SYDNEY STUDIES IN ENGLISH

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Volume 43, 2017

DAVID KELLY: Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, and American Romance 1

KAMILA WALKER: Conceptual Metaphors of Anger and Embodied Realism in *Middlemarch* 32

ALEX JONES: Myth and the Limits of History in *Nostromo*. 57

RYAN TWOMEY AND DANIEL CARRIGY: Richard Steele's Female Readers and the Gender Politics of the Public Sphere in *The Spectator* 73

WYATT MOSS-WELLINGTON: Abject Humanism in Tom Perrotta Adaptations: *Election* and *Little Children* 90

STEVE CRAMER: Neoliberal and Social Democratic Versions of History in James Cameron's *Titanic* and Roy Baker's *A Night to Remember* 110

Editors: David Kelly, Peter Marks and Mark Byron

Sydney Studies in English is published annually, concentrating on criticism and scholarship in English literature, drama and cinema. It aims to provide a forum for critical, scholarly and applied theoretical analysis of text, and seeks to balance the complexities of the discipline with the need to remain accessible to the wide audience of teachers and students of English both inside and outside the university.

Submissions of articles should be made online at:
http://escholarship.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/index.php/SSE/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions

Each article will be read by at least two referees.

Sydney Studies in English is published in association with the Department of English, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. Visit the Department's homepage at: http://sydney.edu.au/arts/english/

ISSN: 0156-5419 (print)
ISSN: 1835-8071 (online)

Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window* and American Romance

DAVID KELLY

In 1954 Alfred Hitchcock released his adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's 1942 short story 'It Had To Be Murder', bringing it before the American public in the form of the claustrophobic and riveting thriller *Rear Window*. 12 years is a relatively short space of time from story to film but this was an extraordinarily eventful period in American national life and, as all adaptations are as much of their time as they are efforts to recreate in another medium something of the original text that inspired them, it is interesting to consider what sort of effects this might have had on the process of adaptation and any potential transformations of textual meaning that might have occurred. Such a consideration is especially appropriate with a filmmaker like Alfred Hitchcock, who never felt the constraints of fidelity when it came to the task of adaptation; as he memorably observed of his own approach in conversation with Truffaut: 'What I do is to read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema.' In this paper, then, I would like to look at Hitchcock's film from this perspective of unfaithful but inventive adaptation by considering *Rear Window* in the light of the generic background of Woolrich's story, the nature of generic transformation in adaptations of the classical Hollywood era, and the cultural dynamics of American intellectual, political and social life through the '40s and '50s.

The film dates from a period of peculiarly schizophrenic national self-absorption in the United States, divided as it was between the paranoid inquisitions of McCarthyist politics and the first shapings of a new American cultural self-consciousness consonant with its place as the dominant Western power in the post-war world. Each was to balance the other in a complex and fraught Cold War scenario: the political effort to root out and expel the un-American occurred simultaneously with the intellectual effort to more fully comprehend the peculiarity of Americanness, particularly as it manifested itself in cultural productions. Having shucked off its pre-war isolationism, the nation had now become fascinated both with its new-found

pre-eminence in world affairs and also with the potentially undervalued cultural history that might have played its part in bringing this about, giving rise to an intensification of interest in American Studies as a discipline. In this task, university English departments in particular were keen to begin the work of distinguishing the uniqueness of their native literature from the British heritage and a key concept in this development was the idea of romance.

Initially, the notion of romance enabled discriminations to be drawn between narrative modes familiar from the English novelistic tradition and those that came to prevail in what was being seen as the less novelistically congenial American context. With tongue firmly in cheek but critical eye nevertheless sharply peeled, Henry James had prefigured such a distinction the previous century in his biography of Hawthorne, observing:

> It takes so many things, as Hawthorne must have felt later in life, when he made the acquaintance of the denser, richer, warmer-European spectacle—it takes such an accumulation of history and custom, such a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist… The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name, no sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools — no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class — no Epsom nor Ascot![1]

With no raw novelistic material to work from, how was one to become what, from this view, might seem an oxymoron—an 'American novelist'? At

