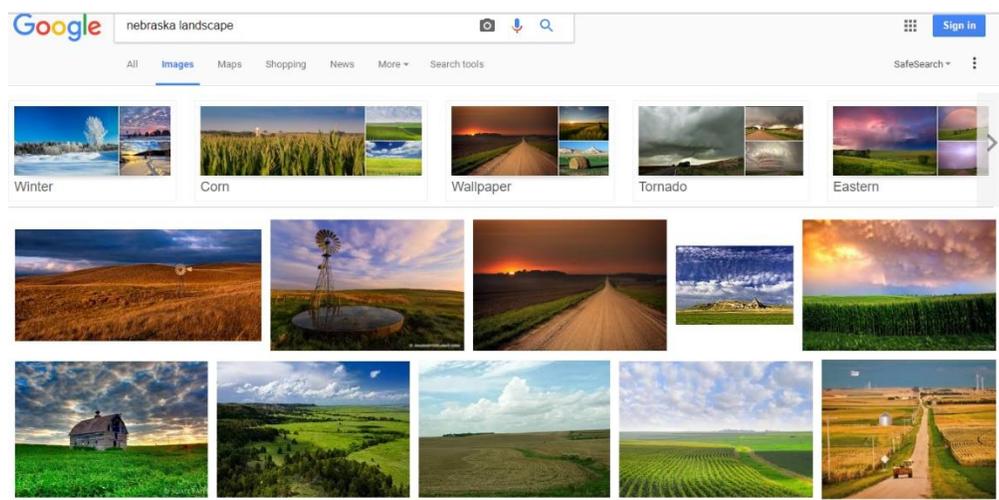
Figure 4.6: A screenshot, taken August 25th 2016, of a Google image search for "Nebraska landscape"

There is another linkage to be made. Without wanting to be needlessly strident or otherwise over-read what is too tidy a connection, it is worth noting the Malick-like

nature of all of these images a la *The Tree of Life*. Several of the pictures might as well be screen-shots of Malick's film. All of these images, individually and taken together, of course have a politics and perform a certain kind of intellectual and cultural work. They evince a discursive preference for a digitally modified high-definition naturalism as a romantic brand of realism. It is significant that the search for "landscapes" tends to return high-resolution, screensaver-friendly photographs rather than yields a selection of, say, paintings or scanned analog photos. Where high-definition is often falsely associated with increased verisimilitude, as Jonathan Sterne has pointed out, the pastoralism on display in the images tacitly links an evaluative claim in realism with the natural order implied through a highly cosmeticized, photo-ready American idyll. Payne moves away from this practice and specifically means to avoid its most commercial aspects. *Nebraska* does not offer realistic images, or even "Realism" proper, as an affirmational commodity, what Jean-Louis Comolli called the essence of ideology; the camerawork bespeaks a strategic imperative to let viewers see a realistic documentation rather than straightforwardly consume affirmative mythopoetic visions of the American heartland.

Trusting the camera to capture its subject with sufficient fidelity necessitates relying on the technology as a transparent medium, an assumption that would appear, on some level, to link Malick's and Payne's strategies in realism. But something is quite different in *Nebraska* in the relationship Payne and cinematographer Phdeon Papamichael cultivate between viewer and view. Suggesting the definitional duality of "transparency," the film's camerawork invites the viewer to see the world "as it is" as well as *see through the process of documentation* in both senses of the phrase. *Nebraska* rejects privileging a camera-specific onto-optics and goes in for a more provisional,

bracketed realism-in-practice. The film's bleak, black-and-white world admits the present truth of things all the while announcing itself as anachronistic chronicle of foreclosed realities already past.

Alexander Payne's films are very often set in his home state of Nebraska. *Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Election* (1999), *About Schmidt* (2002) all take place in the cornhusker state. However, the Nebraska of *Nebraska* looks and feels different than its representations in the director's previous films, the closest example probably being *About Schmidt* with its near agoraphobic emphasis on personal isolation. Payne's 2013 project offers yet a far more severe and decidedly bleak representation. Nebraska appears to feature in the earlier films as a conveniently representative metonym of middle-America, "the heartland," its many lamentable qualities or unexciting features intertwined with its redeeming characteristics, its plain-spoken democratic character and rustic bonhomie. At the same time its expansive and unforgiving landscape offers dramatic, camera-ready environments appropriate for anchoring storylines of despair, boredom, and stagnation. Thus the state as a setting and cinematic trope has been well suited to Payne's projects as a backdrop for character-centered human-interest storylines dealing with monotony, alienation, and loneliness.

As a concept as well as a state, "Nebraska" is of course a meaningfully contested signifier in the broader cultural imaginary. It summons to mind both the Midwestern and the Great Plains regions, conjuring at once images of agrarian landscapes and post-industrial rustbelt territory, cornfields and prairie tundra. Moreover, the state is representative of Sarah Palin's dubious "real America" as well as implying, in some circles anyway, social inertia and cultural lag. Geophysically situated almost perfectly in

the direct center of the continental United States, Nebraska is both representative and

exceptional, connoting as it does the mundane and serially uninteresting at the same time

it is thought to shelter a vital, primordial American scene. The Prairies and badland

regions of the interior have, after all, featured prominently in the nation's whitewashed

mythology of Westward expansion, buffalo-covered grasslands, ox-driven wagons, and

frontier towns triumphing in the popular iconography over scenes of protracted racialized

violence and a systemic genocide. More so than other states typifying the contemporary

"Midwest," Nebraska's western orientation in North America's vast interior plain, its

under-population and lack of city-based suburban developments, all mark the state as an

exoticized (and stigmatized) intra-continental hinterland.[107] The state's massive corn,

beef, and pork export operations might after all resemble mercantilism. Nebraska's well-

touted and often derided dependence on agro-business dealings and annually besieged

corn subsidies speaks to the precarious ways the state's economy is envisioned. On the

one hand, Nebraska produces essential, necessary materials to supply and feed the nation.

Quixotic images of yeoman homestead farmers, cornfields, steel mills and railroads

abound.[108] On the other hand, Nebraska is a state whose anachronistic economic bearing

evinces its own obsolescence; it is an economy and culture of work propped-up and

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[107] At least to people not from that subject position – one of the criticisms often leveled at Payne, somewhat unfairly, is that the now successful, LA-based Nebraska native smugly makes fun of and is condescending toward the rural Midwest.

[108] An almost soviet-style brand of American social realism looks to the Midwest in this vein for its mode of glorifying pastoral. Wrapping up its romantic treatment of agrarian working poor with a tacit statement of hardy American exceptionalism, Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* is just one of a number of contemporary examples of an effort in quasi-soviet, neo-realist hipster mythologizing of the white working class.

artificially insulated as it were from "the market," a turn which is thought to have resulted in myriad forms of cultural as well as economic stagnation.

I want to suggest that the western corridor the Midwest in a certain way lends itself to national reflection of a particular type. Perhaps nowhere else in the country has such a centralized if romantic view of white, blue-collar labor collided so starkly with the realities of late capitalism. Of course, many regions and populations across the country have suffered from a slow but steady infrastructural shift away from a manufacturing economy. Migrant laborers, minority workforces, and women of every ethnicity and class background have before and since globalization been economically victimized.

Through this analysis I in no way mean to imply an essentialist account of white economic deprivation as History. Rather, it is the persistence of and investment in this historiographical 'truism' that is worth considering.[109] This historiography and its cultural expressions have persevered and changed in a number of curious ways over the last several decades. For both the vaguely leftist, masculinist, do-it-yourself strains of white middle-class hipsterism (aka, working class costuming) as well as different varieties of reactionary white nationalism share in common a homologous historical memory drawing on similar mythopoetic devices and selective nostalgia. One can understand the stakes for thinking through the forms of a new kind of social realism. Payne's film poignantly reflects upon the social effects of standing economic conditions at the same time it, at both the level of form and content, resists a lyricizing and nostalgic presentation of the small, hardworking Midwestern American town. It also refrains from offering a

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[109] Susan Faludi's excellent social history, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), provides a thorough and insightful treatment of this subject

glorifying narrative of decline as a matter of style. It stages a realistic version of a culture

beset by economic destitution but refrains from preparing images of hardship as an

accessory to commodification. In so doing, it de-ontologizes inimical *forms* of pastoral

while nonetheless presenting in stark visual terms the reality of widespread economic

effects.

Nebraska marks a clear departure for Payne from his previous work for its tenor

and subject matter. Stylistically distinct for its stark minimalism, anamorphic shooting

and high-contrast black and white cinematography, *Nebraska* is also Payne's first film

exclusively about working-class people. Where *About Schmidt*, *Sideways* (2004) and *The

Descendants* (2011) gravitate toward human-interest plots generated from angst-ridden

(and very white) middle-class scenarios, *Nebraska* deals with the ramifications of

longstanding economic immiseration. As is often the case with realist filmmaking,

representing said economic conditions and visualizing their impact on people and places

over periods of time is what the film is largely about. *Nebraska* wears plainly this

conceit. Though many of Payne's films are at the onset well-positioned for awards season

acclaim, offering character-driven melodramas "about real life," *Nebraska* partakes in a

similar genre self-styling at the same time it is straightforward about its embedded

sociological directives. Parallel to and thematically resonant with Bruce Springsteen's

1982 *Nebraska* album, famous in part for its cover's stark black-and-white photography,

Payne's film journeys into a rustic, downtrodden heartland to report back to a wider

audience the conditions of white working people to his (by now) quite established and

very likely well-heeled audience. As was true for Springsteen's *Nebraska*, the scene in

question is understood to be somehow beyond the view of everyday view or

consciousness at the same time it is understood to perfectly index a primal and even representative American setting. Premised in both Payne's and Springsteen's project is an attempt to visualize in a new and compelling way the nature of the socioeconomic reality that is immanent but somehow hard to see. One can identify how consciousness-raising and even cognitive mapping feature as a justification for the projects these artists undertake. But Payne moves to the documentary rather than working in mythopoetic social lyric. His is a project that relies on mimesis, however bracketed. *Nebraska* is all at once an intimate family melodrama and a bleak social portrait of a stagnated white labor class. As many different characters offer to one another at a number of different points in the film, this is a landscape where "no one has much to do." The film's premise is motivated in part by this sentiment: Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) and his son David (Will Forte) undertake their circuitous journey in no small part, to "have something to do."

The film centers on the elderly Woody Grant's nonsensical quest to claim an obviously spurious million-dollar cash prize notice from a Lincoln-based magazine distributor. In spite of his family's repeated attempts to convince Woody that his award letter is a scam, he nonetheless attempts on several occasions to walk all the way from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska. Having twice rescued his father along highway shoulder from these ill-conceived journeys, the kindly and sensitive David, himself beset by ennui and emergent troubles in his personal life, agrees to drive Woody to Nebraska on the condition that they stop in Woody's hometown, Hawthorne, Nebraska to meet with family and old friends. David's cooperation is spurred in large part by the knowledge that, on account of Woody's continuing lifelong alcoholism and increasingly erratic behavior, his mother (June Squibb) and older brother (Bob Odenkirk) are

considering putting Woody in a retirement home. Sensing an opportunity to spend time with his aging father, David wants "one last" substantive chance to connect with Woody. David's motivations are paralleled with Woody's rationale for striking out to collect his million dollars; we come to find that he is driven by an acute patrilineal fantasy to procure and leave "something, anything" for his children. And also get a new truck. Indicative of the atmospheric resentment and torpor characterizing the film, David rightly guesses that the journey will be salubrious to his father (as well as himself) : "he just needs something to do, something to live for…."

While the story progresses evenly along its father-son roadtrip structure, the plot is embedded within a project to depict and metaphorize the everyday predations of late capitalism as they affect economically vulnerable populations. Reflecting the terseness of the characters, the narration never falls into polemic or states openly its political commitments. An anger courses through this depicted world that can be glimpsed and occasionally detected. But it rarely surfaces as such. Returning to a well-established theme in contemporary leftist literature, which is always more nationalist than one might realize, *Nebraska* is cynical about the American Dream and goes so far as to suggest its toxicity. David is quick to point out (correctly) that his father's million-dollar prize winning is a scam, but his father cannot and will not believe he has been defrauded. Referring to the claims printed on his now quite wrinkled letter, held up as if the document itself was precious, "they cannot say it if it's not true." One of the more poignant moments in the film follows this line of reasoning. Having finally reached the Lincoln-based company that sent the scam letter, Woody is rejected politely by a genial but indifferent customer service representative in a small office in an out-of-the-way

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business plaza. Dejected, Woody withdraws into himself and David speaks briefly to the young woman. "Does this happen often?" he asks. She nods, admitting that it is mostly older persons who come in occasionally to claim the "winnings" in person. "What's wrong with him," she inquires quietly to David. David sighs, "he just believes stuff people tell him…" Not without empathy, the representative responds after a moment, "that's too bad." More than critiquing the status of language in postindustrial capitalism, the scene confronts the degradation of specific kinds of truth-claims. Woody's faith in the letter is framed as a kind of mental disorder and associated, as it often in the film, with idiocy, disease, or even madness. David's assessment also conveys a core set of beliefs about the magazine company's practices: he "just" believes stuff people tell him. At this point in the film, we have learned that, despite his outward gruffness, Woody has been taken advantage of most of his life by people who would abuse his compliant kindness, including his 'friends' and extended family. In a moment of justified consternation, Kate tells off a group of venal relatives in Hawthorne as they encircle her sons and look for reparations to be paid: she sets the record straight about who actually owes who money and admonishes her kin, "he couldn't say no to anybody and it ruined him…"[110] Sensing how Woody's hardships, however often they were and continue to be self-inflicted, stem in part from his charity and wanting to do well by others, David's response to the customer service representative conveys an appropriate if understated bitterness. Like everyone else, he thinks his father is either a fool or a desperate man for falling for the

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[110] It is important that Kate makes clear she has kept records and states that, technically speaking, if anything, the Grants are owed money by their relatives because the unpaid labor Woody provided for friends and family who needed on-the-fly vehicle maintenance and repair. History and self-historicizing play a major role in the film, as does the contentious nature of truth as it is construed by various parties. Evincing her faith in a print epistemology and the official narrative it connotes, Kate's statements function as an 'official' history in the story's narrative logic.

letter's scam; but David also recognizes the ethical position inherent to his father's ingenuous literalism. He is moreover critical of a discourse that can intentionally make deceptive if not altogether mendacious statements to prey on vulnerable people and not be held accountable for it; he is bothered by the fact that his father "should have known better" precisely because a prevailing advertising calculus and sale-pitch mentality devalues the integrity of communicative expression as well as highlights unequal access to legal recourse. The representative's rejoinder is telling on this score: she perceives the injustice of the scam and maybe regrets how it plays on people's hopes and vulnerabilities, but she cannot recuse herself from the operation from an ethical point-of-view. It's bad that Woody believes at the surface-level what is said and written, but it's just as bad that he doesn't know that's how the world 'really' works.

The film is interested in the ways certain epistemological commonplaces influence how people consider their own economic station. Woody insists to David that he must collect his purported winnings in-person because, "you can't trust [the government] with this sort of thing." Woody believes in the contract-based language of marketing and sales pitches but has no faith in legally established, regulated institutional bodies. Reflecting an attitude common in today's libertarianism, Woody believes devoutly in the validity of invisible, unofficial orders of operation like "the market" but is skeptical of official bodies like the mail service. In this sense Woody and his journey to Lincoln offers commentary on the self-defeating but persistent hold of a certain type of political-economic thinking. Similarly, Woody repeats several times with the pain of long suppressed taciturn longing his desire to "buy a new truck." It remains unclear if the allure derives from the purchasing, and the prosperity it signals, or the truck itself as

either a tool or ornament. In either case, Woody can no longer drive and thus his fantasy is, to be overly didactic for a moment, impractical and divorced from his everyday reality. One of the points the film wants to make, albeit gently, is that the unhindered mainlining of capitalistic ideologies has over the last several decades slowly devastated the economic prospects of working class people and the working poor, those who nonetheless remain some of its fiercest advocates. Woody's situation in the film exemplifies this point. It is not insignificant that both Woody and his outspoken wife, Kate (June Squibb), are revealed to have been longtime small-business owners whose enterprises lasted for a time before faltering, forcing them both into a retirement supported, it is implied, largely by welfare and government social security. This reality is another which Woody seems unable to process. Motivated in no small part by desperation and an increasingly acute sense of his mortality, Woody's journey also turns on a delusional premise: a financial promise offered in print is a binding legal document that refers to a valid arrangement and is a text whose contents are true. Woody's imaginary reifies a business ontology, a sense of the world contoured to the discursive topography of capital.

In light of Donald Trump's political ascendancy in the 2016 presidential campaign, it is worth mentioning the implicit linkages between different strains of nativism and certain types of stories of economic decline. As any number of scholars and cultural critics have rightly suggested, prevailing accounts of American manufacturing rely heavily on tropes of emasculation and the systemic betrayal of American ideals; politicians, corporate interests and globalization, immigrants, and a feminizing culture of political correctness have together failed white, working-class men and furthermore

undermined the working, blue-collar father as the imagined lynch-pin of social and political life. To be sure, *Nebraska* is not cut from an altogether different cloth from these types of viewpoints. It is in some respects a conservative film where its most legible political statements concern white, working-class displacement. Not unlike the attitudes recently espoused by reactionary white nationalists, the film's elegiac sensibility is predicated on an unstated sense of betrayal. *Nebraska* asks to consider and accept that communities of good, hard-working people have been left behind by a nation that claims to value exactly what these communities can embody. The film is also structurally conservative. *Nebraska*'s poignancy emanates from the warm but conflicted relationship between Woody and David. David is an eminently likeable, nearly angelic hero because his compassion and understanding allows him to simulate for Woody forms of patrilineal filiation and inter-generational continuity that no longer have emotional, psychological, or emotional purchase in the contemporary world. In other words, even where the film moves to contest traditional expressions of male authority, it nonetheless solicits a sympathetic hearing for patriarchy and invites a lamentation of its diminished place in American cultural life.

But quite unlike *The Tree of Life* or *Man of Steel*, *Nebraska* meanders the paths of yesteryear without submitting to mythopoetic tropes about the Midwest or indulging a reactionary return to the values of mid-century, postwar culture. It is a sad and frequently quite beautiful film – but it is not an especially nostalgic one. As A.O. Scott put in his review of the film, "The chilling implication of [*Nebraska*] is not that the old values of hard work, family and community have fallen away, but that they were never really there to begin with" (2013). When the entirety of the Grant nuclear family visits Woody's

childhood home, the dilapidated homestead farmhouse and adjacent barn is presented as a

historical accident rather than a monument to simpler, better time. The property is filmed

as if it were a crumbling, claustrophobic mausoleum. Passive and a little detached, the

characters are unfazed by the fallen state of the ruinous interior. In fact, the ever-acerbic

Kate mentions, only half-joking it seems, that "this is how [Woody's] mother kept it."

Woody agrees: "looks about the same." This was never a cozy prairie home. Far from

being a testament to the vitality of the past, the quietly rotting edifice is just a diminished

artifact of hard living. Wanting to ease the sadness weighing on the group and perhaps

desirous that his family have a meaningful connection to this place, David alone tries to

elicit a sentimental response from his father. "Did you ever want to farm, like your Dad?"

he asks. Woody shakes his head, looks around the property for some moments, and utters,

"all just a bunch of old wood and some weeds." The question of course mirrors the

narrative's structuring design by invoking the possibility of patrilineal succession as a

meaningful economic and emotional connection – but there is no romance accommodated

at this point by the narrative. In both a formal and thematic sense, the past in the narrative

is entirely foreclosed. The past never functions in the story as a reserve of greatness or a

tenable guide for navigating the present. However it might feature as an object of

fascination for the ever-curious and receptive David, nothing about Woody's past in

Nebraska is especially charming or enticing. The landscape and the people of the small-

town Hawthorne are equally pleasant and severe, charming and creepy. If anything,

Hawthorne is more akin to Sherwood Anderson's grotesque-filled Winesburg than

resembles a wholesome, Victor Fleming-like Kansas idyll or approaches anything like the

quasi-realist pop-pastoral of the Superman mythos.

The film's shots of rural landscapes and open fields are in several instances strikingly beautiful, but, largely because their being filmed black-and-white, they are not suggestive of realistic depiction or even remotely suggestive of unmediated documentation as such. The black-and-white coloration, signaling as it does a color filter rather than the "absence of color" as in prior historical moment, quietly but relentlessly reminds us of the camera and the fact that the film is a document – but rather than simulating documentary technique in the narration, the cinematography instead suggests its own readiness for archiving. Pastoralism itself is thus identified in *Nebraska* as an anachronistic and highly aestheticized mode of theorizing Americana. The title sequence implicates the film industry along these lines by opening with Paramount's now somewhat grainy-looking corporate graphic from the 1950s (pictured below). In addition to eschewing a clean, modern, and high-definition aesthetic as a brand, the film asks us to take seriously the linkage between documentation and the postwar social realist tropologies abounding in the twilight of the classical studio system. This is not, in the manner of contemporary hipsterism, a selective, presentist, and stylishly retro appropriation of a prior time's cultural semiotics. What we have in the case of *Nebraska* is preservation, an attitude suggesting care as well as, critically, distance from the subject being represented.

Figure 4.7: The Paramount pre-credit title card in *Nebraska*

The opening sequence that follows encapsulates the narrative's attitude toward an impoverished Midwestern labor class. Unaccompanied by music, the film opens with a static straight shot of Woody hobbling slowly down the track-side shoulder of a busy freeway toward the camera. Without fanfare the camera, remaining completely still, quietly suggests its status as an impassive, straight-on observer; the long take and its deep focus emphasizes the subject's motion in space and furthermore situates Woody in an environment, allowing the audience to see clearly into profilmic space and glean details about the setting. Moving in the opposite direction of traffic and walking parallel to a still, discontinued line of train-cars, Woody is positioned in the shot in and against an inhospitable topography. Where an oft-repeated romantic trope pits the singular man within and defiantly opposed to nature through stylish visual tropes, so celebrating heroic volition and rugged individualism, what we see here is far less ennobling. The shot conveys infrastructural alienation rather than expresses mastery or self-determination. Underscored in the sequence and thematized throughout in the film's visual system is the bankruptcy of the unthinking glorification of individualism – as in Woody's case, strong-willed independence is often indistinguishable from madness. In an almost Foucauldian

way, Woody's madness and its attendant, ever-present threat of hospitalization appears to have very little to do with physical disability or specific age-related malady. Woody's problem is essentially one of protracted discursive dislocation. He cannot productively narrate himself into space and all his route behaviors and ways of talking about things fail rather enable his efforts.

Figure 4.8: Woody (Bruce Dern) slowly ambles along a highway in the opening shot of the film

Woody's movement contrasts with the directed movements of the vehicles around him; his snow-covered, makeshift path on the shoulder between the highway and chain-link fence is not intended for pedestrian use and the space itself not at all conducive to or even designed for human travel. His alienation is meaningfully infrastructural. In short order, his alienation also becomes a legal matter. Each of Woody's first attempts at walking to Nebraska are brought to a close by policemen who assume the pedestrian patriarch is either a vagrant or a sick old man who has eluded his caretakers.

It is significant that the film considers how the shot might otherwise operate visually at the register of mythic self-determination and takes step to preclude such

signification. *Man of Steel*, for instance, turns a similar shot of a forlorn and impossibly

handsome itinerant Clark Kent (Henry Cavill) into an image of romanticized isolation

when the last son of Krypton - - who, in a fit of modest self-loathing, is disguising his

abilities - - cannot successfully hitch a ride along the side of highway running through a

treacherous, wintry mountain pass. The wandering, roadside working-class bum is reset

in Snyder's film as an idealized masculine image, a pseudo-tragic glorification of the

working-poor. Set against the Cascade range as snow gently falls around him, poverty in

the context of tortured individualism has never looked so good.[111] Not exactly trapped by

his socio-economic position on account of his incredible powers, a (literally) alienated

Clark performs a culturally familiar station in his different jobs under various names to

remain anonymous and undergo an protracted excursion in a humbling ascetic penance as

he comes to grips with his unknown alien heritage.

Figure 4.9: Clark Kent (Henry Cavill) hitchhikes in *Man of Steel*

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[111] As Thomas Waugh attests in his famous essay "Beyond Vérité…," American sources took the archetypical figure of the lone traveler and made with it an object of fetish by taking a trope of isolation and alienation and converting it to work of Romanticism. One might think of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) at the end of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). The film's famous final shot uses a doorframe to visually connote that Ethan is alone and cut-off from civilization, set off from the home as he is and placed before the open frontier. This iconography, however, does not so much suggest the isolation of Ethan's position as much as glorifies literally a-social individualism at the level of the romantic image.

In short order, we Clark employed as a commercial fisherman, a barkeep in a small-town

pub, and then working on a freight crew for an Artic-based cargo company. In each of

these instances, Clark's understated but unwavering moral compass impels him to

intervene in dangerous emergency situations as they inevitably arise, forcing him to

reveal his powers, wherein he must move on to another place to assume a new temporary

identity; though this itinerant pattern is vested with sadness in the story, Clark is actually

embodying the American ideal of self-invention over and over again from a position of

complete knowingness, power, and self-determination. He is not an economic refugee.

His feelings of confusion and personal loneliness aside, nothing about his economic or

physical well-being is at risk.[112] Unlike Woody, whose deranged and alcohol-fueled

desperation compels him to repurpose civic infrastructure and make a path where none is

intended, Clark does not need the infrastructure at all. Even though he cannot yet fly at

this point in the film - - only because he had not *imagined that he could* and therefore had

not tried - - he does not require the road (or the truck he signals in vain) to move about

the world.

As I will discuss in more detail shortly, what prevails in *Man of Steel* is a

visualization of the travails and insecurities of working-class living detached from

suffering of world historical economic realities. Clark's agrarian background and status

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[112] Clark's messianic stature is eventually relayed to him posthumously by a virtual representation of his biological father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe). Jor-El conveys that little Kal-El (ie., Clark) was sent to earth to escape a planet on the brink of ecological cataclysm as well as evade circumscription in a highly rigid, genetically engineered caste system on the plant Krypton: "every child was designed to fulfill a predetermined role…what if a child dreamed of being something other than what society intended? What if a child aspired to something greater. You were the embodiment of that belief, Kal." And so self-determination and class mobility, the American Dream, is communicated as a universal value.

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as an itinerant laborer is incidental rather than significant. It furnishes a story of individual growth, a story about securing one's identity by attaining self-knowledge, with stock imagery and thematically resonant American mise-en-scéne; the movie is not about working-class people nor does it treat economic destitution in a meaningful way. The visual trappings of Clark's initial class station are markers of phases of development. Matriculating into bourgeois society as investigative reporter Clark Kent at the *Daily Planet*, becoming Superman entails more than donning a red cape and performing incredible feats in the spirit of civic service; it requires Clark's yuppification and involves his ability to tangibly shape public discourse as an author from a well-heeled, institutional position at a major news media outlet. Even though he does hail, on earth anyway, from a Kansas-based farming household, Clark's kindhearted but rugged demeanor and gritty, working-class mien as an adult function primarily as style. Barely obscured by the urbane costuming that his Metropolis attire suggests, Clark's quiet, ur-masculine ethos, working-class background, and undisguisable physicality legitimize his status as an authentic "worker" in a bourgeois and possibly effete industry. Put another way, all of this is perfectly hipster.[113] Or, perhaps more precisely, Clark's station at the *Daily Planet* is a hipster fantasy for a post-industrial economy.

Nebraska seems on some level to be aware of this kind of tropology and visual patterning and moves to work against it. Woody stands as a case-in-point. What could have played as a charming, funny macho recalcitrance is never entertained. Played admirably well by Dern, Woody is in fact often quite funny, and he emerges a

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[113] It is worth noting that the iconography and story-patterning in *Man of Steel* reflect the influence of Christopher Nolan's Batman films (Nolan was an executive producer on *Man of Steel*).

sympathetic if somewhat inaccessible character. But the narrative does not permit typage in its principals; Woody does not come across in the manner of the humorously plain-spoken, irascibly stubborn patriarch – a Henry Stamper or Archie Bunker he is not. As we soon learn through his interactions with family, Woody's intransigence is a form of disability requiring his begrudging and (often) unacknowledged dependence on others. The film's poignant but critically minded climax reiterates Woody's dependence and foregrounds how commercially-riven fantasies of self-determination have harmed rather than fortified the plucky septuagenarian cornhusker.

The final moments of *Nebraska* indulge the type of triumphant façade the film actually rejects. After having been humiliated in front of friends and family alike when it is made evident to "the entire town" at a diner in Hawthorne that the letter is scam, Woody is eager for an opportunity to save face. When he and David finally reach Lincoln and verify with the magazine company that the letter is indeed a marketing ploy, Woody shrinks into an inarticulate despondence. And so the deceptions begin. David exchanges his Subaru at a dealership in Lincoln for a clean, new-looking used truck. Woody, pleasantly astonished, asks, "did you work something out with the prize people?" David, after catching himself, agrees that he did. David lies to his father about the legitimacy of the prize letter by agreeing that Woody had in fact won *something*; he also agrees to a flattering lie about himself, assuring Woody that his son is an assertive and shrewd personality who can "win" what is owed him. Passing through Hawthorne on the way home to Billings, David stops on the outskirts of town and asks if Woody would like to take the wheel and drive down Main Street. Quickly recovering from a temporary sense of shock, Woody, with barely suppressed delight, agrees. Once he enters town, Woody

assumes at the wheel a straight posture and demands David "get down" in the passenger seat to hide himself from view. As he drives slowly through the town center, Woody cuts quite an image. His newfound position before the onlooking town casts doubt on the basis of his humiliation from the night before. This trial and judgment is visualized on the screen. Woody's drive through downtown is a kind of parade. As with the scene in the diner, here again "everyone" in the town seems to be outside ready to re-narrativize their accounts of Woody and his fortunes; in all, Woody passes several family members, his rival, a former lover, and a number of other locals.

Woody's projected mastery is theater. Shortly after exiting the township limit, David retakes control of the car and proceeds to drive to Montana. Woody's triumph is illusory as well as solipsistic. This doesn't mean it isn't meaningful of affective in the context of the story. However, the film pressures the economy of valuation its characters subscribe to and rely upon. Woody does not succeed in procuring anything for his family and David's newly acquired truck amounts to a pyrrhic victory on the grounds of commodity fetishism – the truck can only ever be an over-determined signifier rather than a meaningful object whose possession confers any newfound reality to the owner. Similarly, Woody's performance of individual affluence and calm self-control is, well, performative. The film offers nothing, in the final analysis, to validate in material terms the journey its characters have undertaken.
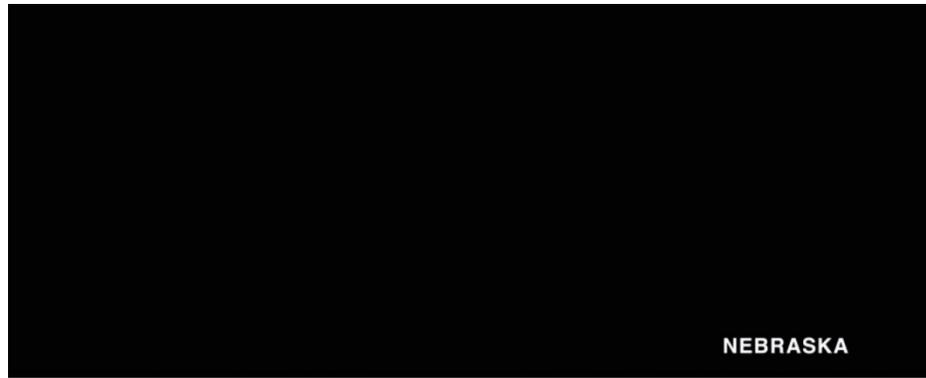
Figure 4.10: The film's understated and minimalist title card

Nebraska announces this sensibility at the onset. Set to Mark Orton's understated

folkloric score, the minimalist and undersized titlecards are preceded by bleak images of

abandoned factories, highways and empty stretches of railroad tracks, forsaken

smokestacks against a cold, gray sky. This is the world that sets Woody to walking along

freeway shoulders in the snow.

The economic station of the principal characters furthermore index a historical

trajectory the film wants to highlight in its history of immiseration. Woody's long

deceased father, a first generation immigrant from Scandinavia, owned and operated a

Nebraska homestead farm on the prairie; having grown up on that farm, Woody served in

Korea before returning to run a mechanic's shop in the small nearby town of Hawthorne;

the family having moved west for Kate to operate a hair salon (opened with money her

dying parents left her) while Woody enjoyed retirement; David works as a capable but

under-employed salesman at an anonymous, chain electronics store in a Billings strip-

mall plaza. The generational succession of the family's male heirs offers a clear and

possibly didactic economic history of labor, shifting from an agrarian to manufacturing to

services. Inherent to the progression is a story of the degradation over time of the white

working class subject position. More than his father or grandfather, the ever-earnest David is openly alienated from his occupation selling cheap, foreign-made stereos and television sets. As is made obvious in the one failed sales pitch we are shown, David is a knowledgeable friendly, and non-coercive salesman; but he sells inessential products that, especially in the worldview of the film, no one is thought to "really need." Removed from the economic situation and personal stakes attributed to a family farm or a personally-owned auto shop, David's selling electronics devices for a corporation to persons with disposable incomes marks his distinct status from his father and grandfather. As his daily work regards his identity and sense of his life, David is foreclosed in important ways from the worlds of his masculine antecedents. This arises in the film in a number of different ways. David's brutish, unemployed, and occasionally criminal cousins in Nebraska make fun of him and his brother for driving fuel-efficient, lower-middle class "Jap" vehicles, David driving a used Subaru and Ross (a local television news anchor) a Kia Redondo. On several occasions it is remarked how "pretty" David is, a point which the camera quietly reiterates; vested though he is in a heavy flannel overcoat and a stubble-covered face, David's unassuming good looks, side swept hair, and nice-guy disposition contrasts with the weathered, aged, and often puffy faces adorning Hawthorne. Kate jests that passersby often mistook the toddler David for "a girl because [he] was so pretty." Bruce Dern's famously rugged, athletic star-persona functions to offset an apparently "softer" male type for his on-screen son. David's physiognomy denotes a reactionary and masculinist socio-economic historiography of generational feminization.

If the film invokes this historical trajectory it contests and possibly even upends its attendant value statements. This is one of several important ways the films resists what might at first seem to be a nostalgic mode of storytelling. David acts as the film's moral center, and he is just one of just a few characters shown to have a stable job or have even a remote prospect of achieving middle-class security. The amiable but self-interested Ross is the film's only obviously middle-class character, a point accentuating his personal distance from the family's past in Nebraska and which informs his smoldering, low-level hostility toward relatives intending to take advantage of Woody's would-be winnings. Clearly serving as a point of audience identification, David mediates his family's working class identity and its maladjusted place in a new economic environment. David's position crystalizes his family's arrested development. Though he is kind, mature, and responsible, it is made clear that David is "going nowhere." Responding to David's plea that she not go through with moving out of their formerly shared apartment, that their relationship "not take a step backward" after living together for two years, his girlfriend can only indicate profound existential confinement, "get married….break up? I don't know." Foreshadowing Woody's anxieties about forms of familial and financial continuity, marriage in this context for this working couple cannot be associated with futurity, development, or progress (a positive chronology of sequential, causal linearity) but instead with inertia, languor, resignation.

The sense of temporality one gleans from *Nebraska* is a modulated "deep time" tied in meaningful ways to the metaleptic nature of the camera's narration. Immediate, present and also indicative of the already past, the film's photographic strategy in documentary realism works to present an aged, reeling postwar economic milieu through

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the perspective of people wanting to have a connection to the vitality and reality of that past as a mode of presence. Some of the most striking shots in the film speak to this point. Several important episodes in the plot transition to another dramatic set piece by way of a three-shot montage serving the purpose of narrative ellipsis. More than bridging scenes together by providing visual exposition, the triadic sequences cut away from people, human places, and the "story" proper to show non-human environments, landscapes that may or may not depict the world of the diegetic present. In each case, the tripartite sequence begins by showing David and Woody in a long shot moving in their car across an expansive space. The subsequent two shots present somewhat dislocated, metonymic shots of objects, animals, and wide open space below a sprawling sky.

Figure Group 4.11: Stills from *Nebraska*. These landscape shots function
as ellipsis in the film.

The composition of these shots indicates their dual-quality; documentary realism and

pastoralism arise in each as cooperating (and competing) visual modes. An intensified

representational presence, an acute sense of "immediate" time is at odds with and coeval

with timelessness. In addition to documenting the "fact" of the places represented, several

of the shots take on an impressionistic quality as self-contained aesthetic artifacts in the

manner of a still-life.

Figure Group 4.12: These landscapes similarly work in the manner of
ellipsis but also suggest their artful composition in the manner of a still-
life.

The pattern holds through the film in a rhetorically significant manner. Starting with the

characters moving in diegetic space, the narration moves to abstracted "realistic"

landscapes and then cuts to shots of town signs to re-anchor the story's wandering

purview in locatable, diegetic terms. In the interim, it is confused whether these places

are or were. Reveling in this confusion, the film's realism confronts the machinery of

documentary by taking seriously the politics of mimetic observation as a socially-minded

art form while, at the same time, it moves to foreclose its discursive purchase for seeing in the present.

Commercial Realism in *Man of Steel*

Nothing is perhaps so iconic or present in contemporary American mythology as Superman. Even at a time where new and different superhero franchises are announced with increasing regularity and have long since become a staple of studio-based blockbuster filmmaking, Superman retains a special place in the cultural imaginary at large. His iconic 'S' chevron is one of the top five most used and recognized symbols in the entire world, tellingly just behind such icons such as the Christian cross and Islamic star and crescent motif. Much in the way that people who have never seen *Star Wars* are likely to at least recognize Yoda or Chewbacca, people who have never read a Superman comic or seen any number of films, tv shows, or cartoons featuring the character still have some grasp on the basics: Lois Lane, *The Daily Planet*, Lex Luthor; an alien infant sent to earth from a dying planet, saved by kindly farmers and raised in Kansas, mild-mannered reporter by day, leaping tall buildings in a single bound by night. Truth, justice, and the American way. This is the very reason I want to assess Superman as a contemporary American myth, focusing specifically on the forms it has recently taken. The mythology supersedes any individual text featuring the character, memorable (or not) as the entry may be in the canon. For my purposes here, the character's mythic quality is significant because Superman has generated so much debate along the lines of ideological criticism.

In his inception, Superman was a socialist working-class hero who fought for workers and workers' rights against corporate greed, believed in international peace, and

seemed in many respects to visually and thematically channel a kind of progressive, post-Teddy Roosevelt figure whose efforts in trust-breaking and aristocrat bullying was commensurate with his numerable athletic feats of machismo. WWII and the Cold War changed the figure into a less reckless and more patriotic kind of father figure, and his powers during this time increased in a manner conspicuously matching the arms race. By the 1960s, Superman had long since left his roots as a grounded, Herculean-style strongman and become an anthropomorphic super airplane. Ever since the fifties, various elements of the character have oscillated between these poles under the guidance of very different creative minds. Clark Kent is frequently a "human-interest" investigative reporter who, against the direction of his fair but business-minded editor, Perry White, highlights in his stories the realities of poverty, racism, and systemic inequality. Superman's arch-enemy, after all, is the corporate scion and billionaire celebrity scientist Lex Luthor. But Clark is also an upwardly mobile yuppie living a minimalist but urbane life in Metropolis, and his dual position as newsmaker *and* reporter has him shape discursive norms in tangible ways. This is an important aspect of the fantasy Superman presents – his dedication to truth, where truth is understood both as a transhistorical abstraction as well as an informational lynchpin of democratic life. An important feature of the character is the way Superman, as Clark Kent, shapes "truth" and contributes palpably to the reality governing consensus politics. He is a middle-class reformist, not a radical. The hero side of things is also complicated. "Superman" the persona is at once an entirely compassionate, caring, and gentle figure. He is also a straightforward fantasy of the unlimited power and moral righteousness of American exceptionalism – he's a muscular American Jesus who punches things when necessary. Which is surprisingly

often, as it turns out. When all the paradoxes are considered, the vague consensus is that the character's politics are center-left while the masculinist wish-fulfillment template he embodies is conservative and possibly even fascist.

So why talk about the obviously fictional Superman in an account of contemporary realism? I am interested in media-intensive forms of myth, particularly where these forms correlate and function across genres and delivery platforms. One of the most striking aspects of Zack Snyder's 2013 summer blockbuster and reboot of the Superman franchise, *Man of Steel*, is its curiously gritty, hand-held cinematic style. Both Snyder's enthusiastic supporters and reliable bevy of detractors will contend that the director places a premium on the visual. By the time he was selected to direct *Man of Steel*, Snyder had a track record of producing financially successful and visually arresting comics-based genre films for Warner Bros. in the provocative and stylish *300* (2006) and then intricate *Watchmen* (2009). Many in the industry assumed Snyder would bring his trademark aesthetic toolkit to a franchise in Superman apparently well suited to his signature aesthetic, one characterized by elaborate stylized sequences, frequent use of speed-ramping and dynamic slow motion, neatly composed frames, lush color grading, and the innovative use computer-generated imagery.

Early in production, however, Snyder made clear that he was taking a different track. This Superman, Snyder stated, "needed to feel grounded" (*Empire* 2013). As one would expect for a summer blockbuster, *Man of Steel* steers toward sumptuous displays of visual grandeur and special-effects driven spectacle. The film does not, as its provocative first teaser-trailer implied, jettison grandiose sci-fi set pieces for a more intimate, Malik-inspired form of American epic. But the tone and visual register of *Man*

of Steel are nonetheless quite distinct from the glossy slew of recent vibrant superhero fare. Snyder's film even looks very different from *The Dark Knight* trilogy helmed by Christopher Nolan, whose somber and operatic take on Batman informed Snyder's self-serious rendering of Superman. The environment of *Man of Steel* frankly doesn't look like a cinematic superhero world. Unlike the polished "comic book" style that obtains as an end and style for Marvel's wildly successful, Disney-produced cinematic universe, *Man of Steel* seeks to emphasize the drama of its subject by faming Superman in the vein of sci-fi inflected speculative realism. The film's color scheme is muted and under-saturated; the camera's view is filtered through a grainy lens, and, unique for a project of its scale, the entirety of the film was shot with a single, hand-held camera. Hallmarks of low-budget, independent cinema style abound: smash-zooms, lens flares and a floating focus evoke a heightened, almost amateur footage sense of immediacy. The film's provocative teaser-trailer largely disguises its superhero content under the auspices of a lyrically gritty art film. The teaser's final shot discloses the film's formal commitment to realism as a conceit for the project. As Superman ascends from the earth into the heavens, the camera tracks his movement upwards across the sky. With a sudden smash zoom, the camera re-frames the flying figure and continues to follow him skyward as a sonic-boom encircles his path into the upper atmosphere. The shot is not exactly realistic, per se, but it simulates "realism" by staging the sequence as if it was really filmed by a camera-person in the sky trying to document the man of steel.

Figure 4.13: As Superman soars into the sky, the camera utilizes a smash-
zoom to suggest "capturing" the image 'live'

The film proper follows through on the aesthetic promised by the teaser. Certain

action scenes in the film are actually quite hard to follow, evidencing the filmmaker's

commitment to invoking a sense of action really happening before a lone camera. The

rhetoric of Snyder's cinematography is all the more interesting in scenes depicting the

Midwest. The camera in these moments does not attempt an 'authentic' view of quotidian

American life in the heartland as much as gesture toward a way of representing an

aestheticized working class milieu in an insurgent, non-Hollywood register. In many

cases Snyder's exercise in mythmaking tellingly reaches for a nostalgic, minoritarian

representational strategy and at-hand iconographic reserve to vest its filmic Americana

with touches of proletariat everydayness. The result often looks like the appropriation of

an imagistic, object-oriented arthouse cinema re-engineered as contemporary pop-

pastoral. Thus the production's emphasis on the emblematic 'everyday' and its corollary

commitment to real locations and on-site shooting ("Creating *Man of Steel*" 2013).

Though the film is about a super-powered alien who can fly, and whose settings includes

distant planets, space stations, and multitude other fantastic environments, the filmmakers

wanted *Man of Steel* to feel realistic and therefore employed minimalist cinematographic techniques associated with verisimilitude, mimesis, and referentiality. As Snyder intimated in a press junket prior to production, "this is the most realistic movie I have ever filmed" (Cornet 2011)

The film's purported realism manifests in interesting and controversial ways. It was no surprise that the blockbuster would have an extensive merchandising campaign and partake in a range of cross-promotional marketing endeavors. But *Man of Steel* nonetheless evinces conspicuous corporate design. A truly remarkable level of product placement features in the film. When pressed about the product placement in an interview, Deborah Snyder, Zack Snyder's wife and co-producer on *Man of Steel*, replied, "We wanted to make the film feel as real as possible" (Empire). Deborah Snyder's answer might seem disingenuous. But the appeal to realism is not altogether unwarranted. The American landscape is branded. Extensively so. Populated by strip malls, gas stations, bill boards, and chain restaurants, advertisements and logos are everywhere in contemporary America. To see a Midwestern landscape untouched by late capitalism would be, on some level, patently unrealistic. One might argue presenting an idyllic agrarian environment unchanged by capitalism, shot in a nostalgic-realist mode, would have be to participate in nonsensical propaganda. For the rural community and small, independent family businesses that typify Smallville, Clark Kent's fictional Kansas hometown, is already an anachronistic economic fantasy at odds with the realities of America in neoliberal capitalism.

Curiously enough, it seems that product placement in *Man of Steel* stymied the ideological work that immersive, 'realistic' storytelling in classical Hollywood narration is thought to perform. Bordwell and Thompson argue in their seminal book on the subject that such films disguise their constructedness by emphasizing the integrity and totality of the profilmic world. The camera records; it doesn't create. This facilitates the identification of the viewer with the screen image and the operational logic of camera's signifying system. It engenders an immersive viewing experience and solicits the internalizing of its visual-rhetorical norms, naturalizing its views and grammar of seeing. Product placement would appear to arrest this process insomuch it precludes immersive identification with 'naturalized' views. If the cultural products of late capitalism obscure the economic machinery underlying their manufacture, the reactions to product placement in *Man of Steel* indicate a situation where, paradoxically, displays of capitalism in the context of an intercorporate Hollywood blockbuster films hinder the optimal ideological function of their products by punctuating its modeled way of seeing with indications of deep economic collusion; they make legible the invisible origin of the cultural product and furthermore tincture both the world and camera-based view of the world the film offers. The film's American romance, constitutive of and commensurate with its 'gritty' rendering of a lyrical American sensibility in a camera-based vernacular, is a form of advertisement whose ethos is stymied by markers of advertising.

My aim is to examine the curious realist aesthetic of *Man of Steel* from a media industries perspective and elucidate how the film's cinematography correlates with the commercial underpinnings of the contemporary blockbuster model. While many major film franchises partake in robust cross promotion and embrace a range of commercial tie-

in opportunities across merchandising venues and delivery platforms, *Man of Steel* is unique where it demonstrates so thorough a cooperation between financing interests and the film's production and composition. The aesthetic object really cannot be parsed from its production parameters. This is not to say that the film as a cultural product is determined monolithically by economic forces and profit-maximizing tactics. As Derek Johnson argues *in Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, it is worth articulating how different producers work for and within industrial structures in and across various stages of production. Blockbuster franchise films are all at once intercorporate figurations, collaborative arrangements, and communicative art objects; and they always negotiate these dimensions. In what follows, I briefly outline the financing, development, and production of *Man of Steel* and assess the film as a confluence of directives that speaks to more than the forces and calculus of corporate synergy. By interbraiding the production of *Man of Steel* with a diverse and multifaceted marketing campaign, Warner Bros. escalated the blockbuster model by conflating the film, as a discrete narrative, with the commercial branding endeavors of the project's corporate partners in a manner that largely obviates an easy distinction between the film and its production, its form and content, its narrative with its commercial paratexts. The result is that the branding mechanisms of *Man of Steel* render visible the film's underlying capitalist program, doing so in way that complicates the armature of mainstream cinematic realism and interrogates the formal technics of "realism" as a representational logic and popular media epistemology.

As *TIME* reported in June 2013, *Man of Steel* had over 100 promotional partners whose contribution to the film neared approximately $170 million. This level of

cooperation between corporate investors and a single film was unprecedented (Tuttle 2013). These promotions publicized Man of Steel and worked to offset a considerable portion of the film's overall production cost. Before the film was ever seen by critics or audiences, Warner Bros. was in a favorable position to recover the film's budget and make a substantial profit. Built into the process of making a big-budget Superman film was a lucrative cultural-economic environment whose capacity for all sorts of diverse branding opportunities neutralized some if not all of the financial risk involved in making the film. The cross-promotion offset the film's hefty production budget as well as diversified the film's marketing campaign. A nearly ubiquitous presence in and across media platforms and venues "eventized" the film and vested Man of Steel with an air of magnitude.

The extent of cross-promotion for Man of Steel was unprecedented, but its inter-corporate cooperation was also unique where it influenced how audiences could access the film during its opening weekend. Wal-Mart was one of the film's biggest partners. In addition to standard retail cross-promotion, tickets to nationwide early screenings of Man of Steel were made available for purchase exclusively through Wal-Mart stores across the nation (Morrison 2013). Unlike strategies that more or less capitalize on compounding brand recognition, this version of cross-promotional palpably benefited both the filmmakers and the corporate partner. Interested customers had to attend a local Wal-Mart store to procure tickets to early showings. And for Warner Bros., the early ticket sales generated additional hype for the movie as well as bolstered sales numbers included in the film's "opening weekend" gross, an important index of any film's clout as an "event movie." Wal-Mart stores came to be logistically involved in the movie-going

experience as an extra-theater mediator. Superman seemed to arrive on the scene in 2013 as a hero of neoliberal commercialism as well as a paragon of American virtue.