[1] Henry James, *Hawthorne* (https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/literature/english-men-of-letters/hawthorne/chapter2.html accessed 1/12/17).

which point Henry James no doubt would have arched an eyebrow as if to say *quod erat demonstrandum*, but in fact Hawthorne himself had claimed that he was no novelist but rather a writer of romances. He distinguished the two by pointing out that the role of the romancer entitled him to a certain liberty as regards any mimetic or realist responsibilities,[2] and it was this that was to become a defining feature of critical reflections upon the American tradition as these ultimately came to give rise to the idea of a distinctive national literary genre: the American Romance.[3]

---

[2] Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hawthorne/nathaniel/h39h/preface.html accessed 1/12/17):

> When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as it its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.
>
> If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and especially, to mingle the marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution.

[3] James, of course, had much to say on his own use of the romance form in his Prefaces and was fascinated with the relation between realism and romance, most notably here in the famous Preface to *The American*:

> The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire…
>
> The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a related, a

As a treasured American value—virtually co-opted to Americanness in the national political discourse—this idea of liberty in the literary arena squared easily with reflections on other areas of American life, so the freedom of movement for the artist conferred by the romance form might have been seen as not only welcome but culturally congenial. Stretching back into a textual past comprising works charged with deep metaphorical and even mythical resonance—epic, pastoral, quest narratives and more recent gothic modes—it is a form less concerned with the world of actuality than one of potentiality. In Gillian Beer's famous formulation: 'Romance, being absorbed with the ideal, always has an element of prophecy. It remakes the world in the image of desire.'[4] As such, the romance form came to be regarded as a natural idiom for a deeply optative nation, and Emily Miller Budick was to make the claim that American Romance is distinguished by a tendency 'to swerve away from the depiction of social reality toward the evocation of a country of the mind'[5] in an effort to 'encode within language itself the specifically American features of the new sociopolitical and economic reality known as the United States.'[6]

The scholarly discussion in which the idea of a distinctively America Romance evolved began with the publication of the work that effectively initiated the modern discipline of American literary studies, F.O. Matthiesen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. This was published in 1941, only a few years after

---

> measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities. The greatest intensity may so be arrived at evidently—when the sacrifice of community, of the 'related' sides of situations, has not been too rash. It must to this end not flagrantly betray itself; we, must even be kept if possible for our illusion, from suspecting any sacrifice at all. The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe—though remaining as exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well. The art of the romancer is, 'for the fun of it', insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him.

Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (University of Chicago Press: 1934, 2011), p. 33.

[4] Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (Methuen: New York, 1970), p.13.

[5] Emily Miller Budick, *Nineteenth Century American Romance: Genre and the Construction of Democratic Culture* (Twayne Publishers: New York, 1996), p12.

[6] Ibid. p.20.

the formation of the House American Activities Committee in 1937 and not that long before HUAC began gearing up for a decade of paranoiac anti-communist hysteria in the late '40s, beginning with its first foray into Hollywood in 1947 and going on to claim many victims from the worlds of the arts and the intelligentsia, including, possibly, Mathiesson himself.[7] As that discussion evolved, however, it became evident from the centrality of texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* that, rather than simply celebrating the exceptional nature of Americanness, one crucial aspect of the American Romance was its capacity to ironically interrogate national values and the national self-consciousness. With its mystery structures, its epic journeys, its dreamlike scenarios, combined with its freedom from the trappings of realism and empiricism, the romance provided access to underlying currents of the social imaginary,[8] and so opened the national psyche to deep and potentially unsettling questioning. In a structural sense, the recurrent use of the mystery or quest narrative to arrive at a stabilising truth upon which social order may firmly sit may be seen to reflect the aspirational ideology of the nation itself, which had come to understand itself as experimental, a quest within human history to arrive at a newer, more equitable and righteous order of human affairs, a revolutionary democratic order founded on self-evident truths. This understanding highlights the mythical function of the romance narrative, but also reveals its dark ambiguity: for when the mystery remains unresolved—like the meaning of

---

[7] The Wikipedia entry for Matthiessen notes:

> In a note left in the hotel room, Matthiessen wrote, 'I am depressed over world conditions. I am a Christian and a Socialist. I am against any order which interferes with that objective.'[23] Commentators have speculated on the impact of the escalating Red Scare on his state of mind. He was being targeted by anti-communist forces that would soon be exploited by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and inquiries by the House Un-American Activities Committee into his politics may have been a contributing factor in his suicide. (Accessed 1/12/2017)

[8] To use Winfried Fluck's term. Fluck gives an extensive account of the development of the concept of American Romance in 'The American Romance and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary,' *New Literary History*, Vol.27, No.3, Summer 1996, 415-45. Regarding the term 'social imaginary' he notes:

> As an agglomerate of diffuse feelings, images, associations, and visions, the imaginary needs fiction to be translated into a coherent, comprehensible, and culturally meaningful expression. It is thus part of the special attraction and usefulness of fiction that it articulates something 'beyond' its own means of representation, and the romance can be seen as the literary genre which makes the expression and articulation of that dimension 'beyond' its starting premise and its major rationale for existence. (423-4)

the scarlet letter, or the whiteness of the whale, or (for later generations in another medium) the significance of Rosebud, which seems to mean everything and nothing, or of the Maltese Falcon, which blurs the true and the counterfeit—when these ambiguities are raised a kind of existential instability is introduced, casting doubt upon the foundations and effective functioning of the social organism: the irresolution of the metaphorical order reflects fractures and contradictions within the national order. Similarly, when the quest fails—as in the hunt for the white whale, or Huck's quest for freedom (his adventure ends as it began with him intending to 'light out for the territory'), or, in a different register, when Gatsby's romantic quest for Daisy fails—the capacity for the nation to deliver on its promises of life, liberty and happiness is put in question. The implication is that some sort of national failing is at stake here—some departure from the original historical promise of the republic, some corruption of the 'fresh green breast' of the new world, as Nick Carraway saw it, has taken place. In the metaphorical figurations of that failure provided within the ironic patterns of the American Romance tradition a self-searching nation recurrently came to recognise its lapses from its original promise and its constant need for renewal through recourse to its founding spirit of rebellion in the name of democratic human values, and through a rededication to the individual and the felt truths of the human heart—truths like Huck's instinctive sense of human kinship with Jim on the raft, which make a claim on the imagination as self-evident, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, or intuitive, in the language of American Transcendentalism.[9]

In 1960 this understanding of America and its metaphorised self-reflections arrived at a significant point of articulation with the publication of Leslie Fiedler's encyclopaedic and wonderfully mischievous *Love and Death in the American Novel*, which was the first scholarly study to draw attention to the potentially subversive implications of the genre. If the American Romance could be seen as both invoking and interrogating the national dream, it was Fiedler who gave a psychoanalytic inflection to the discussion, crystallising this emergent but increasingly problematic sense of Americanness as one riven by fault lines of race, sex and gender and beset by a burdensome and contradictory historical legacy. In this way *Love and Death in the American Novel* opened the ground for later speculation on the nature of the American Romance of the kind that I have described above, conceiving of it as a metaphorically charged form peculiarly suited to the

[9] Sacvan Bercovitch developed these perspectives fully in his study *The American Jeremiad* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1980).

purposes of a democratic, aspirational literature on the one hand that equally gave highly imaginative expression to profound stresses—and, in Fiedler's view, particularly sexual and racial stresses—which served to bring into view deep contradictions within national life. Offering a reading of the American literary imagination as absorbed with sexual and racial anxieties that unfolded in Gothic imaginings shaping themselves in romance forms, Fiedler's thesis was always meant to be provocative, and he memorably characterised the case in this way:

> The figure of Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town towards the good companions and the magic keg of Holland's gin. Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization', which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility.[10]