Hollywood films and financial institutions have had a long history of collaboration. Media industry scholars have been interested in how this cooperation shapes films at the level of composition and inflects how we might think of a film's 'cultural work.' Jerome Christensen has recently questioned whether big-budget Hollywood films can, in the traditional sense, constitute "art." In *America's Corporate Art: The Studio Authorship of Hollywood Motion Pictures*, Christensen argues, "the motion picture studio is the exemplary modern corporation…The Hollywood studio is a business that does its business right there on the screen as the projector rolls" (3, 2012). In an attempt to move beyond now atrophied ideology critique, Christensen relies on a problematic delineation of "art" and "ideology" that underemphasizes how narrative forms contour and reify ideological figurations. But if Christensen's provocative claim is (perhaps intentionally) overstated, he raises compelling points about the nature of corporate authorship in the studio system. Accentuating Derek Johnson's recent work in articulating a post-auteur heuristic, Christensen's argument is well taken when we consider the ways the creative process in filmmaking is networked, compartmentalized, and diffused among separate but interrelated contingents. This framework has gained traction in recent years as outside financiers, investors, and cooperate partners now play an increasingly large role in pre-production and production as films become riskier gambles economically speaking. The trope of the singular creative artist has since been supplanted in (most) criticism by a model of artistic production emphasizing consensus and compromise, guided by profitability. Taking cue from Justin Wyatt's conception of

the 1980s "high-concept" film, Janet Wasko describes the mathematics of contemporary film production accordingly: the content of studio films are "properties," a text, an image, and a brand tailored for a targeted audience – films are conceived, designed, and developed with and for investors and studio executives to effectively appeal to specific demographics (2009). But if, as Christensen suggests, "The Hollywood studio is a business that does its business right there on the screen as the projector rolls," this process is by no means even in uniting the different levers and layers of production. *Man of Steel* is an excellent example of a film whose dissonant authorship influenced the nature of its production and contributed to its odd genre identity and curious formal character.

The controversy surrounding product placement in *Man of Steel* concerns this set of problems. The film makes clear how capitalist structures override our experience in everyday social spaces in the context of a blockbuster Hollywood film that, traditionally, will elide the structural mechanisms of its production and furnish a distinct filmic-realism that maintains an illusion about its economic origins and commercial imperatives as they relate to the reality produced. The project's financial partnerships yielded paratextual advertisements wherein the 'world' of the ads was conjoined with the narrative's diegesis. More than 'lowering' the would-be artistic medium of film to the level of an advertisement, their coeval registers in *Man of Steel* make apparent that blockbuster films and advertisements cannot be so easily differentiated. Such intertextual continuity is reinforced when we consider the types of cross-promotional ads and commercial paratexts that appeared in and around the time of *Man of Steel's* release. Several of these ads were shot in the film's hand-held style by director Zack Snyder himself; the film's

grounded "realism" here is rendered for what it is, a mode of narration that in spite of its minoritarian, non-Hollywood cinematic posture serves as a flexible and commercially viable rhetorical technique across genre venues.

Much has been written about product placement in *Man of Steel*. Reviewers, bloggers, and fans alike were taken aback by the film's overt commercial tie-ins. In some scenes, the product placement is relatively understated where the usage of products by characters appears to 'fit' in the story's logic: Lois Lane, for instance, uses a Nikon camera in her journalistic pursuits. In other instances the parade of brands is harder to justify by story-driven motivation. One of the film's major action scenes - - a battle between Superman, the US military, and the film's villainous alien invaders on the streets of Smallville - - is suffused with product placement: Superman flies main antagonist General Zod through a 7-11, which explodes; Superman is thrown through and then duels Faora in an IHOP restaurant; the Kryptonians throw a parked U-haul van at a military helicopter; and, Superman reveals himself to the US military after the conflict before a ruined Sears retailer.

Cross-promotional marketing also extended the scope of the film's production and, by extension, expanded the layers of the film's diegetic folds beyond the narrative proper. The Zack Snyder-directed advertisements integrate into the film's fictional world the sorts of diegetic and rhetorical environments employed in commercials. Whereas select film footage is often used in commercials by that film's promotional partners in the manner of a TV-spot, *Man of Steel* took this farther by including its promotional partners in the film as a discrete text (product placement) and also by allowing them to author officially sanctioned paratexts.

An example of the film's extension into and intersection with its commercial paratexts is a *Man of Steel* affiliated Hardee's/Carl's Jr. ad named "Potholes," again directed by Snyder. It features the movie's star Henry Cavill, playing Superman, in a hand-held, special effects laden sequence that matches the cinematographic style and production value displayed in the film proper. The ad begins with a Metropolis construction worker and his crew surveying a decimated city street. The likeable blue-collar foreman proudly boasts of the all the work he and his crew must attend to while repairing the damage Superman incidentally incurs while performing his many heroic deeds against super-powered enemies. Such work stirs up quite an appetite, one that can be satisfied by the "Super Bacon Thickburger" ("Potholes" 2013). Suddenly, Superman lands in the background, creating another massive crater in the street's pavement. The contrite hero looks at the construction workers apologetically and then takes off, presumably to resume doing good elsewhere in the city. The foreman shakes his head and shouts to the ascending Superman, "We're good, man," making clear the steadfast allegiance of Superman's heroism with a lionized iteration of blue-collar work. Reflecting the politics of the film's formal iconography, advertisement effectively sells a sandwich as well as an image of working class sensibility as an expression of style.

Hardee's/Carl's Jr. financed the "Potholes" ad, but it was produced entirely by Warner Bros. and its creative talent. Snyder directed the commercial; the studio authored its special effects and provided a CGI model of a battle-damaged Metropolis as it appears in the film; Cavill appears wearing the official suit; and Hans Zimmer's triumphant score concludes the spot. The advertisement's production is nearly one and the same with the film proper, indicating a model of filmmaking wherein the Hollywood blockbuster is a

site of corporate cooperation and vertical integration. The space of the aesthetic product does not merely incorporate, quite literally, brands into its purview and extend into commercial paratexts. There is little boundary between these different systems. The blockbuster Hollywood film as we see it in Man of Steel evidences a deep interpenetration of content, form, and commercial strategy. This is clear in the advertisement. Although it is first and foremost a promotion for the hefty sandwich, "Potholes" is an effectual mini-episode in the *Man of Steel* universe. The barrier between the space of the aesthetic text and an auxiliary commercial argument related to the film's narrative are glossed over in the ad, something that seems to represent metonymically the entirety of the production of *Man of Steel* and the synthesis of branded commercial environments and 'realistically' composed narrative spaces on cinema screens. Its diegetic space is a heterodox composite of financially-minded prerogatives and narrative impulses.

Why did audiences and reviewers alike express consternation at the product placement in *Man of Steel*? It interfered with the romance of its lyrical iconography and controverted the "immersive" quality commensurate with the contract of the traditional blockbuster viewing experience in two primary ways. First, the film's branded aesthetic ran alongside and counter to the signifying practices that have inhered in "Superman" as its own historically established visual brand. Second, and more importantly, the film's product placement implicated and militated against the genre sensibility of the film's cinematography. Specifically it undermines its own stylized presentation of small town life in the Midwest where its visual style gestures toward a mode of nostalgic referentiality, and, by extension, a sentimental but earnest portraiture of an anachronistic

economic reality in small town America. This gets to the heart of the ideological problem posed by mimesis and "realism" as a genre convention and media-specific epistemology. It refers to both the status of the camera-as-narrator as well as to the imagined, discourse-situated reality of the profilmic world prior to the moment of narration; the exoteric in this mode is assumed in the first instance to be a stable object whose reality is commensurate with or at least amenable to the lyricizing gaze that enables and authors it. In mainstream commercial cinema, the viewer's identification with the screen image is abetted by his or her ideological priming for this discursive operation. 'Reality' and a view of 'reality' are conjoined in ways that ameliorate rather than exaggerate its constructedness for the viewer. *Man of Steel* complicates this configuration and its semiotic procedures, and it does so with interesting consequences. The film makes apparent the way that its diegetic spaces - - and its manufactured views of diegetic space - - are enmeshed in an economic arrangement whose precession has effaced the iconography and political register of the mythical illusions it means to present.

Figure 4.14: This shot mixes a helicopter tracking shot, common in blockbuster films, with the lens flare and shaky cam consonant with indie and amateur filmmaking. Shots like these in *Man of Steel* indicate the film's style of realism, which I would argue via Jameson is in many cases affective. While the image on some level may feel authentic, it arguably feels "authentic" where it on many levels conforms to comparable filmic representations of the Midwest in mainstream American cinema and visual culture. The Midwest here is less a genuine object that exists prior to a neutral camera as much as a highly rhetorical visual genre. The lens flare, tinting, and composition of the shot suggest as much. I argue that this genre is freighted with an investment in a certain economic mythology and proletariat ethos, one that the film's product-placement reveals as such where it makes clear the ideological function of this myth.

Snyder's cinematography appears to appropriate the style of Terrence Malick vis-à-vis *Tree of Life*, a move that is all the more interesting where the latter figure's mode of cinematic realism often looks like modernist montage. A progressive element does accompany the realist project in this vein where the impulse for description can estrange familiar objects and normalized ways of seeing the world and reframe visual information, and the audience's subject-position, from a non-majoritarian vantage. The quotidian in this way of thinking becomes a place for wonder and, perhaps, even subversion. Fredric Jameson has argued that realism, although often thought of as a conservative and

bourgeois formal category, can sometimes have a paradoxically innovative epistemological quality:

> genuine realism, taken at the moment of its emergence, is a discovery process, which , with its emphasis on the new and hitherto unreported, unrepresented, and unseen, and its notorious subversion of inherited ideas and genres, is in fact itself a kind of modernism. (2012)

Jameson is referring primarily to literary realism in this case, but his point holds where cinematic realism emphasizes and attempts to make visible the "underreported, unrepresented, and unseen." Several sequences in *Man of Steel* concord with this more progressive iteration of realist form. In one sequence in particular, as a peripatetic Clark returns home to the Kent family farm as an adult, the film offers a striking visual triptych. In three successive shots: a wagon, a windmill, a butterfly. The focus here is on the close-at-hand – the camera's presence is intimate, gentle, and object-oriented. The shots are beautifully composed, as if patiently and generously captured by the unassuming eye of a naturalist documentary. Realist description and detail comes to the fore over expository or even story-based narration. The film assumes in this moment a minoritarian posture in its visual idiom, a sensibility made all the more clear in the shot of the windmill, filmed from a low-angle perspective upwards through a window. From a low and partially obscured angle, the camera almost seems to be sneaking a view at this underreported object from a unique but striking vantage. No object is filmed directly from a straight-on angle, as if direct signification should be avoided. At the level of communicative meaning, the syntagm is affective in its visual display more than semantic or straightforwardly symbolical, a quintessential quality Jameson ascribes to realist representation. This is a plane of meaning beyond an iconographic or literary lexicon.
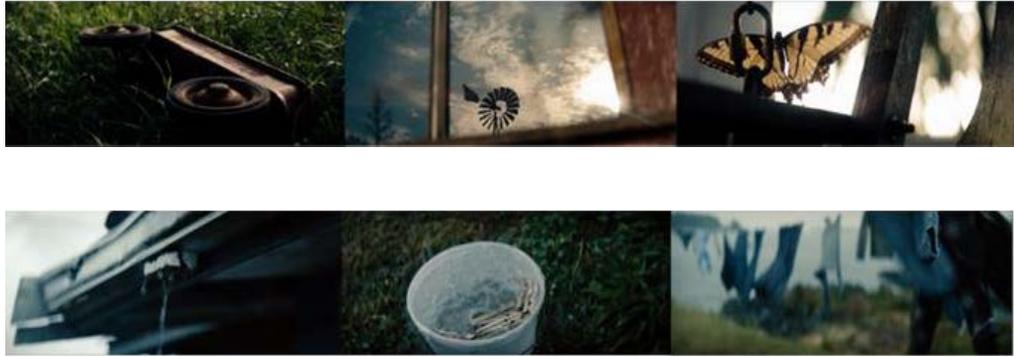
Figure Group 4.15: The triptych I describe, which precedes Clark arriving home in Smallville, Kansas. The second triptych performs a similar rhetoric function early in the film when Clark washes up on the shores a small coastal town in the Pacific Northwest.

The film's exercise in realist affect falters where it aestheticizes agrarian poverty in a conventional and predictable way. The Kent's dilapidated but noble farmhouse, its decay in the story's timeline no doubt ensured by Jonathan Kent's untimely death and Clark's departure, stands in the film's symbology as a sincere masculinist monument to the icon-based romance of the yeoman worker. This farmhouse, and seeing this farmhouse as such, is sentimental social realism as a form of advertisement. As is so often the case, from *Rocky* to Bruce Springsteen to *Man of Steel*, would-be critical instantiations of working class culture are subsumed within the (very male) iconography of capitalist propaganda and circulation. This may be, in large part, why popular audiences felt they were "taken out of the film" on account of its product placement. On the one hand, the film's commercialism undercuts its seemingly sincere stake in the bucolic, small town pastoralism one expects to find in a Superman movie. On the other, the film's minoritarian formal strategy is at odds with the objects that come to populate its view. Its affect runs interference on itself. If there was ever a gesture toward something new in *Man of Steel*, the gesture itself is enfeebled where it devolves into

pastiche, a commodified aesthetic commonplace. In the Jamesonian view, cultural

production in late capitalism obscures the structures and material operations that underlie

said production, and so the reality of global inequity is largely disguised and displaced to

consumers in developed economies (*Postmodernism* 1991). The diegetic world of *Man of

Steel* perforates this situation. Staged together in the same frames, and presented in the

same visual style, the small farming town as film trope with the irrepressible immanence

of capitalist directives made legible, together makes clear the nature of their thorough

interpenetration. More precisely, capitalism stains the means of its own reproduction.

Advertisements abound in the cultural space designated for the proliferation of

commodified illusions and political fantasies and thus make clear the function that has

called forth this fictional world.

In the case of *Man of Steel*, this is all the more striking given the purchase of the

iconographic Superman lore in popular mythology and Americana in the twenty first and

twentieth centuries. In Superman is a glorified assertion of the viability of the premodern

farming homestead and small-business town as an economic, social, and moral paradigm

and auspicious political unit. But as I have suggested, the colonization of Superman's

hometown by national and multinational corporate brands in the film involves more than

a perceived contamination of this lore and its correlative icon-based social imaginaries. It

also makes clear the way that the realist armature of the camera, and its representational

praxis as it relates to the production of "place," have become a monetized rhetorical

gesture, a formal commonplace for evoking the rhythms of a gritty, anguished

Americana. Levi Jeans and their hand-held, black-and-white "Pioneer" ads set to vintage

recordings of Walt Whitman's poetry speak to the degree that such formerly indie-cinema

formalisms have been appropriated by commercial interests in visual culture. The

innovation attributed to the realist camera and the emergent topographies suited to its

view are likewise incorporated. If *Man of Steel* could be said have elements in common

with progressive or avant-garde cinema, it eschews the eminent cultural logic and

language of the prevailing political economy not by subverting it with novelty, but by

being a capitalist project that wears its commercial vestiges so unevenly it stages the

myths and cinematic formalisms of capitalism: the precession of ideologically valent

form-based tropes as such, as style, as commodity.

CHAPTER FOUR

RECORDING AND MEDIA EHTNOGRAPHY:

THE WIRE (2002-2008) AND *ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK* (2013 -)

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As a designation and implied body of work, "quality serial television" has over

the last decade enjoyed consistent critical acclaim. Amongst critics and cultural

commentators alike it has become popular, even axiomatic, to attest we presently enjoy a

"Golden Age of Television." Beginning largely with HBO's original programming in the

late nineties and early 2000s, whatever reservations (some) critics may have had calling

television "art" evaporated in the face of "quality" content with obvious artistic merit. Or

at least content that was legibly "artistic" under prevailing categories. Christopher

Anderson's famous article, "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American

Television," elucidated the arrival of the prestige television show as an avowed artistic

category. At the same time, Anderson reiterated in the first place a central tenet of

cultural studies: all facets of cultural production warrant critical attention and even

aesthetic study, including traditional, "low-brow" TV programming (*HBO Reader*

2008).[114] Making the case easier for critics serious about studying the art of television,

the last two decades have offered a number of TV shows whose artistic qualities are

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[114] It is telling that Anderson makes both these moves, saying at once that television has gotten "better" as an artform and that TV always warranted critical study.

immediately legible as such. This is part and parcel with the embourgeoisment referenced in Anderson's title. HBO series like *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *The Newsroom* (2012-2014), and even the less-acclaimed *Rome* (2005-2007) boasted high production values, cinematic visuals, complex storylines, as well as compelling drama. HBO's recent success with *Game of Thrones* (2011-) indicates how the company, once a subscription service network, has over the last decade developed and fine-tuned its production-side operations to manage multiple, long-running cinema scale projects. Cable networks have also joined in the fun. Most notably, AMC quite famously brought prestige drama to cable with the endlessly lauded shows *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015). With the addition of *The Walking Dead* (2010-) a few years later, AMC dominated the Emmy award circuit for several years. Networks like FX also looked to pitch their network's existing cachet in male-oriented action television toward prestige content: *Rescue Me* (2004-2011) and *Justified* (2010-2015) made operatic, genre familiar epics out of their eminently TV-ready, serial-format template in the macho workplace drama. Showtime similarly turned to prestige content around the same time, offering in short order *Weeds* (2005-2012), the hit counter-terrorist thriller series, *Homeland* (2011 -), and ur-realist ensemble dramedy, *Shameless* (2011 -). When Netflix and then Amazon and Hulu joined the original programming party, quality serial television -- and specifically niche-marketed programming - - burst wide open. The sensation surrounding *House of Cards* and critical acclaim accompanying *Transparent* pronounced the arrival of quality serial television, a designation that now describes an increasingly diverse range of programs, networks, and distribution platforms.

House of Cards in particular is often discussed as a flashpoint in the history of television. The show marks a definitive moment in Netflix's corporate history wherein the company, at first an innovative delivery service for programming, itself became a producer of high profile quality content in the manner of a studio or network.[115] *House of Cards* and its success has led to a veritable explosion in the number of original programs backed, financed, and produced by Netflix (as well as its competitors). In addition to signaling a major shift in television history on the production and distribution side, *House of Cards* also indicated the extent and scale of the perceived change in television quality. That Academy-Award winning and nominated actors Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright were attached to a "web television series" at all speaks to the tractability television had accrued as a venue for work of artistic merit. As Kevin Spacey offered in an interview with *Variety* (2014), he accepted the part of Frank Underwood because he felt that, more and more, it was television, rather than film, where serious art was happening. While Spacey's comments are no doubt self-serving and intended to tout the show's plaudits as a serious drama, they reflect the attitudes of a number of critics who have seen franchise-logic and lucrative merchandising mania subsume what is still a very profitable, but increasingly risky, business venture in mainstream studio filmmaking.[116] While film has gone in the direction of bigger and more expensive franchise-based "event films," well-

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[115] Baz Luhrmann's high-profile and big budgeted Netflix original, *The Get Down* (2016), is an example of a tendency toward auteur-driven, "cinematic" content in the context of television production. Further indicative of the blurring of cinematic and televisual production parameters is the nature of the cooperation between Disney and Netflix regarding Marvel properties and the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe): shows like *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil*, and *Luke Cage* have been apportioned to the Netflix side of production (unlike *Agents of Shield*, which premiered and runs on the Disney-affiliate network ABC) would not likely have generated sufficient interest to secure a film or even a wide-appeal television audience. For this reason, these more niche facets of the broader Marvel diegesis have had a distinct aesthetic life in an altogether different production and distribution venue.

[116] See chapter three for the discussion of Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013)

publicized spectacles that take advantage of their short duration (2-3 hours) and big-screen character with IMAX and 3D flair, television has opted for grounded forms of character-driven serial narration. Put another way, where films have become ever more stylish viewing experiences that make a case for cinema-specific media as well as advertise for their sequels and their merchandise, television is understood to have become more interested in characters and storytelling, becoming more literary. Networks have coined their own promotional taglines in this spirit, jumping at the chance to associate their brand with literary quality: for AMC, "story matters here" ; for the USA Network, "characters welcome"

The recent history of film and television I have just sketched out is a popular account but is, of course, a bit too simplistic. It moreover essentializes media specificity in a number of ways. I'm not interested in perpetuating this history or reproducing its implicit value judgements about cultural production vis-à-vis a rarefied artistic quality that tends to skew at the level of definition toward belletristic estimations of the literary. What interests me is the idea that the type of artistic merit associated with quality serial television is a kind of merit that draws heavily on the cachet of literariness for its valuation. Here the literary designates a set of formal features as well as speaks to an imagined cultural commonplace, an implied venue for socially-minded democratic art.

Rounded characters, multiple character trajectories, complicated long-form plots, the time and space available in the format to progress with detail, pace, and elaboration: these attributes are among the reasons quality serial television is frequently deemed "novelistic." Sci-fi writer Neal Stephenson enthusiastically pushes the comparison of new television programs and novels, conveying to TIME magazine, "I think the reason that

TV is so good and it's succeeding so well now is because of the writing. It's because it is novelistic in its scope" (Dec 15, 2015). Just a year before, Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid authored a roundtable discussion for the *New York Times* entitled "Are the New 'Golden Age' TV Shows the New Novels?" (Feb 25, 2014). While the authors are hesitant to affirm the decline narrative embedded in the question as it concerns novels and print literature at-large, they agree that new television is successfully democratic, complex, and character-driven. Moreover, like nineteenth-century fiction, new television is more than ever before novelistic in its scale, able to oscillate between proximate settings and broader diegetic vistas.[117] In this way the social novel finds in quality serial television an apparent successor or, even, possibly, an anachronistic return to its origin – as Kirsch points out, early filmmakers credited Charles Dickens and his ranging social portraits with pioneering montage as a concept. It's possible that Dickens might have approved of David Simon's season-ending montages in *The Wire*, sequences that survey a variety of urban scenes in the interest of assembling a heterogeneous social vantage. According to claims like these, quality serial television might, after all, be the better realization and more accomplished representational medium for the transhistorical form and democratic venue that is the nineteenth-century social novel.[118] Writing for *The*

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[117] Embedded in the claim is a criticism of multi-camera TV programming, shows such as the traditional sit-com which are filmed in a studio (sometimes before a live studio audience) and which feature only a limited number of sets, many of which are more theatrical in nature than convincingly mimetic. A number of technological developments and changes in the industry have popularized location shooting in TV programs. Where the sitcom is confined to particular spaces, frequently domestic and often suburban, newer television dramas tend to have a far wider range of environments.

[118] Not something I believe or would ever care to argue. And I reject the media telos implicit in the claim. As Siegfried Zeilinski argues in *The Deep Time of the Media* (2006), too many accounts of media emphasize a history of progression, wherein newer and more capacious media subsume previous technologies in a somewhat straightforward capacity, drawing on McLuhan's claim that the "content of media are other media." Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation* is one such popular history. Zeilinski proposes a uniformitarian kind of media history, one that doesn't presume the succession of media but rather the uneven development of technologies across time.

Dartmouth, the university's student newspaper, Andrea Nease is unequivocal on the matter of the connection between robust quality serial programming and the diminished literary imagination: "television is the new book" (March 2, 2015). For a newer generation eager to consume television content, there are perhaps additional incentives to de-stigmatize TV "binging" and associate the medium with the esteem and edification attributed to reading.

In this chapter I discuss how contemporary realism in quality serial television remediates elements of nineteenth-century fiction and newly interrogates mimesis as a basis and justification for socially minded pedagogic art. Ensemble television dramas focusing on dozens of characters, storylines, and settings, and then spanning several seasons over a number of years, offering in some cases hundreds of hours of content, replicate what Pam Morris will identify as the defining features of nineteenth-century realist fiction a la Emile Zola: "the fusion of detailed factual observation of social reality with the visual intensity of the dream or nightmare…the use of poetic symbolism and imagery to convey the awesome power of huge, impersonal industrial and political forces on human life" (71, 2003). In this arrangement, as Zola mused, the realist is an observer and experimenter, a clear forerunner for the anthropologist-detective sensibility I am identifying as a prime narrative ethos in new realism.

The Wire and *Orange is the New Black* are both examples of prestige dramas that, in different ways, foreground in their premise a realist mission in ethnographic social reportage. Each of these shows *look to reveal* under-reported aspects of social reality – they "report back" from the periphery, apparently going into the heart of the real and rendering it for the benefit of the polis, or, at least, "the social" as it is construed in the

middle-class imaginary. In both programs, contact with social otherness is processed through a white interpretative voice, reiterating how didactic social realisms tend to assume and speak to a reformist-minded bourgeois subject. They "look to reveal" in both senses of the term: they intend to show through the representation of minoritarian circumstances the reality of marginalized experiences; at the same time they build into their narratives, both formally and tropologically, *looking* itself as a means of revealing social reality. As I have discussed in previous chapters, literary realism often looks for ways to formally simulate perception and intensified, immediate observation in the narrative consciousness. The detection and documentation of reality emerges in *The Wire* and *Orange is the New Black* as a primary thematic concern in each program. For this reason - - and because of the popularity and acclaim they have garnered at different important moments in the recent history of television programming - - *The Wire* and *Orange is the New Black* are helpful texts to consider the relationship between technics and aesthetic and cultural techniques. Where *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are media-intensive histories wanting to prioritize the "media-event," history as it becomes history because it becomes information in media, David Simon and Jenji Kohan's adopt a similar ontogenetic sensibility but are less invested in "events" as such. *The Wire* and *Orange is the New Black* instead offer different theories of serial representation as a form of social observation. Each program negotiates an informational social fantasy in empiricism that relies on the intelligibility of forensic archaeography.

Policing Information in *The Wire*

The problem with homicide Detective Jimmy NcNulty isn't just that he's an irascible, cavalier, and often insubordinate Baltimore detective. His biggest problem is

that he makes life difficult for his superiors by complicating things. McNulty pressures,

categorically, the department's working definitions of criminality. His follow-up

questions and side investigations challenge the department's operative epistemology.

Rather than working within the established protocols and padding the homicide unit's

crime statistics, numbers that make or break the careers of rising policemen, McNulty

generates problems as often as he solves existing cases by looking into matters and

'detecting' criminal activity that was unnoticed or otherwise illegible as exigent

criminality. I want to emphasize that McNulty isn't a problem for the department simply

because he is thorough and has a researcher's exacting commitment to detail. He is a

good detective and talented investigator in his own right, but McNulty's transgressions

against the police bureaucracy have little to do with workplace sanctimony or a vaguely

moralistic ethics concerning the value of good police work for its own sake. An

honorable and devoted public servant he is not.[119] Ruthless careerist Major Rawls makes

plain the nature of McNulty's infractions against the Baltimore police establishment

when he accosts the detective for speaking to a circuit judge, unintentionally bringing

pressure on the department to investigate an extensive drug-trafficking network the police

had no idea existed, in effect humiliating the department into taking action. Growling at

McNulty in indignation, Rawls issues, "You backstabbing, smartass, piece of shit…I'm

upstairs trying to answer questions about some project nigger I've never heard of whose

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[119] Not only is McNulty is hard-drinking, selfish, and frequently assholic character, which is more often than not excused in the show's masculinist diegetic system, where his faults contribute to his insouciant antiheroic "charm," but he is not an especially moral figure – he takes a bribe in season two and, in the same season, participates in effectual perjury by helping to knowing procure manufactured evidence when Omar Little (Michael K. Williams) offers false testimony to incriminate one of Barksdale's crew. In the fifth and final season, McNulty's actions verge more overtly into the criminal when he more directly falsifies evidence to generate media coverage around a series of crimes he is investigating.

beat my unit on ten murders…I had to go upstairs and explain to the deputy why we're getting calls about murders that don't mean a shit to anybody." Apologetic and caught off-guard by the tirade, McNulty's offers for his only defense: "major, these guys are *real*"

For Rawls, it doesn't necessarily matter whether or not the murders happened or if there is a criminal conspiracy linking the homicides together. The reality is more or less irrelevant in the face of how it is represented and translated as data in the police department's knowledge stores.[120] Rawls's anger toward McNulty bespeaks an investment in the department's politically-riven, internal accounting system: the official record. Setting the terms of their ongoing enmity, Rawls (John Doman) accuses McNulty (Dominic West) of highlighting the department's relatively narrow definitional purview of the criminal. Evident in the scene is a statement of the homicide division's protocol, its information processing system, its self-reporting practices and case math which together organize detective activity and motivates resource allocation in the department.[121] Cases are to be solved (or not) and then shelved. The goal being to limit the number of murders accountable to the department's jurisdiction, in the first instance, and then 'clearing' (solving) active cases to minimize the overall number of unsolved murders, those ultimate black marks on a career police officer's file should they desire promotion.

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[120] The dematerialization of the real continues throughout the series as it concerns Rawls, who by season three is deeply insulated in his office and cares only about numbers, berating his subordinate officers to lower crime rates (rather than police the city in more meaningful or responsive ways). Representation and self-reportage as logics eclipse that which information is thought to designate. One of the important aspects of *The Wire* is to dramatize the separation of information worlds as they are experienced as alternate world views.

[121] As discussed in the introduction and in chapter one, the detective is a meaningful figure in this study as it theorizes the work of realist art and establishes a groundwork of intelligibility through an aesthetics that takes shape in taking social measure.

Throughout the series, Rawls and other commanding officers fixate on their "clearance rate" as it corresponds with their own job security and career aspirations. Ignoring what the murders might entail, show, or indicate about the people involved or the environments they occurred in, what *really* matters is how crimes come to exist as information. Rawls is incensed, for instance, that the newly highlighted murders would re-open investigations into prior-year cases, cases that had been known entities, verifiable data points in the department's accounting calculus.[122] In the first season, this functional myopia is homologous with a broader, more pressing encounter with alterity the show means to dramatize. McNulty's trespass is to make the police department accountable for a territory, domain, and group of people it hadn't known and hadn't cared to know. The murders McNulty asks about hadn't mattered to "anyone." The department we see at the onset of *The Wire* responds only to crimes intelligible as such – it is operationally blind in its procedures to dealing with alternate social realities and unseen, unofficial organizations. It responds to and works individual incidents, crimes legible as such and tractable as cases that can lead to arrests and charges, but it cannot (and won't) address or discern the more complex, infrastructural, and networked nature of organized criminal activity. In the face of a strategically etiological perspective, McNulty and *The Wire* pushes for a more encompassing theory of social reality.

The show's second season elucidates how bureaucratic parsimony engenders a self-serving operational logic at the cost of addressing or working with ambiguity or

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[122] A comical follow-up to this scenario resurfaces in Season Two when McNulty, who has been punished by Rawls and sent to work the marine unit, proves that two bodies that washed up in his new jurisdiction can prove, after consulting this tide charts, that the murders occurred in Rawls's territory and therefore makes the Major and his department responsible for investigating them.

complexity. When a shipping container full of dead immigrant women (victims of human trafficking) is discovered in the Baltimore port, each official body that responds to the incident - - immigration, customs, port police, Baltimore police, Maryland state police - - tries to avoid becoming involved in the ensuing investigation. Each representative offers a route justification for their department not being accountable for the bodies, marshaling with almost comic dexterity the appropriate legal requisites to recuse their agency from interceding. When the defeated state policeman reluctantly agrees the incident falls under Maryland police jurisdiction, the same officer quickly surmises that the case as it presents itself meets sufficient criteria to be considered closed, warranting minimal paperwork and precluding a follow-up investigation; it will just be reported as a sex trafficking incident leading to the unintentional deaths of the women cargo. Indulging the ultimate realist wish fulfillment, the case for the state police officer is entirely "self-evident" and therefore the case is closed on arrival. In spite of what the agents can intuit about the case, there is strategic value in stating that the physical fact of the incident contours its representation in legal documentation. The state police officer attempts to "write it off," to reduce and foreclose the range of potential meanings one can derive from the event as an evidentiary, textual object. Only the well-meaning and somewhat naïve port police officer Beadie Russell (Amy Ryan) considers that the incident involves a wider, more complex interworking that concerns international players and Baltimore mafia as well as implicates local, unionized longshoremen. Only after significant hand-wrangling and politicking does the case, several episodes later, become an open murder case with an assigned task force. This, in spite of the fact police are incentivized not to complicate whatever can sufficiently pass for a straightforward, closed cased. As Detective William

"Bunk" Moreland (Wendell Pierce) offers to McNulty in season three when the latter believes (rightly) that a ruled suicide is actually a homicide, "the word from upstairs is that we're supposed to have less murders, not more" (*Dead Soldiers*). The labeling and not the reality being labeled is what is at issue. McNulty's conflict with Rawls in season one crystalizes this problem and parallels Russell's incredulity in season two (importantly, McNulty is called in to help with Russell's case and they become lovers in the course of the next seasons). McNulty's efforts in the first season to establish a larger, more inclusive, and more complex vantage than is allowed for or encouraged in the strategically pared down viewpoint demarcated by police procedure. A metonym for *The Wire* itself, McNulty wants to find and show an underrepresented and unknown world, one that is functioning beneath the visible threshold of mainstream civil society. *The Wire* works from and dramatizes, at the level of structure, a realist directive to go into, detect, and report back from underworlds of poverty, drug-trafficking, and organized crime. It means to make the invisible visible. The first question, of course, is for whom was or is this reality invisible?

The program's very first pre-credit, "cold open" sequence communicates how realism functions in *The Wire* as a narrative conceit. Opening on an off-center shot of blood streaks running along street level pavement, the dark liquid reflecting the flashing lights of police and emergency response vehicles, McNulty discusses the deceased party with one of the victim's acquaintances.

Figure 5.1: The blood streaks on the asphalt graphically match the squiggles of different radio frequencies coming over the wire monitors as they are shown in the show's opening title sequence – the stuff of the material real is imbricated with its documentation, the noise of recording and communication

McNulty learns in this interchange that the recently murdered friend, named Omar Isiah Betts, was known in the neighborhood as "Snot Boogie." Taken aback by the name, McNulty considers how the deceased may have earned the nickname in childhood: "you know, he forgets his jacket so his nose starts running, some asshole, instead of giving him a Kleenex, calls him 'Snot'…so he's Snot forever. Doesn't seem fair." Snot's friend offers, sullenly, "sometimes life be like that, I guess." Snot's friend makes clear that he will refuse to testify against Snot's murderer in court, obliquely referring to an implicit neighborhood omerta. He acknowledges the injustice of the murder, however, lamenting that "he didn't have to kill [Snot]." He conveys to McNulty that the kleptomaniac Snot Boogie often tried to steal money at weekly craps games and that "[the players] would beat his ass, but it never went beyond that." Puzzled as to why the group would continue to let Snot Boogie partake in the game if he nearly always stole money, McNulty asks, "why'd you even let him in the game?" "You got to," the friend replies, "it's America, man."

We never know what happens in the ensuing case (if there is one) and the show never follows up on this opening scene. Presumably, the investigation stalls when none of the present witnesses elects to testify. Because the victim is a poor black man, killed while committing a crime, it is possible there is insufficient motivation in the department to pursue an investigation. The opening sequence implies the notorious mass media invisibility of "black on black" crime. But the viewer simply does not know whether or not the case is resolved or abandoned. It's a curious way to open a series: by way of thematic national parable. As is often the case in conventional realism, the Nation or polis is always on some level the imaginary basis for its points of advocacy, requiring its in-story invocation and invention accordingly. The sequence interfaces official and unofficial discourses and considers the deterministic nature of racial and socio-economic relations under the auspices of a liberal justice system. It also frames the show's sense of its project: contact with the other as a premise for educating a white, middle-class audience about an unfamiliar world. Snot Boogie's anonymous friend discloses to McNulty the interworkings of an unseen, alternate America.

I want to suggest that *The Wire*, as a race melodrama, functions like the similarly acclaimed, Academy Award-winning film, *Crash* (2004). Both are stories about cities, stories that were and still are, to different degrees, celebrated as sociological ensemble dramas whose pluralistic structure and representation of heterogeneous experiences offer commendably democratized story formats. Furthermore, both *The Wire* and *Crash* address the realities of white privilege, racism, and system-wide police abuse at the same time black and minority characters from across a socio-economic spectrum are represented with nuance and, in the case of *The Wire*, a fair degree of "rounded"

complexity; they avoid, in other words, the kinds of typage and tokenism so common to the representation of non-white characters in popular urban crime dramas and television more generally.[123] *Crash* and *The Wire* share another important structural similarity: they each frame their stories, and by extension the implied narrative work of their stories, through moments of intensified contact with the real. In this respect, each recapitulates homologous modes of reformist bourgeois realism. Viewers of *Crash* may recall that the film begins with a curious epigraph: "It's the sense of touch . . .we miss . . . so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something."

The film then stages a series of dramatic, propulsive encounters between different socio-economic and ethnic groups in contemporary Los Angeles. Underlying the intended drama attending these conflict-laden encounters is a narratological premise suggested in the epigraph: you don't think about race, difference, or otherness until you crash into it, are forced to confront it. This is only true, of course, if one is white and also probably affluent enough to insulate one's daily life from "others," possibly, in large part, to avoid such conflicts in the first place. The epigraph is premised on normalized hyper-segregation as an infrastructural and demographic fact. The narrative consciousness in *Crash* assumes an atomized, bourgeois subject and this inflects the film's interpretative vantage as well as its approach to the "social." Viewers outside this purview do not need to "crash" into anything to see how race, gender, sexual orientation, and class actively structure one's lived experience and impact all manner of daily social interactions. The matter of encounter as a source of drama is not the only narratological problem that arises

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[123] Again it is worth noting how novelistic attributes inform the evaluative categories for film as well as "quality" serial television in this context.

in the film. Prefiguring the same kind of acclaim that enveloped similar story-arcs as they later appeared in *The Help* (2011), *Crash* establishes racial harmony as the redemptive narrative endpoint for white heroism. The utopian possibility of intersectional ethnic concord is thought to be available through enlightenment and, more specifically, personal edification.

Amplified by the film's notably quasi-spiritual choral soundtrack, the possibility of transcendent understanding is communicated in epiphanic moments of white heroism, scenes where white persons elect to no longer be prejudiced or act racist. When white people can be the best, most fair, and most civic versions of themselves - - in other words, good liberal humanists - - everyone wins. Important to the bourgeois, consensus ideology guiding each of these plots, nothing at the level of the political, social, or discursive *system* is thought to warrant fundamental change. In fact, the system is obliquely credited for allowing and, in its aspirational promises, even forecasting progressive change. Thus a historiography of gradualist democratic reform is validated in these types of films.

A number of realist or realistic race melodramas are predicated on similar narratological impulses: *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967), *Glory* (1989), *Amistad* (1997), *Remember The Titans* (2000), *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Gran Torino* (2008), *The Blind Side* (2009), *Free State of Jones* (2016), *Hidden Figures* (2017) to name just a few.[124] Steady progress toward a better and more robust

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[124] It is worth noting that a number of these films are based on "true stories," a genre conceit complementing the formal "realism" of the story and credentialing the narratological system and historical realism (democratic fantasy) on offer. A number of these films are straightforwardly "white savior" films, but as I will discuss shortly, this subgenre does not exhaust popular forms of conservative white realism.

democracy is not only possible, it is the historical bedrock and actual social reality being referenced in a teleological fashion. Accordingly, modes of personal improvement, education, and measured progressivism all supersede forms of collective or radical politics based in ethnic, sectarian, or class-based consciousness.[125] A 'universalist' (white) nationalist, republican worldview thereby constitutes the moral basis of the reality on offer. As Niklas Luhmann asserts in *The Reality of Mass Media* (1996, 2000), political systems and their attendant communicative networks regulate discursive topics by simulating problems requiring self-affirming solutions – thus self-simulation in the media comes to pass as the communication of 'information' in a mass media system. It is through this process that even vaguely "progressive" films confronting racism and inequality can actually reproduce, formally, the discursive terms of racial iniquity rather than challenge inveterate social figurations in a meaningful way. Moreover, by suggesting the baseline *reality* of a democratic historiography, the race melodramas I've highlighted essentialize the system's prevailing categories. Luhmann states, "the mass media seem to determine the way in which the world is read, and to assign moral values to description" (79).[126] In this mode, the conflicts materialize as represented conditions stand in opposition to what *should* be true in a fair, just, democratic society, these

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[125]This notion of collectives emerges in *Orange is the New Black* in weird ways. After criticism for its portrayal of race relations in the first season, the second season of the program took focuses on the cultivation of minoritarian identity politics in the prison – the series villain, of course named 'V', radicalizes the African-American women to her cause and parses her self-serving powergrab in Litchfield with the language of 1970s black nationalism and radical collectivism. Indicating, for better or worse, the utopian ideology that obtains in Kohan's vision for the show, V is never not a mendacious and open antagonist who is eventually defeated, whereafter her posse diminishes.

[126] He continues: in the United States context, the result of [tele-socialization] has been characterized as moral-intelligence… ultimately it has to be clear who are the goodies and who are the baddies. Whatever is thought not to advantage as reality is offered up as morality, it is demanded. Accordingly, consensus is better than dissent, conflicts should be capable of being resolved (since it is, after all, only a question of values) [79].

somehow constituting an extra-historical force toward which history will invariably gravitate. *Crash* and *The Help* naturalize realism in particular as a historiographical tropology and theory of ontology inclined toward the truth of democratization.

The Wire is less egregious than *Crash* and less complacent than *The Help*. It is also likely to strike viewers as more "realistic" than either of those two films, whatever it is that actually means. *The Wire* is not, in my view, less melodramatic in its structure or tone than the films I have mentioned. The reality *The Wire* conveys is nonetheless meaningfully different. As Fredric Jameson has argued, harkening to an earlier tradition in literary naturalism, the show is committed to showing how social structures, political figurations, and discourse exert a deterministic agency. For Jameson, the program's realism largely inheres in its unabashedly fatalistic worldview. Whereas the majority of mainstream films and television shows, particularly crime dramas, tend to celebrate the mastery exceptional individuals exert over their circumstances and surroundings, *The Wire* takes seriously the ways social reality is circumscribed by environmental factors and other exogenous, non-character generated scenarios. Simon's portrait of Baltimore is multifaceted and complex. Caroline Levine usefully discusses the show as "a theory of competing social forms" for the way it dramatizes how different political bodies, bureaucratic organizations, and communities interface with one another. In addition to showing many different aspects of the city and its residents, the program's season-by-season organization bespeaks a commitment to bricolage and multiple perspectives. Viewers familiar with the show will recall each season is refracted through a new storytelling vantage: illicit drug-trafficking in season one; longshoreman unions and white working-class experience in season two; local government in season three; the

education system in season four; and the news media in season five. *The Wire* strives in its story formatting for a kind of pluralism and narrative heteroglossia. As Brian G. Rose attests, "David Simon and co-writer Ed Burns were eager to throw out the moribund certainties of the cop genre and inject not just a measure of reality, but a potentially combustible mix of urban sociology, fiercely argued politics, and even macroeconomics" (63, 2008). One gets a sense of an urban ecosystem in Simon's Baltimore rather than just getting a thematically resonant and stylistically helpful scenic backdrop (see: New York in every mediocre police drama). Underscoring a philosophical commitment to showing multiple perspectives, the narrative's axiology is convoluted as well as relativistic; there are no obvious, unequivocal "good guys" or "bad guys." The police are often unlikeable, chauvinistic, or otherwise repugnant while some of drug-dealers, junkies, and criminals are sympathetic, noble, charming, and, in some cases, even benevolent.

And yet, another current works through *The Wire* alongside its putative investment in moral ambivalence. The way in which the show self-presents as social meaningfully art rests crucially on the pedagogic value of mimesis. Simon's narrativized theory of crime in urban America, in the words of Linda Williams, enshrines a white interpretative voice in parsing and depicting reality as it does for the show's primarily well-heeled HBO audience. Its ethnographic countenance, for all its positivistic bearing and faith in representation, contradicts the kinds of moral uncertainty the program exploits for dramatic intrigue. Caroline Levine's lauding of the show as a theory of social forms, for instance, assumes that the representation of different social systems and cultural formations in the narrative reproduces with fidelity the blunt fact of these social formations as well as depicts with accuracy their discursive, practical, and semiotic

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effects in relation to other social formations. Levine's argument replicates *The Wire*'s

attitude toward mimesis rather than interrogates what it means to visualize "cultural

forms" like courts, police departments, ghettoes, etc., in the context of a serial television

narrative. In this capacity, the show not only attempts to represent the convoluted nexus

undergirding the reality of Baltimore, but it is in a position to show how, exactly,

different institutional bodies and other organizing forces regulate the real. After all, the

third-person, omniscient narrative consciousness presents all pertinent story information

– *The Wire* is a compelling crime drama, but it is not an especially suspenseful show.

Mysteries are not solved because there are no mysteries; the viewer is placed in a

privileged position and has unfettered access to those elements and environments the

police are investigating. Before the main characters on the law enforcement side have any

idea of who Avon Barksdale is, or any sense of his organization, the viewer has seen the

elusive drug runner and has had the interworkings of his empire visualized for them.

Restricted narration plays no role here. Crucially, the crux of the show's dramatics

concern detectives and police coming into information, procuring evidence, and building

a case. The fact of reality is assumed, and it can be accessed and known – the trouble is

the process of making the tangible and tangibly real known and, specifically, legible in

media as knowledge. As Williams writes, "As the series cuts from one site to the next,

rarely stopping to recap or reiterate, it approaches what the ethnographer could only

dream of: a multisited ethnographic imaginary that no longer needs to depend on

allusions to abstract ideas" (23). For this exact reason, Williams moves in *On The Wire*

(2014) to disassociate the program from debates about its alleged "realism"– such

conversations, probably untenable anyway, tend to focus, somewhat didactically, on content rather than question the form.[127]

If *The Wire* is a show about the collection of data and making of stories, and is itself a gambit in ur-realist fiction as a mode of non-fiction reportage, it might be easy to import the lexicon of "metafiction" and "self-reflexivity" to describe the formal character of Simon's take on Baltimore. These terms may indeed apply, but I'm not sure they tell us much about the show besides ascribing knowing, artistic intentionality to the showrunners. I want to suggest that we look at the role of media and mediation in *The Wire* as a form of metalepsis, specifically metonymy. While there are formally interesting things happening in the show's cinematography, *The Wire* is not in the main as formally media-intensive as, say, *Zero Dark Thirty*. It is nonetheless far more obsessed with media technologies as story objects *and* a narrative conceit. Media are everywhere, and the ways in which the detectives need to work practically with what are, in the show, outdated hardware and surveillance technologies bespeaks an awareness of media-specificity. The program's very name, of course, suggests a prevailing thematic concentration on media and, more specifically, the detection and communication of evidence. Like the detectives circling their target, listening in and documenting their subjects, the narrating camera aims to detect the truth and report its view to audiences.

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[127] I fully agree with Williams on the question of *The Wire's* being a "realistic" show – it isn't. McNulty is a pastiched stereotype of the handsome, hard-drinking, recalcitrant Irish-American hero-cop in the spirit of "Dirty" Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood). He, like Piper in *Orange is the New Black*, focalizes the series in important ways and his personal story therefore frames the program's anthropological gestures. That McNulty, in a classic depiction of romanticized alcoholism, flirts with committing suicide in the first episode by playing chicken with an oncoming train shows that *The Wire* requires his experience of contact with the real as the program's dramatically exigent premise. Other melodramatic tropes abound, the most obvious of which may be the immensely popular figure, Omar Little, who is straight out of a western. Rather than quibbling about the show being "realistic" or not, I want to focus on how realism functions in the text as a guiding auspices.

But if *The Wire* is largely about media and uses mediation as trope to suggest its own cultural operations as an ethnographic drama, it nonetheless adopts a relatively instrumental and humanist theory of media semiotics. After all, it is in a position to represent the reality to be rendered in information, its drama emerging from the complications that inhere in the transfer of the fact of reality into data and, then, the "trial" of that data as evidence in legal terms in the context of court proceedings. Some of the show's most striking stylistic elements and distinct formal characteristics derive from its thematic interest in gathering evidence. Media metaphors abound in *The Wire*. The first season in particular concentrates on the detection and processing of raw, stochastic reality into information, noise into signal. As in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Libra*, discussed in chapter two, the production of evidence emerges as a dominant, organizing trope in *The Wire*. Reminiscent of Wolfgang Ernst's media archaeography, the narrative consciousness in Simon's crime drama and police procedural gravitates toward moments "when media themselves, not necessarily humans anymore, become active archaeologists of knowledge" (55, 2013). But technology writing technology in the show is just about always legible for human users and is, actually, preferred for its objective character. In a sense, *The Wire* is an informational social fantasy in empiricism that relies on the intelligibility of forensic archaeography.

The season's characterization of Avon Barksdale epitomizes *The Wire*'s fixation on data collection and becoming media. As the investigation first begins to take shape and McNulty's detail is assembled inauspiciously under various intra-departmental constraints, one of the chief problems facing the investigative team is that they have no information about Barksdale: no picture, no tax records, no credit history, no driver's

license, no phone or utility bills. Barksdale's suspiciously absent criminal record, all that exists is an infraction dating to his teenage years, has been expunged from his juvenile record. They only find it because of an archiving technicality and find it would be inadmissible in court as evidence. Even the strip club he owns, and which serves as a front for money laundering and drug trafficking, is not legally attributable to him and not owned in his name. Having crafted an identity that elides the representational strategies and data designs of legal, bureaucratic, and financial systems, Barksdale represents at the level of civil infrastructure a kind of counter-epistemological blindspot. Concurrent with his institutional invisibility, Barksdale also enjoys a beneficial discursive anonymity attributable to police and judicial protocols as well the city's hyper-segregation. When the investigative team finally does procure an image of their elusive target, it is only because the seasoned and often prescient Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) is able to recall a vague hint about Barksdale's background and pair it with his own personal knowledge of the west Baltimore scene; recognizing a boxing club that Avon is thought to have trained at in his youth, Freamon is able to find an old promotional poster from the gym on account of being friendly with the gym manager: the aging poster contains a grainy image of Barksdale as a young man. It is telling that the only data the team has in the early going is a relic, an outdated, analog media artifact "unsearchable" in any database, found by a senior African American detective through unofficial, familiar channels in an alternate communication environment. Many of the police come into the investigation having never heard of the powerful drug kingpin, a fact which continues to surprise many of the street-level witnesses, suspects, and informants they interview in and around the towers.