Ironically, the one romance narrative that is not accommodated here is the sentimental love story—the one we think of most commonly today when we use the term 'romance'. These either fail (as in *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby*), or are avoided altogether in fantasies of masculine escape or, in Ernest Hemingway's phrase, worlds of men without women. Thus, in the search for Americanness that takes place between the scholarly perspectives of Matthiessen in 1941 and Fiedler in 1960, this trope of the womanless man on the run was becoming recognised as a mythic figure of the national imagination from which had evolved a familiar morphology of American masculinity: boundary riders of American civility perched on sexual, ideological, cultural, and racial liminalities and torn by the dilemmas thrown up by the competing stresses of these forces at play in the national life. This is the world of classic American literature understood as a homosocial, at times almost homoerotic domain, featuring a cast of vagabonds like Huck, adrift on his raft with Jim, borne down the river into the heart of American slavery in a fugitive escapade that will test the achievements of republican 'sivilization' against its original promises of liberty and equality; or malcontents like Ishmael on the Pequod, a ship that seems an ironic reflection

[10] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (first published 1960; Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1997), p.26.

of the ship of state in quest of the riddling leviathan, who becomes cured of his misanthropy in his bromance with the dark-skinned islander Queequeg; or—to choose a text closer to those of interest here—drop-out visionaries like Sal Paradise, on the road with Dean Moriarty to find the lost America of the dream (*On the Road*, 1951).[11]

As to how far either of the two texts under consideration here consciously tap into this—who is to say? But conscious textual awareness of the unconscious currents of the social imaginary is hardly a requirement for critical speculation on the matter, since romance functions not by articulating and clarifying such currents but rather by putting them in play and at stake in texts that take their place within the metaphorical discourse of cultural self-reflection. Which is why, against this background of intellectual speculation and political inquisition through the '40s and '50s, it becomes particularly fascinating when one encounters salient points of connection between imaginative texts and this kind of psycho-cultural context, points of connection brought sharply into focus by questions of Americanness, the unAmerican, and the role of romance, race and gender in all of this.

What I would argue, then, in the case of the two texts I'm interested in here is that the ready figurations and narrative traditions of American Romance have made available constitutive elements that automatically engage with the cultural discourse of the form—its mythic reflections and refractions of American self-consciousness. In each case this engagement is heightened by a central image of secret surveillance, a covert, suspicious, and ultimately inquisitorial inspection of quotidian American life being carried out by the protagonists—Woolrich's Hal Jeffries and Hitchcock's L.B. 'Jeff' Jeffries. Ironically, neither Hal nor Jeff can be characterised as men 'on the run' because they have been immobilised, each having suffered a broken leg,

---

[11] Cf. Fiedler, ibid. p.27:

> In our most enduring books, the cheapjack machinery of the gothic novel is called on to represent the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society. . . However shoddily or ironically treated, horror is essential to our literature. It is not merely a matter of terror filling the vacuum left by the suppression of sex in our novels, of Thanatos standing in for Eros. Through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life: the ambiguity of our relationship with Indian and Negro, the ambiguity of our encounter with nature, the guilt of the revolutionist who feels himself a parricide—and, not least of all, the uneasiness of the writer who cannot help believing that the very act of composing a book is Satanic revolt.

but this circumstance—that renders them spectators on life rather than the American men of action they otherwise would be—leads to their restless inspection of others in a central activity that seems to metaphorise either a cultural fascination with the state of Americanness or a cultural anxiety concerning it, or both.

In part, their surveillance activities are determined not only by personal but also by historical circumstance, and here the dates are certainly important. The bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 6, 1941 ended the era of American isolationism and Woolrich's mid-1942 hero Hal Jeffries clearly appears representative of the vigilance that was now essential to the maintenance of American life. It is likely no accident that the criminal threat to the social order here—unnoticed by the authorities, and unregarded by them when it is brought to their attention—comes from a Scandinavian, Lars Thorwald, recalling the treachery of Quisling less than a year before in forming the collaborationist wartime government in Norway. In this regard the story celebrates the moral alertness of the American public and the civic responsibilities enjoined upon and performed by the citizenry at large in time of war. The case of Hitchcock's Jeff, in time of Cold War, is not dissimilar, although there are other aspects to his surveillance which I will deal with later. But it is by fulfilling this civic responsibility of vigilance that Hal and Jeff find themselves precipitated within the mystery structure of romance. Each now shares something with and is co-opted to that evolving image of American masculinity that reaches back into 19th-century origins, but which at this time had developed into its modern urban form: the hard-boiled private detective.