"Everyone" in the city seems to know about Barksdale but the police, justice system, and other 'official' channels. McNulty asks another detective ignorant of Barksdale and his criminal empire in west Baltimore, "what town have you been policing all these years? Where in *Leave-It-To-Beaver*-land have you been?" Directed in no small part toward HBO and its traditional audience, McNulty's question returns to a thematic interest in blindness and unknowing, suggesting again that the Baltimore the police department see, move through, and protect is a different world from the reality Barksdale inhabits.

The comment also expresses the show's sense of itself as an artwork: a gritty, in-your-face anti-*Leave it to Beaver*. Front and center at the historical development of "quality serial television," HBO famously advertised itself and its offerings in opposition to traditional TV fare: "It's not TV. It's HBO." In addition to recapitulating a thematic interest in the detection and disclosure of furtive information networks and their corresponding realities, McNulty's question situates *The Wire*'s brand of artistic realism against the commercially-riven, ideology affirming, and unrelentingly middle-class purview attributed to mainstream television. Like Oedipa Maas, who considers a secret history lurks beneath the suburban-focused domain of postwar "legacy America," McNulty couples reality (and the act of realism) with perforating a white, middle-class sensibility through contact with the other.[128] Importantly, he makes this comment as he and his colleague walk through the downtown commercial district of Baltimore, drinking

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[128] The key difference, of course, is that in Pynchon alterity remains thoroughly other and elides representation and therefore human knowability. Simon's worldview has no problem accepting reality is real as such and can be known according to representational strategies – the show's dramatics in epistemology work because a secure, baseline ontology throws into relief the blindspots, assumptions, and procedures of different epistemic programs.

Starbucks-styled to-go coffees, offering their lines in the bustling "walk-and-deliver" style pioneered in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*. Simultaneously construing "the city" as the camera follows the detectives as they move through a highly manicured "public" space, they narrating the nature of their relationship to a version of Baltimore, the shot reinforces how representation and specifically metonymy functions to create the show's sense of the social. One of the first season's more memorable cinematographic techniques underscores this formal concern. Occasionally employed as an ellipsis or transition, a number of story beats end with a crane shot wherein the camera lifts back and away from action on the street level toward the sky. The camera reframes on the distant downtown skyline visible beyond the nearby rooftops, and then plunges forward through the horizon with a kinetic smash zoom toward the city. Rather than framing the entire city in a single encompassing vision, one social portrait of the heterogeneous complex that is Baltimore, the crane shots foreground the process of metonymic compression and highlight the unbridgeable distance between local perceptions and holistic views (interpretation) of the wider system eluding representation. Put another way, the shots communicate in their composition the difficulty of accommodating something like cognitive mapping. Invoking the city as such solicits a misleading tropological tendency. The show's pluralism, ensemble-style character, and famous season-ending montages are, for a moment anyway, treated rather critically. As I am arguing, *The Wire*'s governing epistemology is too mimetic in its orientation to cede ground as a social argument to non-positivist renderings of the social. But as the detectives walk down the financial district in Baltimore, we can glean how the show struggles formally with its gambit in docudrama, even if this anxiety only has the effect

in the show of pushing for better kinds of representation, better and more visceral executions of social realism. McNulty's commentary cooperates with and even dramatizes the camera's implicit gesture to question the provisional construction of "Baltimore," underscoring the idea that divergent discourses correlate with functionally different information worlds, different epistemologies producing distinct if simultaneous and overlapping social topographies.

This situation prescribes the forms Barksdale the fictional person takes as an antagonist in the story. "Off the radar" as he stands to searching law officials, Barksdale's lack of a proper data identity and penchant for subterfuge and tradecraft (his entire organization stays off their cell phones, use pagers, and use code to make calls on public phones) comes to be associated with a kind of preternatural ability. Barksdale is not properly identified or seen by police until episode ten (of twelve in season one) when he is, unintentionally, discovered at an annual, high-stakes community basketball game between rivals East and West Baltimore. When the investigative detail gets wind of Barksdale's presence at the game, they close in on the area and attempt to covertly identify and track the figure. After pursuing Barksdale in his vehicle as he leaves the game, occasionally switching tail cars to disguise their trailing him, the team loses Avon when he, improbably, gives them the slip and appears to vanish into the city's winding sinews. Lt. Daniels (Lance Reddick), bent on getting a visual on Barksdale, fumes quietly in his car thinking that his mark got away. Suddenly, and appearing to violate the prior scene's diegetic physics, Barksdale emerges in his vehicle from an alleyway adjacent to the police unit sitting in its parked SUV. In slow motion, Barksdale rolls past Lt. Daniels, staring directly out his car window at the investigation's lead detective and wags his

finger, playfully mouthing "no." It's an unreal and uncanny scene. Barksdale's ability to

resist detection manifests in a kind of preternatural stature, specifically something like a

heightened perceptual acuity paired with third-person awareness. Unlike the detectives

investigating him, he can move through his home environment with 'unrealistic' mastery,

reiterating the notion that the subliminal aspects of his identity allow him to occupy a

different landscape. That Barksdale, inexplicably, detects his detectors bespeaks

prescience in excess of cunning and criminal savvy, as if he communes or is integrated

with the surrounding neighborhood infrastructure and partakes in an alternate signifying

system with its own means of surveillance (or counter-surveillance).

Barksdale's capacity for resisting detection matches through contradistinction the

alacrity with which the (few) hero cops of *The Wire* find, produce, and read evidence. As

I discussed in Chapter One, the detective figure is an emblematic and generative figure

for realist art. This becomes all the more clear in *The Wire* where the small band of truly

good detectives focalize the narrative and demonstrate through their work the program's

guiding axiology. These are the few "*real* police" capable of "good police-*work*," figures

like McNulty and Freamon and, later, Russel, detectives with initiative, deductive

prowess, creativity, and the inclination to question first impressions and official accounts.

They are true detectives in the denotative sense (sorry, couldn't resist). They perceive and

mediate, translating their perceptual acumen into evidence and case records. However

selfish or careerist their motivations, the activities of these choice police vaguely

reproduce a moral imperative for pedagogic realism. They mean to document and show

how things are really working.

One of the most well-known and widely referenced scenes in the series demonstrates how the detective figure emerges in *The Wire* as a prescient medium and arbitrator of the real. The widely touted "fuck scene" begins as detectives McNulty and Moreland arrive at a section eight apartment complex in the western part of the city where a murder has taken place. Unable to make headway with the original inquiry, the homicide unit initially tasked with investigating the murder closed the case due to lack of evidence. McNulty and Moreland revisit the crime scene when they think the murder might be linked to the Barksdale cases. They arrive and begin to work over the empty, now entirely cleaned out apartment which has long since been cleared and repainted. As the detectives get to work, surveying the scene, they begin to communicate only with the single word "fuck," issuing the expletive over and over again to each other with different inflections and intonations as they examine the room. With little to no explicit exposition or proper communication between them, the two detectives together come to re-enact the crime in a manner that is at odds with the original report. Almost responding to their fellow detective in the coordinated manner of an elaborate ritual dance, they move about the room, working out through performative deduction the "blocking" for the murder. Piecing together the scene as they read the room, uttering "fuck" after "fuck," McNulty and Moreland coalesce around the exact same interpretation of the event through their performative re-enactment. In so doing, they discover a bullet missed by the original investigation lodged in the wall in a hard-to-access spot beside the refrigerator. Their effort involves a kind of instinctual, extra-linguistic understanding and it works to decode the mystery of the crime – the room is laid bare and the physical evidence discloses itself to the properly sensitive detecting perceiver. McNulty and Moreland's homoerotic

forensics display is also a positivist hermeneutic fantasy. Thus, they find evidence, literally producing the hidden tell-tale bullet from the wall, evidence that clarifies the nature of the crime.[129] They conjecture, based on the new findings, that the murdered woman knew her assailant, as she elected to approach her sliding glass door to greet her assailant at the entrance to her apartment. Knowing that she worked for Orlando's - - the strip-club which serves as a front for Barksdale - - they deduce the connection between the victim and the drug empire.

The scene is important for a number of reasons related to the show's orientation in realism. First, repeating a relatively common trope in detective and criminal fiction, McNulty and Moreland are presented as exceptionally good readers of reality, even when this competence cannot be attributed to or expressed in language as such. A number of television shows and films rely on a similar premise. Misty Knight (Simone Missick) of *Luke Cage* (2016 -), for instance, has and employs "Misty Vision," an effectual if not actual superpower wherein she can mentally recreate crime scenes from limited evidence. Misty's skill is presented as a kind of sudden-onset virtual reality, a stylized slow-motion daydream that "plays back" in the manner of a recording the objective fact of the crime as it really happened. In this way, Knight's video-like analeptic episodes are not unlike those that strike the similarly apt FBI detective Paul Smecker (Willem Dafoe) in the *Boondock Saints*. The BBC's most recent Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) similarly has his hyper-attentive deductive skills visualized through in-screen text, slow motion, and other stylized representations of his interiority. Media metaphors abound,

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[129] We know that the detectives are right in their analysis because D'Angelo Barksdale, the friendly and sympathetic cousin to Avon, expresses guilt earlier in the season about having been involved in the murder and describes it in a manner similar to how McNulty and Moreland describe it later.

slow-motion replay functioning as a shorthand for heightened perceptual alacrity, as if having enhanced senses and amplified interpretative command over one's environment was like being able to control and rewind time in the manner of tape recording.

The important thing in *The Wire* is the emphasis placed on perception and intuiting evidence *as* decoding *as* form of realism. Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), veteran investigator, teaches younger detective Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn) to cultivate her instincts as well as her deductive prowess. Later, when Freamon and Greggs are deliberating about which dancers at Orlando they might "turn" into cooperating state's witnesses, he asks her to choose from a lineup which dancer to approach. Greggs, following from Freamon, chooses Shardene Innes, who ends up being exactly the "right" witness (she ends up cooperating and, further validating their choice, turns her life around, entering a romantic relationship with Freamon, and studies to become a nurse – compounding their capacity for instinctual reading with a moral valence). Freamon justifies the choice by "reading" Shardenne, discerning aspects of her appearance and countenance that, somewhat ineffably, indicate she is the right woman, anxiously on the edge, to approach to be an informant. The idea is that the optimal detective, even without rational or expressible reasons, can detect phenotypical, psychological, or other clues to create a perfect reading. Freamon's prescience, like McNulty and Moreland's, reads as well as generates clues and can accurately assess how things really are.[130]

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[130] Freamon is in many respects implied to be a historical precursor to McNulty, a talented if not politically shrewd investigator whose promising career was sidelined on account of his failing to 'play the game.' Like McNulty, Freamon is a sharp detective whose realist impulse translates into a motivation to uncover the elusive truths behind surface level illusions. This inclination becomes clear in the course of the investigation and wire-tap wherein he instinct to follow-the-money and pursue all manner of paper trails leads to potential scandal when Barksdale's finances are shown to be imbricated with Baltimore's "clean"

The "fuck" scene also shows how *The Wire* places thematic and narratological emphasis on *producing evidence*. More than simply revisiting the crime scene and coming away with a different and possibly better interpretation than the first round of investigators, McNulty and Moreland manage to come away with a tangible object that other parties had missed.[131]

Reiterating the epistemological grounds conducive a positivist fantasy, one of the more striking formal motifs in *The Wire* concerns translating noise into signal. Throughout the series, a number of shots linger on computer screens, regardless of whether a human user is present. Through the buzzing shrieks of internet frequency, literal noise, phone numbers are typed unto the screen, digit by digit, as if proffering an actual translation in real-time.

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political operatives. Like McNulty, Freamon is convinced that alternate information environments, obscured as they may be from view, tell "the true story" of Baltimore.

[131] In season five, this narrative concern becomes a part of the story when McNulty is able to manipulate and produce evidence for the mass media.
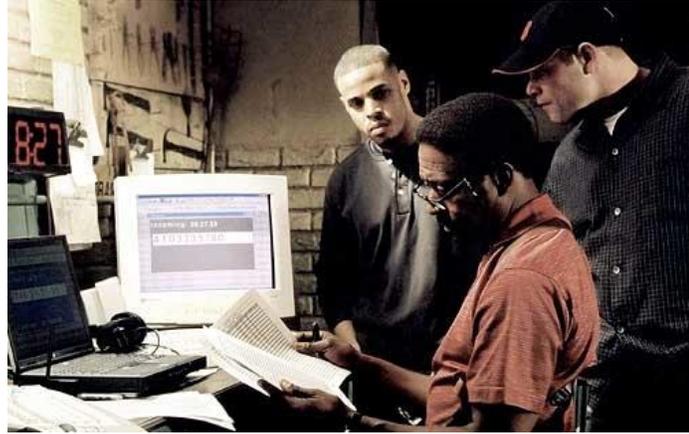
Figure 5.2: The harsh, buzzing static of phone and internet signals is processed, decoded, into alpha-numeric language, distilling a linguistic signal from an techno-semiotic milieu of noise. In a second-order operation of translation, Freamon matches the number with phone records, pinning the number to an identity, converting their data into a legally tractable grammar

The narratological point I want to make is how odd *The Wire* is as a crime drama where it concerns the processes surrounding the production and translating of data into evidence rather than simply finding and interpreting clues. Shows like *CSI* and *NCIS*, for instance, generate suspense by delaying how evidence enters into the story – the forensics teams in these shows keep searching until they find or discover the one piece of evidence that tips the scales of analytic uncertainty toward a definite interpretation (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of "self-evident" evidence). In these programs, because of restricted narration, the audience, like the investigators, does not know who committed the crime. The drama depends on our not knowing as well as our being invested, story-wise or ideologically, in the forces of good getting their interpretation of the crime right, apprehending or killing the bad guy, and maintaining law and order. In *The Wire*, however, we know who did what crimes, as do the police for the most part. The suspense inheres in seeing if criminal activity can meet a representational threshold and then be posed as a tractable

interpretation of the real for the justice system. As is the case in *Libra* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, for instance, description as a means of taking social measure becomes a formal expression of political anxiety as it regards democratic discourse. The detectability of reality, or, as I would insist, the detection of reality in media, is itself the source of intrigue. As elucidated by the opening title card, harkening back to Michael Snow's media experiment and avant-garde crime drama in *Wavelength* (1967), the impression of reality upon a recording instrument is the empiricist basis for the show's dramatics as well as its theory of social art vis-à-vis realism.[132]

Figure 5.3: The opening title sequence for *The Wire*

A number of formal motifs emphasize this point. Throughout the series and across many various investigations, the narrating camera pays close attention to how all manner of recordings of diegetic events are being produced and documented. One such technique is a simulated photograph. The narrating camera, adopting a focalized point-of-view shot

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[132] See Introduction for discussion of *Wavelength*

of a rooftop investigator observing suspected criminal activity, freeze frames the image of its purview, suggesting that its gaze has changed status from a (disguised) unit in a filmic syntagm mimicking "natural vision" to a discrete image and stand-alone semiotic unit, metaphorizing the camera's single frame as a photograph. The component pieces of the narrating consciousness, the camera-grammar constituting the available visual world, are transposed into a representation of a media artifact. Each of the freeze frames is in turn accompanied with a camera click and the narration's brief, momentary switch into black-and-white coloring, a move which intimates the archival nature of the simulated image and demarcates it from the narration's representation of natural vision. It is a formal approximation of becoming media and even media archaeography. Evidence takes on the ontic qualities of the third-person narration through their compositional self-similarity.

Figure Group 5.4: In one shot, Detective Kima Greggs prepares to take a furtive, long distance photograph with a telephoto lens. Cutting to a POV shot, which frames the subject, the camera then cuts to a black-and-white still image of the P.O.V. A technical point worth noting is that in the diegesis Gregg's is able to take these clandestine images from a nearby rooftop by quickly taking the pictures and concealing herself. To get the quality of the images she gets, however, with the type of telephoto lens she is using, requires long exposure times at odds with how her sneaky surveillance is depicted in the show. Without wanting to quibble about a possibly minor detail being overlooked for plot convenience, it is worth considering how the "error" works with respect to the show's prevailing attitude toward knowledge. It is significant that the move to metaphorize the eye through camera vision assumes the relatively straightforward production of a high-definition, clear image - - eliding the technics of the camera itself - - rather than allows for the "noise" which would actually accompany the shots Greggs would be taking.

While *The Wire* takes seriously and attempts to represent the ways institutions and discursive operations prescribe the social world and therefore impact an individual's realty, it also depends on an objective mimetic posture to represent a heteroglossic reality as such. It assumes an Archimedean point for itself to present the sum total of social complexity. Simon's strategy in narration is ambivalent and in many cases modest where it concedes that its vantages are provisional.

Docudramatic Ethnography in *Orange is the New Black*

"I carried a suitcase full of money, drug money. Once. Ten years ago."
"What's the statute of limitations?"

"Twelve years."

The information fantasy organizing *The Wire* also motivates Jenji Kohan's Netflix original program *Orange is the New Black* and inflects it approach to realist ethnography. Both are nuanced ensemble dramas concerning different sides of the criminal justice system. Like Simon's Baltimore, Kohan's microcosmic Litchfield correctional facility testifies to the gritty realities of a complex social system. To use Levine's term, Litchfield stages an interplay of social forms and their different levels of inscription. There are hierarchical groupings amongst the prisoners, groupings that cut somewhat unevenly across race, age, religion, sexuality, and time served, with each category soliciting its own terms of community. The prison's various sleeping quarters sustain their own rules and implied community in the manner of dorms. Different groups, at different times, also navigate the prison landscape according to networks of resource allocation and access to contraband: be it illicit drugs, harmless tokens from the outside world, or, in the case of season three, a widespread used-panties operation. In turn, each of these cross-cutting

social formations interface the prison architecture as well as the correctional officers and prison bureaucracy, each of these of course having their own interworking dynamics.

As with *The Wire*, the world of *Orange is the New Black* similarly acknowledges structural racism and moves to represent different types of environmental determinism. The most poignant (and frequently tragic) moments in the show tend to deal with discursive formations and institutional bodies regulating their own operations to the detriment of the show's characters and their circumstances – human interest stories and edifying tales of redemption are invoked only to be tried against a different narrative topography.[133] Where Kohan's show breaks most notably from Simon's is the faith it expresses in representative reportage as a means of 'realizing' and delivering upon the terms of the first mode of narration of and above the second.

More important to my analysis is a structural homology in the two programs' approach to information. Ethnography in each organizes realist tropes of discovery, detection, and revelation. A forensic theory of realism is at work in each; the disclosure of under-reported realities through their revelation and communication to an implied larger body instills a civic-minded foray in reportage as a basis for narration. There is a formal and thematic emphasis placed on "telling one's story," on representing oneself and one's experience, as this activity features as an important, civic-minded endeavor in social democratic pluralism. The information fantasy it evokes reinstall a humanist media

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[133] For example, transgender character Sophia Burset (Laverne Cox) is defeated and forced into compromising situations early in the first season when, even after repeated attempts to reason with her immediate supervisors, she is denied her hormone treatments for no proper or ethically valid reason other than newly imposed, crassly economic policies concerning inmate medications – importantly, she is denied in the final instance by an educated, "friendly" blonde white woman doctor. Bureaucratic imperatives supersede individual circumstances.

semiotics, a project in documentation-as-advocacy crystalized in the program's haunting opening title sequence. Consciousness-raising tropes abound. The narrative solicits its own realism by guiding characters toward it as an in-text world epistemology where realism means of self-knowing and possibly, empowerment. *Orange in the New Black* has become a more complex (and more interesting) show in subsequent seasons where it addresses and negotiates this style as a premise, moving as it has at different moments through turns of satire, high melodrama, and polemic social allegory. By occasionally and rather unevenly treating Litchfield as a not-so-hetero feminist heterotopia, the show has courted both its most interesting and controversial developments as a would-be social argument by contesting the confines of its realism. [134]

Orange is the New Black, like *The Wire*, takes for its premise and main narrative conceit an encounter with alterity from a white perspective. Like Piper Kerman's non-fiction memoir on which the show is inspired and loosely based, *Orange is the New Black: My Year in A Women's Prison*, Kohan's program advertises its narrative in the manner of an eminently marketable, premise-based pitch: an affluent, educated, and conventionally attractive white woman - - a public relations executive, no less - - goes to a women's prison, forcing her to confront her privilege, worldview, and values amidst a diverse population of downtrodden prisoners and score of daily hardships. Presented through a glib fashion industry idiom, even the tongue-in-cheek title, "orange is the new black," bespeaks a logic of encounter as personal accoutrement: the commodification of

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[134] As many commentators and critics are quick to point out, the utopian aspects of the show are on the one hand obviously meant to be "progressive" - - touting inclusive pluralities - - as well as they are, in deviating from a social realist commitment to determinism, an "irresponsible" fantasy authored by white feminist prerogatives.

human interest stories that white persons generate amongst under-privileged people of color. With an eye and ear toward the aesthetic, toward the "story" to be had, the white experience of prison becomes a template for drama. In other words, the show, especially in its first season, relies on the intrigue of this unstated premise: someone who, historically speaking, isn't *supposed* to be in prison must interact with and learn from those who, on account of their background and ethnicity, are, in reality and in the popular imaginary, more likely to be in or associated with prison in the first place.[135]

Piper Chapman's (Taylor Schilling) imprisonment provides a generative basis for drama, comedy, education, and a story of one's edification through unfamiliar community. The first season in particular is an ensemble drama largely focalized through Piper's experience. Even when secondary characters are, somewhat straightforwardly, 'humanized' through episode-by-episode flashbacks in the manner of ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010), they are only "rounded" as characters and given a backstory that illuminates their actions in the present at Litchfield as it concerns the way they've related to or acted toward Piper. A hermeneutics of epiphany structures the narration's treatment of character; over and over again, the audience sees through analepsis the one, telling episode of a character's past that explains their behavior in the present and therefore allows them to be decoded and 'known' by the viewer as a character type. In the process, the narration relies on the somewhat straightforward legibility of social determination as it scripts personality across time. This technique has a double effect, allowing the show to

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[135] In this respect, the show's ventures in comedy may draw an unflattering resemblance to the Kevin Hart and Will Ferrell film *Get Hard* (2015). The movie's premise: a milquetoast, upper-middle businessman (Ferrell) must prepare to "get hard" for prison and hires an outspoken, "real" black man to educate him in the ways of prison life so he will survive his incarceration.

depict "representative" social situations while, as it concerns the individual character, these flashbacks clear the way for their movement away from social determinism. *OITNB* thereby reiterates a quintessentially realist formal preference for metonymy; as Katherine Kearns argues, "deeply concerned with character, realism talks its people into a viability that functions both as example and antidote" (13). Especially in the first season, the show's analeptic 'revelations' work to make different minor characters more sympathetic after they have been encountered and then explained according to their prior experience. Over and over again, an original and superficial "surface" view must be complicated, and the character's moral standing, rescued through what content is provided by flashback, wherein access to more story information allows for a more sophisticated reading of the character. By staging this maneuver again and again, the narration entrenches its guiding purview in Piper's vision to frame its endeavors in realism. Otherness has to be explained as such and the third-person, omniscient narration is up to the task via flashbacks.

For its structural reliance on white focalization *Orange in the New Black* is, not unlike HBO's groundbreaking prison drama *Oz* (1997-2003), a prison melodrama as well as a race and class coded cautionary tale.[136] While perhaps a generic feature of the prison drama more generally, predicated as it is on voyeurism and dread, both *Oz* and *Orange is the New Black* both get considerable dramatic traction from the implicit understanding that their gentle, milquetoast protagonists suffer in excess of their fellow inmates: not only did they come from more comfortable backgrounds to begin with, crystalizing the

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[136] It is worth noting that both the Litchfield Correctional Facility and Oswald State Penitentiary are set in upstate New York. In many ways, Kohan appears to mirror elements of *Oz* in the world of *OITNB*.

nature and extent of their "fall," but there is the persistent and essentialist notion structuring the narrative that their imprisonment was not predictable and that they, essentially, don't *belong* in prison. Like Piper, the sheltered and upper-middle class Tobias Beecher of *Oz* focalizes the experience of prison through a white perspective.[137] Unlike the majority of their fellow inmates, these characters are forced for the first time in their lives to consider the possible dangers involved in moving about the world and partaking in daily routines. Each show begins its story with these fallen middle-class characters coming into prison for the first time, framing how the audience is to experience the frightening and alienating aspects of everyday prison life. Tobias and Piper are demonstrably non-threatening, law-abiding characters. They are shown, rather explicitly, not to be "conventional criminals" or "bad people," but individuals whose mistakes have entailed severe consequences: chiefly, forfeiting the safety, comfort, and freedom that comes with being a white, middle-class person in America.[138] Tobias's crime is that of criminal negligence (vehicular homicide from drunk driving) and Piper's long-past and somewhat unwitting infraction is a markedly non-violent offense; based on her prior association with drug dealing, on account of being in a relationship with drug-pusher Alex Vause (Laura Prepon), ten years before the narrative present, she is much

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[137] Also, whitest names ever.

[138] In and of itself, the argument suggests the attitude it is generally combatting: the notion that the American justice system, including its prisons, typically works fairly, prosecuting and imprisoning *individuals* (rather than demographic groups) who on account of his or her actions deserve the sentence they have received. Returning in a sense to the kinds of deterministic, anti-humanist attitudes that inhered in Zola's naturalism, programs like *Oz* and *Orange is the New Black* present a case to their (primarily) white audiences about the prejudiced nature of incarceration as it regards racial discrimination. *OITNB* in particular, in its third and fourth seasons, addresses this point rather directly by dramatizing the gross and systemic ethical trespasses of privatized prison management. Of course, in each of these programs, visualizing the dehumanizing and unfair aspects of the justice system is most poignantly and easiest done by subjecting white persons (and white bodies) to structural violence.

later, and rather unexpectedly, indicated for drug trafficking, a development which

scandalizes her well-to-do WASP family and disrupts her engagement to the boring and

not-so-nice "nice guy" Larry Bloom (Jason Biggs).[139] One of the important formal

linkages between the two shows is their commitment to white individualism as a

sacrosanct figuration under threat. Piper conveys as much to Alex when they meet again

for the first time in many years at Litchfield: "you stole my good life" (3). Where "life

seems to happen *to*" other characters, Piper espouses a proprietary sense of *her* life – a

neo-liberal viewpoint underpinning the terms of the narrative's value system. As Jessica

Grose suggested in *Slate* about *Orange is the New Black*, "[it is not] an examination of

women within prison but rather a member of the middle-class-transgression genre, in

which women from higher level social classes go into situations which are considered

degrading" (5/2013). Grose's article concerns Kerman's memoir but the criticism holds

true in many ways for the Netflix adaptation. Throughout the first season, so much the

humor and shock value of *Orange is the New Black* (hereafter *OITNB*) relies on

subjecting the highly manicured persona of intergenerational WASP manners to the

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[139] As I will explain shortly, one of the troubling aspects of *OITNB* in the first season is the idea that prison eventually offers Piper a queer sexual utopia, a kind of unencumbered sexual license in contrast to the "prison" of heteronormative marriage and middle-class domesticity. The point against the latter two social formations from a feminist perspective is to be respected in the context of a mainstream tv show and, possibly, even applauded – but it is also a prime example of white feminism advancing strategies in representation to the detriment of non-white feminisms. As it is, the notion that prison is, for an attractive and affluent white woman in her early thirties, a space of high-charged erotic fantasy is to indulge a privileged, neo-liberal, and unintentionally racist strain of thinking – thinking that the showrunners moved to redress in season two. As a number of viewers and critics have pointed out, often in less direct language than the following quote, the nature of the show's white cultural slumming and its stylizing white encounters with an exocitized alterity: "please, keep telling downtrodden [women of color] how great it is to be in prison for the lesbian sex filmed like a Quentin Tarantino-style porno [for men]" ("*OITNB* and Race" Popmatters.com, 4/14). To Kohan's credit, she has been open about soliciting ideas and criticisms from fans and moved in the later seasons for a different tone and representational ethos. One of the more important developments in the show is the diminishment of Piper's character as chief, focalizing protagonist.

degradations, pressures, and routinized casual humiliation of prison living. A memorable

example centers on Piper's initially contentious relationship with veteran inmate and

plucky head cook, Red (Kate Mulgrew). Attempting to commiserate with her fellow

inmates, Piper unknowingly criticizes the cafeteria offerings in front of Red. For days,

Piper is bullied by the kitchen staff and her meals are compromised – one day she finds a

used tampon in her sandwich. The conflict with Red is further amplified by class

antagonism. When she tries to apologize to Red, Piper reveals that her work is in

"artisanal bath products" – flashbacks from both characters then function to ironize the

situation, first showing Red as a beleaguered cook in her family's modest shop-restaurant

and then Piper, whose only experience of want comes in the form of a weeklong, juice-

cleanse detox. Later, at the height of their conflict, Red states plainly, "get your yuppie

ass out of my kitchen." It is not surprising, then, that Piper's primary antagonist in the

first season materializes in the shape of white working-class anti-intellectualism, the

zealous faux-Appalachian grotesque, "Pennsatucky" (Tiffany Doggett).[140] In the course

of the season, a number of similar subplots emerge dealing with Piper's (mostly comic)

growing pains in adapting to the norms of a new discourse communities within

Litchfield.[141]

Along these lines, much of the first season plays like a dramatization of James

Paul Gee's "What is Literacy?" (1989). The seminal essay applies a Foucauldian

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[140] Another interesting change after the first season involves Pennsatucky's characterization – she is a freakish and creepy villain in the first season, but she emerges as a far more kind and convoluted character in the next few seasons. This change coincides, problematically, with a distinct cosmetic restyling of her physical person and attenuation of the character's white supremacist views.

[141] One of the may criticisms of the first season focused on the fact that Piper's initial forays in acclimating to prison were relatively devoid of danger and high on comedy. It isn't until season two when Litchfield begins to feel like a tangibly dangerous place to be.

understanding of discourse to an analysis of linguistic competence in educational settings. Attempting to de-essentialize intelligence and point out the cultural specificity of mainstream education, Gee argues that children whose primary discourse closest resembles that of their school environment will succeed because they "acquire" rather than "learn" the maneuvers and ways of thinking validated by the discourse. Students whose primary discourses are different than the school's prevailing linguistic and cultural environment will be at a disadvantage, even if they are remarkable students. This is because "learning" does not entail the same kinds of lived mastery and that is more readily available to students who have spent most of their life in a dominant discourse.

The early episodes of *OITNB* get a good deal of comedic traction in dealing with Piper's growing pains as she acquires functional literacy in a new discursive context. The acquisition is long and painful, which is thrown in relief against her funny attempts to have "learned" prison-life. Piper likes to read. Before arriving at Litchfield, she reads several books about how to survive in prison. At one point, her new cell-mate, Nichols (Natasha Lyonne), asks "what are you in for, blondie?" Piper responds, "you're not supposed to ask that. I read that you're not supposed to ask that." Amused, Nichols asks, "did you study for prison?" It quickly becomes evident that Piper's studying has not helped prepare her for life at Litchfield. Moreover, rather than helping her in any practical sense, her middle-class bearing and schooled literacy functions to separate her from her environment and otherwise mark her distinct class status in the prison. "She thinks she's fancy," as Red diagnoses right away. Trying to talk with several black inmates who are discussing religion, and overhearing a phrase she recognizes, the agnostic Piper excitedly repeats "*Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison?" The conversing

women, Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson (Danielle Brooks) and Poussey Washington (Samira Wiley), stare blankly back: "no, we're talking about the bible." In addition to poking fun at Piper's tastes and casual, unironic participation in the institutional appropriation of cultural blackness, the scene also serves to humble the myth of literary humanism. A longheld if often unstated (and unchallenged) belief about reading literature is that it makes one a better, more empathetic, and more discerning person ready for civic life. The literary project is thought to connect with reality and the lived experience of the real in palpable ways. Here, it only connotes an elitist neo-liberal solipsism and pattern of celebrated self-reference.[142] In this case, Piper's literary literacy broadcasts her class blindness as well as highlights the privileged nature of her access to official or quasi-official bodies of knowledge. Prefiguring her short-term trajectory in the season, the scene forecasts how Piper can work the prison officers and cultivate affinities with the prison's governing apparatus. Her initial alliance with the delusional would-be benevolent father-figure, therapist and Corrections Officer Glen Healy, bespeaks the ways Piper is uniquely able to navigate forms of white patriarchy when it suits her to do so. Similarly, she is initially able to solicit favors from lecherous executive officer and part-time good guy Joe Caputo (Nick Sandow).

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[142] We might think of the opening title sequence which prioritizes confrontation and direct contact, the immediate mediation and reporting of experience. It is not my sense that Jenji Kohan and the writers have it out for Toni Morrison in particular, but the show expresses skepticism about "the literary" as an artistic venue in the context of middle-class education.

Figure 5.5: As Piper reveals to her family, in a flashback, that she has been charged and will be going to prison, the camera takes Piper's P.O.V in the shot-reverse-shot exchange that follows. The viewer is literally put in Piper's position as she testifies both to her family and her family's highly cosmetized representation of itself on the table before her in the form of family photographs. Facing her as she speaks, the photo archive on the marble coffee table works to connect the analeptic episode with the dialogue she is having with Larry in the narrative present about how her mother is disguising Piper's incarceration to her friends to maintain respectability.

Focalizing prison through a white, middle-class lens is treated in the narrative as an exercise in ethnographic observation and sociological documentation. Modulated through Piper's viewpoint, even when the narration concerns other characters, *OITNB*, especially in the first season, presents "the experience of prison" rather than "prison," assuming an autonomous subject position and treating prison itself as a transitory genre or premise for a certain type of representational ethos. Over and over again, the supportive people around Piper insist that her stay is "temporary." Prison, it is decreed, will not define her or change her identity; it is just a scary experience to get through before returning, eventually, to the daily comforts of "normal life," comforts that will be available to her as soon as she returns. Where *The Wire* may install a white interpretative

voice in its approach to representing social systems, *OITNB* works categorically from the generic armature of white ethnographer narratives. "Prison" serves as an exoticized (and eroticized) premise for the show's artistic program in social reportage, reflecting how an anthropological basis orders the show's "ambivalent relationship to competing imperatives of duty and pleasure, of judgement and mercy, and of inward and outward compulsions" (Kearns 23). The narration directs us to laugh at Piper's uptight and hilariously square Northeastern WASP family. But it requires the viewer to identify on some level with the family's moral reserve, values, and worldview in allowing that Piper's imprisonment is unjust and the actual experience of prison appalling – this is a structural feature of the show. We have seen what her life was and *could be* as an affluent white woman. Before surrendering her custody to Litchfield, Piper tells Larry that she will get "ripped in prison" and vows to read a lot, asserting she will "not lose a year of her life to prison." Although Piper's vapid self-improvement mantra are ironized, the narration nonetheless requires viewers grant her stated neo-liberal humanism in order to function as a tragic-comedy story.[143]

Because of how *OITNB* has progressed through its subsequent seasons - - becoming more democratic, more melodramatic, and also more polemic in the manner of the best kinds of critical satire, not unlike Jenji Kohan's middle-class family opera, *Weeds* - - one might easily forget the show's initial foray in docudramatic bourgeois realism. As the narrative has continued across multiple years and season, it has, in part

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[143] One of the bold choices Kohan and the showrunners made in season three and four involves turning Piper into an unlikeable character and even a villain. At the same time, the show really becomes about the other characters in Litchfield, including the corrections officers. It is telling that the move to address complaints about the first season led to divesting the show of its protagonist and the narratological function Piper plays as a focalizing trope.

responding to fans and critics, become more about Litchfield as an ecosystem and ensemble showcase and less about Piper and her storyline(s).

The first episode underscores, at the level of form, how *OITNB* relies on dramatically charged encounters with alterity. Beginning with voiceover narration, Piper conveys how she likes showers, likes how comfortable they make her – as she speaks, a montage shows her bathing in alone and, alternatively, with Alex and then Larry in different romantic situations. A smash cut brings us to Piper showering in prison, in cold water. "Showers *were* comfortable." As she leaves the shower, she is accosted and felt-up, somewhat playfully, by Taystee, who proceeds to evaluate Piper's breasts. Later in the episode, when we return to the bathroom scene, Piper is confronted by the deranged-looking Blanca Flores (Laura Gomez) who lurches at Piper and shouts "boo!" Before she has a chance to recover from her scare, Piper turns toward an open shower stall and sees Nichols giving head to another inmate; the over-stated, almost pornographic nature of blocking and framing in the shot exoticizes the women as well as conveys through focalization how it features in Piper's erotic imaginary.

Figure 5.6: The last shot of a tripartite shot focalized through Piper's view her
first day in prison

In short succession, Piper has her privacy violated by an outspoken large black woman, is

scared by an unkempt, wild-looking Latina, and then witnesses lesbians having carefree

public sex. The bathroom, once a scene of private comfort, indulgent warmth, and even

romantic energy, becomes a museum of horrors to a heteronormative, white middle-class

mindset, the scene working in effect as a didactic panorama in discomfort by staging

various encounters with otherness. As we know, Piper's line of work is in "artisanal bath

products." Her livelihood is predicated on the aesthetic experience of cosmetic self-care,

an epistemology of selective atomization and ritualistic indulgence as a mode of civic-

minded self-presentation. The sterile, public Litchfield bathroom perforates Piper's sense

of her selfobject geometry, her sense of her personhood in relationship to culturally

mediated spaces. As Taystee's comments and actions make clear, this sense of violation

manifests in physical discomfort and harassment. Holding the scene together, in other

words, is a white sense of autonomous identity and identity in space that is reproduced in

the cinematography. The above shot of the two women, filmed in a close over-the-

shoulder frame, implies the focalized third-person perspective anchored through Piper's

vision. Owing to her history of repressed lesbian desire, Piper's initial experience in the showers frames the prison bathroom as a pyschodramatic exteriorization, a space of erotic possibility intermingling danger with excitement. Alterity is frightening, but tinged with libidinal possibility and dramatic potential.

The program's provocative opening title sequence furthermore communicates a prevailing quasi-anthropological design. Where many shows, including *The Wire*, sport a fashionable, thematically resonant staccato montage set to music for their openings, *OITNB* introduces an important wrinkle to its title sequence: the montage does not include shots from the show itself or offer a straightforward assemblage of abstract, prison-related footage. Instead, the opening sequence stitches together a number of photographic, still images of women offset against a skeletal background montage consisting of straying, hand-held shots of Litchfield prison – these latter shots reproduce the kinds of camera-intensive shooting strategies I discuss at length in chapter three: these are object-oriented, askew frames that hone in on particular, seemingly incidental details, "random" minutiae that become, in the course of their framing, meaningfully symbolical features of the reality being documented. In the OITNB opening sequence, these are gate and fence imagery, a blank wall of phones, and two different shots of seagulls flying past chain-link fences in the foreground. The title card lingers on this motif of flight as freedom, a seagull flying past and above the razor-wired walls of an implied prison (below).[144] The shot perfectly encapsulates the interplay between realist cinematography (artfully askew framing, suggestive detail) and symbolic iconography.

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[144] It is perhaps worth mentioning that it isn't entirely obvious that he seagull is flying "out of" or "into" prison – it only matters insomuch as the seagull seems to suggest mobility as opposed to stagnation

Figure 5.7: The opening title card for *OITNB*

This is the rhetorical backdrop for the precession of photographs. While not stated outright, the sequence appears to simulate an extra-diegetic scenario in documentation: processing new inmates into prison life. In this manner, the montage suggests the process of incarceration as well as itself indicates a history of incarceration as a media archive. There are three main types of photographs in the sequence, all of them straight-on images of the women's faces shot against low background lighting: shots of the entire face, shots of just the eyes and cheekbones, shots of the women's mouths. Suggestively, the effect of the successive intercuts is to imply the precarious ethical balance between humanistic representation and dehumanizing anatomization, the shots disarticulating the human face and anonymizing the subject. Regina Spektor's exhortation in the lyrics: "the animals, the animals / trapped, trapped, trapped 'till the cage is full…" suggests the dualistic ethics of ethnography. Other more personal shots, especially those focusing on the eyes, appear to

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or confinement rather than embody an escape fantasy. Accordingly, a cynic might also read the fetishizing of uninhibited personal freedom so expressed at the level of realist symbolism accords with the show's tacitly white emphasis on individualism. For Piper, the desire is mobility rather than simply not being in prison, the latter being the more dire and exigent case for many of her inmates – "taking steps is easy, standing still is hard."

court a sense of Derridean recognition by confronting the viewer with a direct gaze.[145]

Several are quite poignant, even piercing, stylizing Bathes' idea about images that cut

through their medium and directly inspire an *immediate,* affective response.[146] One of the

more striking and stylistically distinct features of the montage concerns this very point. A

number of the images, which appear as if photographic stills, suddenly move, animating

the media artifact and translating the fact of documentation and the information

communicated into a living, present view unto the real. Several already poignant images

of closely framed eyes become even more striking when, after a moment, the returning

gaze is enlivened, the subject appearing to stare in real-time out from the screen at the

viewer. In another shot, an image of a woman's hands, hand-cuffed behind her back,

begin to move. Another such image depicts in close-up a woman's inked finger being

pressed into a fingerprint record – after a moment, the image ceases to be just an image

and transforms into a scene-in-miniature when the picture becomes film.

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[145] The opening credit sequence may be alluding to a tradition in feminist cinematography pioneered by the likes of Chantal Akerman in her provocative short film, *La Chambre* (1972). Famously consisting of a single, slowly rotating shot from a centered position in an apartment room, the film subjects the viewer to an intimate, circling portrait of a domestic scene – what the director has called a "moving still-life." Among the panorama, a young woman (Akerman herself) sits in a bed and stares directly back at the camera as she masturbates. Not only does her gaze confront the viewer's, it is implied that she can "see" the camera even when the camera can no longer see her – it is an artful attempt to resist a tradition of scopophilic portraiture and rework an essentialist male gaze by resisting how mainstream cinema formally objectifies women and commodifies a male fantasy of female sexuality.

[146] See chapter two for a discussion of "punctum" and Barthes' *Camera Lucida*

Figure 5.8: Still image from the opening sequence

The shot is a reciprocal metaphor, the image's testimony to the translation of human anatomy into information (fingerprinting) is itself animated and made "immediate" and present, turning the artifact itself (the picture of fingerprinting as a signifier in a syntagm) into a grounds for the real. The program makes clear through its opening titles one of its main goals: confronting audiences with the fact of these women and their realities through the direct documentation of them. Here the stirring lyrics to Spektor's "You've Got Time" underscore the mission in mimetic social reportage: "remember all their faces, remember all their voices…" Under this human-affirming auspices and by assuming a minoritarian posture, mediation and representation are coupled in the mode of documentary as positive advocacy. *OITNB* suggests that it is challenging viewers and confronting them with an underacknowledged reality it is producing and making seen. Melodramatic trappings aside, this is realism.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESCUING FUTURISM:

RACHEL KUSHNER, FEMINIST TECHNICS, MODERNIST TECHNOPHILIA

> There is no Life or Death
> Only activity
> There is no Space or Time
> Only intensity,
> And tame things
> Have no immensity
> - Mina Loy, "The Feminist Manifesto," 1914

> Genuine realism, taken at the moment of its emergence, is a discovery
> process, which, with its emphasis on the new and hitherto unreported,
> unrepresented, and unseen, and its notorious subversion of inherited ideas
> and genres, is in fact itself a kind of modernism. (2012)
> - Fredric Jameson

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I want to close this project by considering media-intensive realism as a politically

valent cultural technique. One of the goals of this project has been to establish a critical

idiom responsive to the distinct semiotic aspects of different media and attentive to the

politics of form. To this end, my analysis has emphasized the epistemological as well as

ideological dimensions of different media syntaxes. In this final chapter, I conclude by

looking at how media-intensive realist style endeavors toward a political strategy in formal experimentation. By revisiting arguments proposed by Mark Goble and Justus Nieland, I assess new realism as a kind of modernism. Media-intensive approaches often solicit an antihumanist or determinist perspective, a critical orientation toward techno-semiotics requiring the revelation and disclosure of media's scripting of the perceptible real. As I argued in chapter one, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is an expression of this tradition where its formally innovative narration redirects the imperatives of social realism to signify technology's unrepresentable social and cultural impacts. To instate the elusive technological real in positive terms, Pynchon presents the V2 rocket as a totalizing hyper-object that upends representational thinking and its discursive topography.

One of the key concepts I have emphasized is "technesis," the idea that technology is radically other and its ranging effects on people and culture are fundamentally reduced and mischaracterized by their representation in language. It is worth considering how the technophilic designs of new realist narration treat the 'realities' authored by technesis. What possibilities are imagined for new, emergent, or disruptive forms of representation? How does a quintessentially 'realist' impulse to discover and show "the new and hitherto unreported, unrepresented, and unseen" coordinate with an avant-garde activity in modernist experimentation? If the situation posited by technesis cannot be adjusted through representational means, how might technesis as a basis for cultural techniques nonetheless facilitate the emergence of new cultural forms?

This line of questioning is not intended to vest realism with the kinds of political heroism often attributed to avant-garde "literature," but rather an attempt to describe how formal manifestations of technesis can renegotiate prevailing cultural syntaxes. Emergence entails the unscripted and even unpredictable generation of new fields of possibility. Artistic experimentation is often discussed in this light – whether its clearing a new grounds for more authentic communication or finding forms of meaning that evade hegemonic determination. It is now a pat methodological feature of critical literary studies to fetishize emergence as an epistemic endpoint for literary production.[147] This is because "genuine" emergence is held out as an extra-capitalist field of force. Without wanting to contest the idea of emergence itself, because maybe it is a useful stratagem if not an accurate description of cultural-political dynamics, at least not at the scale of text, I don't think it makes sense in the first place to assume "literature," as either a technology or cultural habitus, is especially well suited to the kinds of activism emergence often suggests.[148] Of course, this is not to suggest that literature or narrative art has no political

[147] One of the reasons I am returning to modernism is because this construction is itself a methodological truism consecrated after the Frankfurt School. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno emphasizes the role of form and formal innovation as a means of critique. Adorno is particularly interested in what he conceives of as a negative moment in the modernist artwork, being that the artwork defeats symbolic accounts of its content because it already contains a critique of the symbol. As he says, "the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of object elements, defines the relation of art to society" (129).

[148] As I have suggested throughout this project, realism as a political activity and de facto theory of "the literary" tends to coalesce around reformist and bourgeois conceptions of art. On the one hand, this makes perfect sense and it is a claim about cultural production that needs to be made and made often, especially in English departments – the overwhelming majority of artworks, even profound and well-crafted ones, simply are not progressive or radical. Where this manifests in literary criticism, it makes for good reading, and the kinds of suspicious close-reading strategies that have held sway for decades have routinized an array of compelling, tactically impressive analytic maneuvers attentive to the social and political dimensions of text. This is a critical vocabulary attuned to the reality of hegemonic discourse and critical of its formal manifestations in language, communication, and art. It is in this tradition, for instance, that Linda Hutcheon can say that postmodernism "de-centers" cultural commonplaces and contests dominant social figurations. I want to stress that the allure of Hutcheon's heuristic is evident and understandable. In Hutcheon's estimation, "a poetics" is a critical rather than descriptive analysis of literature and literary form. So, while her program usefully fashions a responsive critical idiom, I do not

efficacy or transformative epistemological qualities. By way of concluding "the technics of realism," I want to consider how formal innovation can *mean*.

This chapter analyzes how technesis as a conceit motivates new realist experimentation and suggests technophilia as a basis for formal experimentation. I assess Rachel Kushner's ambitious novel *The Flamethrowers* (2013) in this regard. The novel is one of serval new realist media that repurposes the modernist bildungsroman to subvert and then reinstall its intellectual program. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman* (1975), Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) are antecedent media to Kushner's project in metafictional autobiography.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Flamethrowers* as a piece of realistic historical fiction is that it foregrounds its theoretical inquiries and directly addresses technological determinism as a semiotic reality to be negotiated. For Reno, the novel's protagonist and Kushner's diegetic proxy, this means trying to define oneself as an artist in opposition to the masculinist dictates she encounters in New York City and Italy in the late 1970s. It also entails an attempt to theorize new forms of subjectivity through technological media. Reno is a working-class artist preoccupied with motorcycles, machinery, and velocity – her photography and short documentary films capture landscapes she has 'composed' with vehicular signatures. Reno's art concerns both the thrilling moment of inscription - - driving motorcycles at high speed across open terrain -

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think her assessment of postmodernism describes with accuracy the state of cultural production as much as envisions and rationalizes an essentialist category of the literary, one wherein the critic - - in league with the author - - takes the mantle of politically active cultural hero. To be blunt for a moment, this is a self-serving and increasingly deceptive fantasy. If we as a profession want to be politically active and socially germane, we need to be real about what narrative art is and actually does.

- as well as the after the fact documentation of its physical trace, offering a metaleptic testimony to dynamism, energy, and danger.

Part historical fiction, part thriller, and part artistic treatise, *The Flamethrowers* also offers an extended disquisition on Italian Futurism – the novel reconsiders that movement's fascination with technology and its intoxicating and transformative effects. It also scrutinizes the program's hyper-masculine and proto-fascist doctrine. Haunted by Futurism's jingoism and misogyny, the novel asks what if anything can be redeemed from its euphoric techno-fetishism. By extension, the narrative reconsiders essentialist readings of technology and technological praxis – a recurring trope in the novel, revisiting Pynchon's handling of a similar question in *Gravity's Rainbow*, involves treating the scopophilic male gaze. How can a woman artist, a filmmaker and photographer, resist or contest this cultural technique? Can a machine grammar be harnessed for new and auspicious political ends, or do technologies always already circumscribe the conditions of their use? If, as Stiegler suggests, "man *is* technics," how might this statement of a techno-semiotic reality effect different types of bodies in different historical instants? I propose that Kushner's feminist remediation of the modernist bildungsroman is also an exercise in media archaeology where it revisits and reconstructs a previous media regime from a position of piqued epistemological estrangement. It revisits Futurism from this perspective, attempting to rescue from that movement's incendiary, technophilic axioms an auspicious theory of embodiment in anachronistic media.

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Several contemporary artists have looked to modernist technophilia as a basis for their own art. As Justus Nieland writes, describing novelist Tom McCarthy's thematic interest in modernist media,

> media archaeology…invests in past media cultures, especially the unredeemed technological utopias of the historical avant-garde, to understand contemporary network culture, giving obsolete medial objects an afterlife in the fashion of what Benjamin once called the revolutionary energies of the outmoded. (571, 2012)[149]

As I have been suggesting throughout this project, media-intensive realism looks to accommodate the provisional, noisy expressions of superannuated media. An artistic rendering of media archaeology, what Nieland playfully calls "dirty media," is a programmatic corollary of media-intensive technique.

Modernism's enticement no doubt stems from its hagiographic mythography. The modernist propensity to frame artistic innovation as an urgent political intervention is an inviting ground for artistic production, however reactionary or chauvinistic these would-be interventions proved in their historical execution. In the face of literature's ever-evident embourgeoisement in the present, the petition for the rhetorical and cultural exigence imagined in manifesto modernism is understandable, along with its attraction to media. Against an ossified and institutional "Literature," literature might be defined as an insurgent political activity once again. A modernist historiography poses another set of possibilities for a contemporary artist along these lines; shrouded in disappointment and jettisoned idealism, "modernism" suggests a romanticized template for tropes of

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[149] Nieland is referring to the "media archaeology" defined by Erik Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, whose demarcation of this subfield within media studies tries to outline approach "suspicious of deterministic approaches to technology and media, as well as positivist historicism's accounts of the evolution of medial history from past to present, accounts that overlook both epistemic ruptures and unforeseen continuities between medial pasts and presents. Instead, media archaeology opts for a "reading of the 'new' against the grain of the past" (3, 2008)

ennobling defeat. Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, in different ways and under

different guiding auspices, quietly exalt modernism as a failed cultural experiment.

Modernism is the attempt, after a loss of innocence about representation, to invent forms

that will determine their own audiences, "to project a future onto a future unremediated

by any form of commodity" (Jameson 24, 2012). This a modernism that constitutes itself,

is future oriented, and which produces its own reader and reading subject. We might

recall Ben Marcus's defense of difficult literary art, wherein he advocates on behalf of a

quasi-modernist literature that can ""interrogate the assumptions of realism and bend the

habitual gestures around new shapes" and create "fierce little reading machines,

devourers of a new syntax" (47, 49, 2005). Put simply, Marcus's restatement of

modernism envisions an artistic triumph over history. The agency conferred to art and, by

implication, the artist, is itself a component of the modernist imaginary. Nieland is right

about new artists looking to modernism for what if offers media archaeology in terms of

estranging techno-epistemological potential. But I think there is also an ideological myth

of the humanist artist that needs to be addressed as well, one that longingly reifies the

modernist artist's doomed Herculean task in redemptive cultural heroism against the

overwhelming mechanized tide of machines, war, and monopolistic capitalism.

Italian Futurism is an exceptional and usefully hyperbolic program to address as a

modernist prototype for the reasons I am suggesting. The movement looks to technology

and technological innovation as a basis for its ambitious and would-be socially

transformative art, but it necessarily forecloses the potentialities of technological

otherness in the interest of preserving (masculine) individuality. Italian Futurism under

F.T. Marinetti saw that new technologies could change the world as well as infuse

language with the energy to "[trample] our atavistic ennui" (1, 1909). In the "Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909), Marinetti asseverates, "Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap." He continues, "We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace." Literature is here reimaged as an incendiary weapon to wielded against feminized cultural torpor: "poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces." Marinetti's strident proposals presume that a newfound techno-literary artistry can transform the conditions of one's existence.

However inexcusable and unconscionable the Futurist program, the efficacy attributed to literary art in this estimation is not without its own appeal. Built into the argument is a belief in technology's transformative cultural value as an otherizing semiotic force. As Mark Goble argues in *Beautiful Circuits* (2010), discussing modernist experimentation and its desire for opening new channels for authentic communication, "the mediated life of modern culture takes shape as a network of desires for intimate, material, and affecting relations with technology" (8). Goble's analysis illustrates modernism's attraction to media for precisely those moments when they "do more or less than communicate" — moments when machines do not function as transparent conduits for the flow of information, but instead emerge as objects of affection, nostalgia, and delight (21).

If modernism offers a useful template for imagining an efficacious literary art,

what are we to make of its technophilia? Nieland's account of media archaeology

usefully describes how modernism can signify in its present "afterlife" where it re-

occasions artistic approaches to media, but it doesn't apply to artists like Rachel Kushner

whose novels consider sincere, generative, and present kinds of media-embodiments.

There is an obvious curatorial dimension to Kushner's fiction, but what Nieland refers to

as "modernist necrophilia" in McCarty is at odds with the spirit of a different kind of

media-intensive return to modernism. As I have suggested, Kushner's novel draws on and

works from a rich genealogy of feminist-minded historiographical metafictions.[150] I argue

that a feminist, identitarian media archaeology takes seriously the epistemic openings

afforded by modernism's "unredeemed technological utopias…and revolutionary

energies of the outmoded" (571). Taking seriously does not, necessarily, mean endorsing

or resuscitating. But reading against the grain of a prevailing media-epistemology does,

perhaps, "open" media. Describing her motivation for writing *The Flamethrowers*,

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[150] In this respect, Kushner's fiction is working in the tradition of self-construction as minoritarian advocacy established by artists like Maxine Hong Kingston. Kington's *The Woman Warrior* also repurposes the bildungsroman and questions the basis of its acculturation telos (1975). The novel fuses the individualistic directives of the non-fiction memoir with the lyrical and anti-realist conventions of "story-talks," pseudo-mystical and embellished accounts of the narrator's family's history. As the narrator contends, story-talks work to "establish realities" through the act of narration. Self-authorhood in this fashion involves more than individuation – it requires a space for the authentic communication of a constellated subject. Unifying these works is their sense of constellation, an art-based template for constituting oneself in time, place, and community as well as in and through language. It means partaking in a propulsive realism. The kind of historiographical metafiction that obtains in *The Flamethrowers* and *The Woman Warrior* describes how the narratives interrogate the transhistorical realist "Novel" as a discursively freighted form. Each text contests the representative power of literary realism and disputes its cultural dispensation. Which is why the novels foreground an artistic tradition to work against in the interest of outlining another, diverging model of historical experience. In each of the novels, discursive violence summons corresponding physical violence against women – a point that Kushner is especially keen to situate within a masculine genealogy of art. Broadly speaking, *The Flamethrowers* and *The Woman Warrior* suggest their status as "historiographical metafiction" because they explore the connection between discursive forms, social formations, and historically situated ways of knowing. Their work accordingly moves to critique masculinist and proprietary logic, structural violence, and the prescription of women's identities.

Kushner in the novel's coda discloses her approach to antecedent media and media

objects accordingly – "we want them to open a space, cut a register, locate a tone,

without which the novelist is lost." As I will argue in closing this analysis, Kushner

appears to rehabilitate the work of poet Mina Loy, feminist and sort-lived Futurist, in

envisioning a vitalist objectification in technics.[151]

I have chosen to end this project by considering *The Flamethrowers* because the

novel ruminates the stakes of interfacing human experience and non-human media. *The

Flamethrowers* foregrounds the dangers involved, considering the different levels of

discursive and physical violence accorded to determination. This situation is borne out in

media, too. Fire, as Bernard Stiegler points out, restating the Prometheus myth, is

technology's primordial pharmacological scene. As a technology, the cultural necessities

authored by fire run hand-in-hand with catastrophe and death. McLuhan suggests along

similar lines, "media amputate the limbs they extend" (28, 1964). Futurism's febrile

euphoria and rabid technofetishism offers a compelling historical case study on this point.

All the agency attributed to machine-man hybrids and metalized bodies prior to WWI,

when Marinetti could still assert that "war is the world's only hygiene," was read very

differently after the conflict. Rather than enhancing man, technological advancements

mechanized mass death on an unprecedented, unfathomable scale.[152] Technological

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[151] In the "Feminist Manifesto," Loy attempts to establish a specifically female selfhood first by joining Futurism's anti-social, singularizing tendencies with the collectivist goals of feminism. Reno's progression through the novel takes a similar trajectory from radical individualism to collectivism.

[152] It is important in the novel that the elder Valera, Sandro's father, was a soldier in WWI and says he did not want to be in another war after. Though he and his friends avoided the trenches, "still, in just two years, 1917 and 1918, half their little gang died" (77). His intellectual Futurism continues, but it no longer takes the form of sacrosanct individual power – the soldier. Rather, the success of his company launches him into a rarefied aristocratic circle, casting his Futurism into the sphere of policy. The

advancements administered the hemorrhaging of a generation. Situated against this backdrop as well as it subsequent articulations under corporativist Italian fascism in WWII,[153] the dangers inherent to inhuman media takes on a doubly resonant meaning in Reno's narrative present. Reno's predilection for a feminist media aesthetics walks a line between expressive freedom and discursive circumscription and even sexual violence.

If literature via realism needs to be negotiated as a cultural calculus, surely media and media forms also must be redressed for their role in authoring present hegemonies. Film, for instance, has for decades been talked about as an essentialized vehicle for male voyeurism and scopophilia. Even critics who are otherwise dissatisfied with essentialism as a concept rely, albeit sometimes strategically, on a critical posture that casts the visual culture industry as a fundamentally misogynist enterprise, one that naturalizes and possibly even *ontologizes* a sexualizing, patriarchal directive. In this logic, the intrinsic quality of the machine itself, the camera, is, on some level, understood to reproduce masculinist discursive practices where it concerns both the representation of women as well as posits a point of identification through an implied, male third-person viewer. In this longstanding arrangement, as Laura Mulvey famously stipulates in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), woman is always the object of and for the male subject, always the bearer of the look rather than the one doing the looking.

Hephaestus-style mechanic-tinkerer who prevails in early Futurism does not survive the impersonalization and specialization of industrialized mass death.

[153] An important lingering background for *The Flamethrowers* is the holocaust and atomic bomb – as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the nightmare of techno-scientific ideology is invoked indirectly as a metaleptic strategy.

Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1988) offers a compelling counterpoint to apparatus theory and its totalizing claims. Modleski rejects structural semiotics and the critical vocabulary employed by Mulvey and Christian Metz imported from Jacques Lacan. She adroitly rejects a monolithic male gaze. In order to rescue the individual viewer as well as acknowledge the individual viewing experience, Modleski forwards a cinema-based restatement of Stuart Halls encoding/decoding model, emphasizing "real" women viewers, not abstract and homogenous "subjects" upon which patriarchy, its mechanisms and forms act uniformly (9). Modleski's argument makes an important intervention at the same time it necessarily reifies an essentialized "real" woman viewer. In the manner of Linda Hutcheon's ideal postmodern reader, Modleski holds out that an acute, critically aware viewer of cinema can discern in masculinist-inclined films the "guilt, gaps, and paranoia of patriarchal structures" (23). The claim enshrines a productively adversarial relation between the individual reader and a cultural dominant. Which is just to say that if Modleski rejects as a matter of method an essentialist characterization of film signification, her subsequent proposal admits the practical fact of the cinema's epistemological determinations. "The viewer" can resist or modulate a film's program because they can decode, expose, and arbitrate a text's underwritten ideological scripts. While Modleski's method helpfully resuscitates "the viewer" as a site where meaning is made as well received, her analysis places undue stock in the singular hermeneutic eye to expose and successfully decode a film – a process that results in a preferred, alternate reading through, as she states, "a mode of deconstruction." By focusing on the hypothetical viewer rather than thinking about "reception" more broadly, Modleski valorizes the film critic and fails to account for the

ways film meaning construed, reproduced, and circulated in a wider economy of media forms adjacent to a heroic hermeneutic recoding.

One of the subsequent sets of problems that has defined the post-critical moment as it bears on the question of media essentialism is its structurally necessary maintenance of a Foucauldian-rut; suspicious reading programmatically reinstalls what it intends to diagnose and do away with. In this case, an ideological commitment to feminist critique strategically requires, and therefore posits as true, a male essentialist camera to be identified and renegotiated. Still, the recent history of film and television speaks to a more complicated reality owing to something that looks like actual essentialism. As a number of vaguely "progressive" filmmakers have looked to 'empower' female characters and simultaneously objectify male bodies, the decidedly mixed results speak to the media structural dimensions of representation. Even if the *content* put before the camera changes, the language inherent to the medium itself seems to supersede and steer the message, if not co-opt it entirely. Avant-garde feminist filmmaking in the wake of pioneering figures like Chantal Akerman has, for all its innovation and creative power, been better at demonstrating and condemning the fact of the male gaze than it has been effective at offering an alternative visual syntax. [154]

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[154] In contemporary mainstream filmmaking, a vague push for the appearance of gender equality, largely conducted with respect to consumer advocacy, has unintentionally highlighted the multiple ways in which a normalized gender scripting has shaped the industry's cultural praxis. In 2016, more than half of the industry's top grossing films passed the famous "Bechdel test," a meager starting threshold, to be sure, but massive inequity remains. Thus, a conventionally attractive white woman can now play the lead character in a *Star Wars* franchise film, as Felicity Jones does in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), but men will still have more than 80% of the film's dialogue (Thomas 2017). While this is an purposefully egregious example, the problem could again be said to be a matter of content – or, rather, an issue of content's matter. That is, it's not hard to imagine a follow-up film to Rogue One or occurring elsewhere in the *Star Wars* franchise that features more women characters and "gives" these characters more dialogue. If it is simply a matter of being more representative and using the camera differently, this problem might be easily rectified.

The question of reengineering cinema's predominant *formal* language is trickier to redress owing to its qualitative nature. An obvious way into a discussion of essentialized camera forms is to address how cinematic texts have formally modeled sexual objectification. In her analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's work, Mulvey shows how the director's oeuvre inaugurates a scopophilic grammar of seeing. This derives from the camera's inclination to focalize a male character's languorous views of a woman's body – a tactic which is then recreated where it characterizes how the 'objective,' third-person narration similarly visualizes women characters. Mulvey's analysis pays close attention to the role anatomizing shots play in delineating and objecting women characters, parceling as they do the female body for the viewer's consumption, the body's discrete component pieces working as a disarticulated grammatical unit of sexual intrigue. [155]

The media essentialist argument can also be assessed in light of attempts to rework the male gaze as a formal system. Shots that "objectify" male bodies, for instance, tend to solicit and model an appreciation for forms of masculine power – different from the language of "violation," "voyeurism," and "vulnerability" attributed to female exploitation under the male gaze (Mulvey). I am not suggesting that male objectification is a worthwhile political strategy - - the fact that so many popular films have recently moved in this direction suggests as much - - but rather that male objectification to begin

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[155] As I discussed in chapter four, *Orange is the New Black* struggles along these lines to navigate the competing anatomizing impulses of the documentary camera – what it suggests as a gesture in representation as advocacy-in-visualization, connoting "representation" in the democratic sense, also courts an ethnographic logic of objectification.

with, at the level of form, registers differently as a cultural technique owing, in part, to

media essentialism.[156]

When entries from across the genre spectrum of mainstream visual culture do

move to objectify male bodies - - as in the films, *Man of Steel* (2013), *300* (2006), *The*

Terminator (1984), *Top Gun* (1986), *Fight Club* (1999), *Shame* (2011), and *Magic Mike*

(2012), or, as in a recent spate of television shows, *True Blood* (2008-2015), *Casual*

(2015), *Jessica Jones* (2015), *Girls* (2012-2017), *The OA* (2016), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*

(2015), just to name a few - - they appear to enact a (male) homosocial or homoerotic

gaze rather than succeed in visualizing compelling forms of female desire.[157] One of the

ways third-wave feminism falters turns on this very point – its idea of self-empowering

female sexuality unintentionally testifies to the transcendent, extra-historical reality of

male sexual prerogatives. Under this design, the camera as a technology would seem to

authenticate the empirical basis of male seeing. Even a celebrated indie art-film like *Blue*

is the Warmest Color (2013) drew criticism when it was revealed just how exploitative

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[156] The denotative sense of objectification, to be "object-like" or "made like an object," is in this calculus, an aesthetics of prosthetic enhancement the likes of which Christine Poggi associates with Italian Futurism. The dream of metalized flesh entails a certain kind of physical objectification.

[157] A usefully pronounced example of this arises in *Man of Steel*. Within minutes of his introduction in the narrative, adult Clark Kent (Henry Cavill) is both shirtless and *on fire* as he saves several engineers and crew members on a burning oil-rig off the coast of the Pacific Northwest. In a slow motion shot, the camera hovers on Clark's bare chest and mid-section when he leaps off the rig's helicopter pad and holds up an entire collapsing derrick tower to allow the fleeing crew members escape. The shot's framing typifies an anatomizing, voyeuristic gaze. Of course, the shot is meant to boast Cavill's physique and 'prove' to audiences that the actor's stature is not simply a "cheat" or possibly even CGI-aided special effect. It is also meant to be, however flippantly, to be a formally legible, if bracketed, 'shout out' to women in an otherwise very adolescent male feature. I want to argue, however, that the shot evinces a homosocial erotics in the Futurist sense, a fact partially borne out of the title "man of steel." Though the phrase has long been normalized in American culture as an innocuous moniker for Superman, its vestigial fascist character remains intact. This example is such a useful one precisely because it demonstrates through its hyperbole how male objectification is often coupled with expressions of indomitable physical power.

and emotionally abusive director Abdellatif Kechiche had been toward his two, very young female stars. Clarifying the difference between lesbian cinema and "film lesbianism," the film has since its release been beset with controversy across critical communities on this question of authentic representation.[158]

Of course, essentialism along these lines has more to do with content, and sometimes form, rather than the technology's intrinsic semiotics. A common argument is that the technology could simply be used differently. One of the conceptual problems inherent to media studies concerns delineating exactly how media structurally determine or are consociated with the body. If it can be said, as Stiegler states axiomatically, that "man *is* technics," it is subsequently difficult to clarify how and, to what extent, this is true for which people in different contexts. A prosthetic account of embodiment may allow for personal empowerment, as Donna Haraway glamorizes and Katherine Hayles warns against, but it can also submit the body to the exogenous designs that override and determine what embodiment, say nothing of identity, *is*. As Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999),

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their
> bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is
> a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information
> technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and
> disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a
> condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in

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[158] One of the most telling structural problems facing the production of film and television art is the overwhelming majority of "above-the-line" work is done by men. *Mother Jones* reported in 2013 in "Hollywood's White Dude Problem," that of the top 250 grossing films made that year, "only 16 percent of key, behind-the-scenes roles were staffed by women - only 3 percent were cinematographers, 6 percent were directors, 10 percent were writers, and 15 percent executive producers." While the statistics are disconcerting, the one possibly hopeful upshot is that with a more representative body of people responsible working on the production side of the industry in positions of influence, the nature of the media may change at both the level of form and content.

a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for
constant survival (5)

Haraway's famous and politically well-intentioned "cyborg manifesto" presumes what

others have described as biotechnical basis of human ontology (1991). Employed as a

metaphor, *being a cyborg* means occupying a new cultural domain from a position of

newfound mastery and unlimited freedom. Presumed in her analysis, in other words, is a

self-knowing subject for whom prosthesis occasions a felicitous "being other." In spite of

its attempts at a socialistic material theory, her argument is about as neo-liberal as it gets.

Harraway's "myth of the cyborg" is more or less a nuanced quasi-Futurism

entailing the "fantasy of unlimited power" and ideology of enhancement Hayles warns

against. To be fair, Haraway's essay advertises its "irony" and is offered in the spirit of

provocation rather than tended as a serious account of machine materiality or biotechnical

personhood. With this in mind, I am not attempting to criticize her project or judge its

political aspirations as much as illustrate how it perpetuates technesis without taking

seriously the double-becoming of media. Because of this, the cyborg manifesto crucially

misreads how patriarchy and capitalism have a technical as well as cultural life. Haraway

misses, in other words, the point Jean Baudrillard makes when he avers, "media are not

the coefficients but the effectors of ideology" (38, 2004).[159] Her essay takes a figurative

description of "human life embedded in a material world" and treats it as a conceit – a

grounds for proposing "a common language for women."[160] One of the crucial

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[159] Baudrillard's emphasis here is in service of his brand of Marxism, which posits ideology as the driving historical force under capitalism. His point nonetheless suggests that technological are not merely conduits of (ideological) meaning, but producers of the ideological real.

[160] Haraway treats the cyborg as a heuristic that, unintentionally, suggests her indebtedness to the kind of postmodernist theory she sees herself evading. When is says "so my cyborg myth is about

misunderstandings about technology that Harraway perpetuates, one that Hayles

recognizes and incorporates in her articulation of posthumanism, is the subordination of

technologies and technological media to human desires and intentions. Technology

appears in this instrumentalist view as the conduit of predetermined meanings. For

Haraway, the cyborg as an *idea* installs a new imaginative basis for scripting one's

identity rather than designates how technology's multifold impacts change the grounds of

discursive operations prior to representation. Hayles's measured optimism, by contrast, is

more ambivalent about the interpenetration of the human with technologies precisely

because the extent and nature of the imbrication cannot be represented or predicted.

Technology's history literally cannot be written.

One of the chief difficulties subtended in media-intensive art is the dual problem

of becoming media. On the one hand, technological media can "create new worlds" and

transform extant cultural formations. On the other, because technologies and

technological systems supersede their human use, media-intensive art necessarily flirts

with its (possibly essentialist) semiotic over-determination. For this reason, to use

Nieland's phrase, modernism arises as a testing grounds for this question, where

modernism indicates "not [only] a repertoire of forms, per se, or a utopian technopoetics,

but…a series of mediations between the noble subjectivity of the human and inhuman

media" (572). How then might we think about technologies and media as a basis for

formal innovation?

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transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might
explore as one part of needed political work," she may as well be citing Hutcheon.

The Flamethrowers (2013) explores the interconnection between media, representation, and reality. Kushner is one of several contemporary writers quick to consult literary theory and enfold it into the world of their fiction – her novel is a rare text that works as an entry in "page-turning," realistic historical fiction as well as affords a serious theoretical treatise. *The Flamethrowers* courts its treatment as "historiographical metafiction." As with her first novel, *Telex From Cuba* (2008), *The Flamethrowers* dramatizes the constructedness of historical knowledge and the discursive nature of reality. Both foreground authorship and authoring. Kushner's fiction places a premium on the virtual, embodying the Foucauldian dictate, which I would underscore is a *technical* statement, that authors right to be other than what they are. Media emerge as a *vehicle* for affirmational consolidation as well as disarticulating change – thus the motorcycle is the novel's central trope, imagined both as a tool of utter freedom and object of abject determination.[161] In each novel, Kushner herself appears through a fictional avatar. *Telex From Cuba* features a protean, enigmatic exotic dancer named "Rachel K"; Reno in *The Flamethrowers* emerges as Kushner's version of Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* (1916). A restyled modernist flaneur, Kushner's Reno recasts the pensive "explorer protagonist" in a blaze of motor-oil and working-class angst. There is a touch of the road warrior to Reno, who is independent and talented, but

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[161] Early in the novel, after a long day of racing across Nevada highways and feeling enlivening and revitalized by her riding, Reno has an almost Pynchonian dream, a techno-substantivalist nightmare with its corresponding ghost of technological singularity:

> In the depths of cold motel sleep, I dreamed of a gigantic machine, an airplane so large it filled the sky metal and raking the sound of slowing engines… It moved slowly, the speed of the plane just about to land, but with no lights under its wings. I saw huge landing flaps, ugly with rivets, open on greasy hinges, as the plane came lower and lower, until there was nothing left of the sky but a gunmetal under-carriage, and enveloping screech. (17)

who too often looks to define herself by seeking male approval, turning again and again to a series of successive would-be father figures and role model artists to validate her identity. Whether it is her childhood motorcycle racing heroes, her rambunctious but knowledgeable dirt-bike riding cousins from Nevada, Scott and Andy, an art school peer and acquaintance who was shot while making a documentary, the "mythical Chris Kelly," an acquaintance she haphazardly pursues to New York without first contacting, her boyfriend Sandro Valera, corporate scion and charismatic Italian émigré artist, or the handsome and enigmatic would-be revolutionary, Gianni, Reno's journey through the novel is structured primarily through her encounters with different men. This underwrites the novel's genre armature in the bildungsroman – while Reno negotiates her adult identity and looks to define a nascent art career, she remains crucially dependent on men to concretize and acknowledge her maturation.

This is one of the ways the novel teases apart artistic production as a metaphor for self-authorhood. It considers the ways women artists may fashion a politically viable subject-position within patriarchy by restyling and appropriating the typically masculinist codes of valuation that organize academia, art criticism, and cultural production more generally. Kushner addresses this element of the novel's project in *The Flamethrower*'s candid afterword, "A Portfolio Curated by Rachel Kushner." She describes that the novel was inspired by photographs she had begun collecting:

> I was faced with the pleasure and headache of somehow stitching together the pistols and nude women as defining features of a fictional realm, and one in which the female narrator, who has the last word, and technically all words, is nevertheless continually overrun, effaced, and silenced by the very masculine world of the novel she inhabits – a contradiction I had to navigate, just as I had to find a way to merge what were by nature static and iconic images [the photographs] into a stream of life, real narrative life.

The book's provocative cover image, the photograph that inspired the novel, speaks to how *The Flamethrowers* renders the mediation of a media identity.

Figure 6.1: The image repurposed into the cover for *The Flamethrowers*

The woman's direct gaze confronts the viewer with a combination of sullen ferocity and youthful impudence, her pig-tails and war-paint conjoining a gesture in primitivistic violence with a child-like demeanor. As Kushner discovered it in an archive from the "Autonomia" scene upending Italy in the 1970s, the photograph was covered by two crossed pieces of medical tape – a retrospective paratextual censure. Remarking on the novel's cover image, Kushner says of the fierce-eyed woman, she describes "a creature of language, silenced." Autonomia, of course, was an insurrectionary feminist movement and loosely affiliated working class foment that swept through the country in the form of riots, work stoppages, and a series of high profile political kidnappings – "joyous and full of rage," Kushner offers, the movement was characterized by illegality and violence, but also play, gesticulation, non-work. In the novel, a romanticized version of the "Autonomia" affords Reno with an uplifting, grunge utopian zeitgeist. After she is

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betrayed by Sandro and abandoned, she merges with a riotous feminist demonstration in Rome: "I took their rage and negotiated myself into its fabric. I fused my sadness over something private to the chorus of their public lament" (279). A collective, lived art in civil-disobedience that proves a heartening alternative to the atomized bourgeois character of the New York City art scene.[162]

Reno arrives at this point in the novel only after her prolonged mis-education disabuses her of former dependencies. Left in a final state of promissory abeyance, "waiting for the next thing," Reno's story elucidates how the novel's cover photograph refracts the narrative's ambivalent project. Reno desires more than "an intensified representational presence," yearning for machine-enhanced and embodied virtual intensities. Modernism offers a template for art "that clears a space for authentic new communication" – especially communication that does more or less than communicate. Mediation itself signifies and contains a driving modernist paradox, interfacing "a desire to communicate with a desire to avoid straightforward communication." Thus, Reno's interest in technological media for its continuous double-becoming. Where her communication of an identity parses the immediate/mediated antinomy, Reno's venture in self-authorhood shows how technologies, like media, are the chance and obstacle for emergent forms of being.

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[162] Reno's trajectory recapitulates a philosophical complication Loy found in trying to articulate a subject-position for women artists. Her 1914 "Feminist Manifesto" ends with a commitment to self-expression, but, as Christine Walter points out, Loy's correspondence with Mabel Dodge Luhan suggests "she was aware of the essay's overweening attachment to individualist modes of social protest and artistic creation, and of the limits of such an attachment. Luhan's interests in Futurism, feminism, and personality made her a natural first reader for the 'Feminist Manifesto'" (Walter 21, 2007)

The stated goal to integrate static images "into life" characterizes Kushner's essay in neo-modernist media realism. The photograph intimates the opportunities and hazards involved. In the afterword, Kushner restates an aphorism she ascribes earlier in the novel to the fulminous and pompous ramblings of an over-eager, leading early Futurist in 1914, disclosing a desire to animate images with present life, "the future had to be lived now, in the now, as intensity" (75). Reno describes her skiing according to such an experiential, deictic aesthetics, her "drawing in time" across the mountain. Her motorcycle adventures in the desert salt-beds of Nevada restage a similar "drawing in speed" (28). Framing herself with her vehicles and the thrilling movements they allow, Reno envisions a liberating theory of art in pure velocity. Suggesting the productively estranging kinds of virtual embodiment that Brian Massumi in *Parables For the Virtual* (2002) attributes to movement, motion in his analysis destabilizing "positionality" and the Cartesian stabilities implied by the geometry of the "subject position," Reno formulates a Bergsonian techno-phenomenology.[163] She almost restates Mina Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism" (1914), where Loy intones, citing the estranging and beautiful power of velocity, "form hurtling against itself is thrown beyond the synopsis of vision," Bodies are not, in this conception, buffered containers thoroughly coherent and self-accounting as they exist in time. Rather, as Massumi points out, "bodies are always abstracted from themselves; while in motion, the body does not coincide with itself" (12). From this premise, Massumi argues that the body ensconces within its constitution an incorporeal

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[163] Kushner's first novel, *Telex From Cuba* (2008), begins with a consideration of media virtuality. Writing in her journal, young Everly Lederer muses about the nature of the tie between maps and the real expanses of terrain which they signify. She fixates on the calligraphically scripted "Tropic of Cancer" as she read it on her globe. "Divisions on a surface that is indifferent to rain, to borders, that can hold no object in place." Restating Baudrillard's conception of simulacra, "the map preceding the territory," the narrative prefaces its treatment of the Cuban Revolution with a statement of its guiding constructivist disposition.

element that is not it, "but of it… inseparable, coincident, but distinct" from the physical body (13).

But the novel again underwrites this storyline with an oppositional structure. Reno's story in the narrative present , the late 1970s, runs alongside another coming-of-age story, that of Sandro Valera's father as the elder Valera growing to adulthood in Italy. An early Futurist acolyte, WWI veteran, engineer, and eventual founder of the Valera Motor company, Valera's feverish trajectory into the military industry tracks the history of Futurism as it first takes shape and then contributes to the cultural and political ascension of fascism. The elder Valera's philosophical and artistic predilections closely resemble Reno's. Like his fellow Futurists, he is obsessed with speed. In fact, Valera ends up being more committed to Futurist dogmas than the practicing artist Futurists, owing to his education as an engineer – "none [of them] was interested in generating actual speed" (78). "They read poems about speed and metal," this was part of their general "call to metalize themselves, their bodies turned metal, into machines…Many among the little gang drew – dream machines and swift-moving men, or they arranged typed words to look like explosions on paper. Valera drew too…he drew what was actually possible. Real machines" (75).

In "Dreams of Metalized Flesh: Futurism and the Masculine Body" (1997), Christine Poggi explains the logical work that valorizing a hybridized man/machine body performs in the Futurist system. Poggi identifies that Marinetti and others were forced to reconcile a series of contradictions that inhered in their project:

> How best to affirm virility while becoming free of the debilitating effects of desire? How to imagine the body's boundaries - as both permeable, shifting, and open to fusion with the environment, and as rigid, closed, and

resistant to penetration? How to respond to the body's temporality and mortality? How to create (and believe in) an immortal man/machine hybrid, a body always posited in the future tense? (20).

The mechanized body as an ideal allows for the Futurist hero to occupy several of these conflicting stations at once. Specifically, the mechanized body works to overcome one of the major theoretical problems of Futurist materiality where it can annex materials and energies external to it while nonetheless retaining mastery over the whole of the exoteric world. Agency is retained and amplified by the acquisition of exterior materials, but never surrendered to the environment from which they came.

Valera's techno-scientific worldview communicates his early fascism through a masculine theory of history. Reiterating Marinetti's misogynist and therefore anxiously homoerotic dictates, Valera couches his virility in terms of machines, velocity, conquest. Reeling years later from the "loss" of his childhood crush - - the well-endowed teenager, Marie, she having 'cheated' on the young boy by riding off through town on a motorcycle with a man her own age - - the now-adult Valera contemplates his present supremacy to women. As a child, Valera idealized his teenage neighbor as a sexualized, angelic feminine ideal, fixating on her hands, feet, and breasts when is able to steal a glimpse of her from afar. Now, "Valera thought of Marie, how he'd reduced her to her own foot, a thing he could carry in his mind, like a rabbit's foot… the foot was his." Valera's primal scopophilic scene is reinstated in his adult memory in proprietary terms. His images of anatomized woman displaces a heterosexual encounter with a tokenized femininity. In the future, one of Valera's fellow Futurists intones to his friend, "Women will be pocket cunts…perfect for an infantryman. Transportable, backpackable, silent. You take a break from machine-gunning, slip them over your member, love them totally, and they don't'

say a word" (75). Valera offers his agreement. Technophilia here ensconces a utilitarian, masturbatory misogyny as a form of self-apparel – machine love as a homosocial fantasy of autonomous, male self-generation. Still obsessed with Marie, Valera imagines her present physical diminishment against his own newfound prowess:

> Probably she's squeezing out children, he thought, her big breasts filled with milk. While I am only changed for the better. And still a lover of girls. Ready for Marie's daughter, soon enough. Women were trapped in time. This is why men had to keep getting younger. Marie's daughter, or someone else's. Because men, Valera understood, moved at a different velocity. And once they felt this, their velocity, all they had to do was release themselves from the artifice of time. Break free of it to see that it had never held them to begin with. (78)

Prefiguring his son's relationship with the much younger Reno, Valera's self-glorifying account renders women expendable as well as justifies a pedophilic directive. Marie's original "absurd betrayal," as it features to Valera, also propels his interest in motorcycles and machine-man hybridity, as if the machine might redeem and enhance some original constitution: "he had seemed completed by the machine, as if together they made one thing" (41).

This is the same Futurist imaginary nurturing Reno's artistic endeavors. Early in the novel, before she moves to New York and meets Sandro, she rides a Valera motorcycle across the vast, shimmering landscape of the Nevada desert. "Speed" she intimates, "doesn't need to be a matter of time" (3). The undifferentiated environment enframes her movement and recommends its virtual aspects. Nevada is Reno's desert of the real, containing her projections of epi-phenomenal space composed by and through the authoring, moving object in the manner of Special Relativity. "The faster I went, the more connected I felt to the map." At every truck stop, "five minutes. If I stayed longer, the place the map depicted might encroach" (4) She stands apart from the cars she passes

on the freeway: "we were in separate realities, fast and slow" (13). Reno generates the exact kinds machine-generated self-object geometries Poggi ascribes to Futurist logic, virtual planes of reference authored in the pure language of speed. Electing to participate in the land speed trials taking place over the desert's salt flats, Reno's ride restates the prelude to F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto. Marinetti begins the document with a violent car crash, the crash occurring to the author as a euphoric catharsis. Likewise, Reno sets the land speed record, becoming the "fastest woman alive" for 1976, but she crashes her bike going over 150 mph – "I was in an acute case of the present tense" (30).

The novel retains an investment in recidivist individualism as well as validates the allure of media-generated virtual intensities. However, it begins to tease apart an ideology of neo-liberal individuation as it relates to literary form. For Kushner, the structure of the artist's bildungsroman becomes a premise for deconstructing the tacit politics and economy that inhere in its form and shape its model of experience, that of the individuated artist as late-modernist cultural hero. Reno's relationship to traditionally 'masculine' dominions - - motorcycles, guns, technology - - is the very ground for this subversion, just as her romantic relationship with the (seemingly) 'masculine' emigre artist, Sandro Valera, the middle-aged second son of the Valera fortune, proves to be the figuration of artistic appreciation and production from which she breaks. It is important in this respect that Reno's trajectory meaningfully recapitulates and reasserts Mina Loy's feminist-minded rearticulation of Italian Futurism, that misogynist and quintessentially androcentric strain of manifesto modernism which would seem the least amenable to feminist politics.

Reno's character development begins with recognition of the tacit misogyny of

New Criticism and aestheticism and is completed when she looks to articulate a new

mode of artistic production. This development, in turn, is paralleled by another trajectory:

Reno's movement from an atomized artistic praxis - - riding her motorcycle alone across

a desert, in a heroic and dangerous attempt to master herself, space and time - - toward a

leftist collective politics and an art conducive to its political ends. It's a meaningful

reversal of the consolidated figure one sees in Joyce, for instance, whose epiphanic turn

to "silence, exile, cunning" insulates the artist from social and cultural obligation as well

as forecloses the possibility of identity politics altogether.[164]

This problem correlates with the novel's larger point about art and artistic

production as they correspond with the historical maintenance of prevailing hegemonic

codes. When she begins dating Sandro, Reno observes he and his friend, a photographer

named Ronnie Fointaine, extoling the beauty of a Roman-era stature of a slave woman

while at the Met in New York City. For the two men, the statue is a perfect, self-

contained artistic creation for its internal coherence as an autonomous artwork with

obvious transhistorical beauty. Moreover, the statue memorializes Sandro's and Ronnie's

unassailable fraternity and testifies to their shared artistic sensibilities: "the slave girl was

a shared object of contemplation and fascination, the thing that marked the birth of their

friendship" (105). The two men offer a formal exegesis to Reno in hushed tones, both

testifying to the statue's intricate compositional qualities. Reno, however, perceives how

this way of reading objectifies the woman and the laboring women's historical experience

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[164] Joyce's exile, which has been curiously romanticized, often under very nationalist reading programs, speaks to the degree that the currency that the singular male artist often has as a unit of discourse in literary histories.

in patriarchy as well as elides structural violence –however, the narrative does not directly present this analysis. A recurring feature in the novel, Reno's prolix thinking and observations rarely are presented, especially not through her speaking to other characters – this, despite the first-person narration which grants the reader access to her thinking. By contradistinction, male characters, and male artists, are quick to carry forth with long-winded expatiations. All that is disclosed about Reno's interpretation of the statue in the narration: "all I could think was 'this is a young slave. Later when I told *this* to Sandro…'" Sandro disagrees with her assessment, intoning "this one has been immortalized…we are talking about her *now*, he said, and that in and of itself was a rare and special kind of emancipation" (107, my emphasis). Truncating her own dialogue with other characters by economical suppression, telling *him* only "*this*," Kushner communicates Reno's alienation from her own novelistic instantiation.

Sandro's interpretative position effaces historical suffering and systemic violence through its investment in "autonomous," de-politicized art. His formulation reinforces that woman is a bearer of meaning (for a male viewer and interpreter). Sandro elucidates his viewpoint early in his relationship with Reno when he, as she sees it, encourages her and her art by saying: "you have the luxury of time. Young people are always doing something, even when they're doing nothing. A young woman is a conduit. All she has to do is *exist*." Sandro's position espouses and reframes his father's scopophilic fulminations. Reno replies in kind, having already internalized this perspective while at art school:

> The truth was I loved Chris Kelly, who'd gone to the South of France to find Nina Simone, only to be shot at with a gun she'd lifted from the pocket of her robe. We were in an Italian film class together. He looked at

> Monica Vitti like he wanted to eat her, and I looked at her like I wanted to be her. (55)

Trying in vain to attract Kelly's attention, Reno cut her hair to resemble Vitti and even tried to dress like her character. Reno's disclosure restates Mulvey's thesis, she preparing her own visual consumption by an internalized male view, producing herself as an image.

The Valera family's genealogy in art characterizes two poles of modernist thinking. The elder Valera, as a young man, imagines a transformative political aesthetics through the violent recreation of the world. This is a manic and macho modernism that, like media in McLuhan's argument, "washes over us completely and which leaves no element of the world unaltered" (Goble 5, 2010). Sandro's view characterizes an "art for art's sake" mentality. As Peter Burger discusses in "On the Problem of the Autonomous Art in Bourgeois Society" (1984), this idea of an "autonomist art" integrates a specific version of "art" into being part of daily life, social values, and cultural mores by way of its distinct and de-politicized function. The theory and function of the artwork as a communicative object or cultural artifact is shorn from the instant of its production as well as its social, cultural, and ideological context. Both, of course, delete women – Valera openly disparages women and rejects the feminine outright, while Sandro's better disguises (and rationalizes) his worldview's obvious misogynist bearing.

The novel takes a harrowing, surrealistic turn to dramatize the unstated sexual violence undergirding Sandro and Ronnie's artistic worldview. Reno and Sandro's relationship crumbles when, after weeks of repressing disquiet about the likelihood of Sandro's infidelities, Reno sees Sandro cheating on her with his cousin, Talia, at the Valera factory in Milan. At the center of the family's industrial livelihood, a site

presently under siege from protesting workmen, Sandro consummates through incest his status as a grotesque, genteel hedon in his family's accelerated tale of aristocratic diminishment. At the onset of their relationship, Reno imagined Sandro as a man "not made effete by money." Having seen Sandro in the princely context of his decadent childhood home, and discovering him with Talia just at the moment it becomes clear Sandro will likely have to assume control of the family business, Sandro is suddenly recast in the mold of debauched fin de siècle noblesse. Talia and Sandro's liaison is further prepared by her self-vitiating performance of womanhood. Vivacious and charismatic, Talia at first unsettles Reno by provoking in the younger woman an "irrational" low-level jealousy owing to her unconventional but obvious physical allure. Reno's discomfort is further inflamed in a disconcerting scene in New York City prior to the revelation in Italy. While the group is having drinks together, Talia, at Ronnie's suggestion, punches herself in the face over and over again one. She hits herself so hard her face bruises to distortion within a matter of minutes. Ronnie then takes a series of close-up photographs of her face, Talia casually glamorizing her self-inflicted wounds, smiling through her welts. Reno initially reads the scene as an unsettling, over-stated performance of toughness – "as if [Talia] was making a point." A Futurist admiration for performative violence is transposed into an arts of self-mutilation – borne asymmetrically by the bodies of women.[165] Returning to New York weeks after fleeing the Valera estate

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[165] Reno comes to learn while at the Valera estate that Sandro, as a child, played with toy soldiers. His favorite unit was the flamethrower, a unit his father admonishes for pyrotechnic uselessness, a cost-prohibitive and strategically ineffectual soldier. Art for art's sake is, the novel suggests out, a version of violence for its own sake. Sandro's Futurist affiliation deviates from his father's techno-scientific brutalism and succors the performative and figural.

and sojourning in Rome, Reno discovers that Ronnie is about to premiere a new photographic exhibit for his wealthy patrons. His exhibit – a gallery of beaten women.

Appalled by the cloying bourgeois urbanites who praise the gallery and find it, at turns, "humanizing" and "intimate," Reno re-considers her part-time job at a film lab posing as a "China girl" – "China girls" referring to an anonymous female workforce in the film industry, models whose skin tones are used by technicians and projectionists to "norm" how skin tones appear in the color spectrum in different movies. As Reno tell us, a slight shade of discoloration will not be detectable in the case of non-human objects and environments, but a discolored skin tone disrupts a movie's whole system by contesting its status to referentiality. "If faces look wrong," she intones, "we question everything" (86). When she first starts the job, Reno finds the idea of being "a referent" intriguing and exciting, owing in part of her interest in the technical aspects of filmmaking. In preparation for her first modeling session, Reno enjoys a languorous afternoon in the privacy of her apartment with her friend, Giddle, who assists Reno trying out different styles and various 'looks.'

> Something had changed in my face. Or in what I saw there. It wasn't that I was prettier, exactly. It was the whole charade of getting me ready to be looked at by whoever had placed that ad had exposed me to something. In myself. I looked at me as if I were someone else looking at me, and this gave me a weightless feeling, a buoy of nervous energy. I wanted to be looked at. By men. By strangers. (83)

Reno's experience typifies what Steigler and Hansen call the operative interiorization of exteriorization. More than just constituting herself through representative differentiation in the manner of Lacanian individuation, Reno is transformed by the mirror: "something had changed." As with the motorcycle that enables a virtual experience of herself in velocity, the mirror facilitates an exogenous viewing experience of herself. Contouring

Mulvey's exact language, Reno internalizes and desires the gaze of an abstracted, third-person male subject.

What she initially views as exciting remediation of her identity, Reno later comes to see in terms of her determination. Marvin, a film technician working at the lab, strikes up conversation with Reno and, not wanting to deal with the news of her split from Sandro, begins a long-winded story about an early film job. "Back in the 60's," Marvin mentions, he had been charged with finding stock footage of violent deaths for use in a documentary montage. When he first met Sandro in 1968, the Valera name gave Marvin déjà vu, reminding him of a series of films he had found in the course of his research for this purpose, several of which depicted Italian partisan militias executing fascist officers.

> [the connection wasn't about Sandro] it was about something specific becoming stock footage. I always had this feeling there were two worlds. The one we live in, you know, just streaming along, future into present into past, recorded distortedly in people's minds, and then this other world: stock footage. Small integers of life, I mean life in quotes, which represent whatever did take place, whether or not what's on the stock footage actually occurred. Cropping can make outcomes so ambiguous, but it doesn't matter, see. It's stock footage. A reference file to reality. Like you're a reference file for Caucasian skin-tones; it doesn't matter that you exist. For the technician or projectionist, you're an index of woman, flesh, flesh tones. Which brings up the question of race, unaddressed. You, as you, have nothing to do with it… Also that violent deaths are part of stock footage, even if someone had to be killed, I mean originally, to generate the reference. You look different, by the way. Did you dye your hair or something? (322, 323)

The extended monologue exposes Reno's ingenuous initial perspective as well as constitutes, in the process of its unfolding, the same kinds of masculine performance she has come to disdain. Marvin's speech is a *professorial* analysis that secures his own sensibility rather than meaningfully contextualizes, or empathizes with, Reno's place before the camera. As Reno states, she offered her story to Marvin, who in turn took the

chance to "talk about himself" (323). Even male suspicious reading is, well, suspicious. Marvin barely notices Reno, only recognizing her for her markers of feminine appareling, asking her to account for herself on these specific terms: "did you dye your hair or something?" Marvin nonetheless offers a harrowing account of media determinism, issuing a version of Kittler's point that the camera "shooting" is, in fact, *shooting*. The "realism" Marvin sees inhering in stock footage, implying its own culture of surveillance, is a totalizing and necrophilic fascination. The translation of a living person into an abstracted human "reference," accommodating their image to an information economy of people, is a form of death.

The artist-as-social activist prototype that emerges in the later stages of the novel is pluralist, civic-oriented, and collective. It is also feminist. Reno rejects Sandro's figuration of art as an autonomous (and implicitly bourgeoisie) enterprise, a realization which is coupled with her confronting the reality of his aristocratic upbringing. While work-stoppages, riots, and strikes threaten the embattled Valera Motor Company, Reno is trapped at the family estate with Sandro's cold, distant, and disapproving relations. While in the presence of his family, Reno somewhat reluctantly wears "frilly dresses" in trying to self-present as a suitable partner for Sandro. She is dismayed when she realizes this was never going to be allowed. Throughout her time at the estate, Reno is disconcerted and alienated – by the manor's buttressed opulence, the Valera family's illegible caste-protecting manners, and the various working-class attendants who make Reno aware of her "undeserving" ascension to aristocratic company. When Sandro's mother criticizes Reno's appearance, as if she is putting on airs by dressing so nicely, Reno offers in polite defense that Sandro picked out the dress. She assents, "of course he did…he needed to

refurbish what he brings into the house" (234). Reno is furniture, an object in a room to be restyled to reflect its inhabitants. She is one of many.

In what can only be described as bold, the novel has a disconcerting and ambiguous ending. Having disapproved of the neo-liberal thinking that fortified Reno's early interpretations of her own "empowerment," she ends the story somewhere in the middle, waiting, in abeyance – she is open and undetermined, a middle, a medium. Reno's route forward does not entail overturning or contesting an essential media grammar as much as negotiating the formal syntax and representational economy of that technology in productive way.

After-word(s)

Kushner's novel is ambitious precisely because it hazards that the literary isn't an ambitious field of cultural influence. Which is not at all to say it isn't important or meaningful. Kushner instead expresses a hopeful design for literary production without actually believing it. I want to conclude this study with the words of Mina Loy:

> There is no Life or Death
>
> Only activity
>
> There is no Space or Time
>
> Only intensity,
>
> And tame things
>
> Have no immensity

Loy's abbreviated and embattled tenure with Futurism gave rise to her Feminist Manifesto. Loy contests reified concepts: "Space," "Time," "Life," "Death." She extols "intensity" and then suggests its "immensity," the experience of intensity becoming its practice through magnitude, its gravity, a constellated field of force. Loy discusses "tame

things," her poem situating powerful things in opposition to the calm, timid, and meek.

Being a thing, being an object or object-like, is the danger and the chance.

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