At the closing of the geographical frontier in the 1890s the borderlines of American experience were redrawn along the foggy psychological and moral lines of an increasingly complex and claustrophobic modern urban life, which became the characteristic domain of the hard-boiled detective. 'Like the West of the 19th century,' Richard Slotkin notes, 'the modern city is a living entity capable of generating events (crime waves, scandals, new rackets) that may require incorporation with, and modifications of, the formulas of literary fiction;' and he goes on to suggest:

> In the hard-boiled detective, the characters and roles of dime-novel outlaw and detective … are fully combined, and their ideological opposition reconciled. The hard-boiled detective is both an agent of law and an outlaw who acts outside the structures of legal authority for the sake of a personal definition

> of justice, which often takes the form of a private quest or revenge.[12]

From Marxist pulp writer Dashiell Hammett onwards (and he was another who would have his problems with HUAC), this peculiarly American version of the private investigator had become a characteristic but problematic feature of the mystery narrative in the United States. On the one hand, he is the figure who accesses intuitive truths of justice that an increasingly arthritic socio-judicial system has lost touch with, so in this sense he is a socially revivifying figure; but to do so he is obliged to become familiar with the criminal milieu and operate outside conventional mechanisms of the law. For this reason, his very existence implies an inability of conventional policing to do its job effectively, therefore highlighting that worrying incapacity on the part of the institutions of social order to provide security and justice for its citizens. It is this latter aspect in particular that features heavily in both Woolrich's story and Hitchcock's film, [13] as the mainspring of the tension arises not only from the protagonist's immobility but equally from his inability to convince his policeman friend of the criminal and sinful acts taking place in the unprepossessing suburban apartments just beyond his rear window. Given these sorts of correspondences it is impossible not to be struck by other features of style, figuration and narrative element that tie this story firmly to the American Romance tradition.

To begin, there is the first person narrative form—Woolrich's Hal tells his story, in the style of other hard-boiled detectives of the period like Hammett's Continental Op and Chandler's Phillip Marlow, but this mode of narration reaches further back within the American tradition to narrators like Ishmael, Huck Finn and even the 'Walt Whitman' persona of *Leaves of Grass*. In instances like these, the first-person mode was employed by writers who were seeking consciously to develop a national literary tradition, and they used it precisely for its capacity to highlight the value of the individual perspective within the multitudinous democratic order, because it gives potent expression to the felt truths of the individual soul.[14] In this, first-person

---

[12] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press: 1992), p.219.

[13] It is worth noting parenthetically that within two years Hitchcock would release two other films that specifically take up this theme, first in a European context in *To Catch a Thief* (1955)—scripted by John Michael Hayes, who also provided the screenplay for *Rear Window*—and then back in the United States, and in an unusually gritty style, in *The Wrong Man* (1956).

[14] As Thoreau reminded his readers*:*

in American fiction becomes the narrative mode of personal conviction in defiance of any contrary personal, social or cultural pressure. This is how it operates for Huck Finn on his raft, allowing him to give expression to the worrying but irresistible feeling of his growing human kinship with Jim—a feeling that challenges all of the prejudicial structures of American social and racial life, structures that he has internalised as the voice of conscience and which leave him in a state of torment as he perceives his own actions to be sinful (in social terms) even as we perceive them to be admirable (in moral terms). What Huck feels, that is, is an intuited moral truth about the shared humanity of Jim and himself, so his first-person narration in this context is a mechanism for dramatising the distance between personal conviction and orthodox opinion, and for validating the former, and in a sense this is how the mode operates in Woolrich's story as Hal's conviction ('it *had* to be murder') overrides the authority of the official judicial view as given by his police inspector friend Boyne.[15]

In addition, like Huck, Hal has an African-American companion to help him in his quest to solve the mystery of the rear window, his 'day houseman' Sam. Hal has a peculiarly intimate relationship with Sam and they have shared ten years' companionship of a kind sufficient to embolden him to ask Sam to put himself in danger by taking his place and, when he does so, to fear for him in an intense and deeply personal way. In this version of the story Sam is the character dispatched to poke around the Thorwald apartment

---

> In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thoreau/henry_david/walden/complete.html; (accessed 1/12/2017).

[15] The agitation of Hals's sense of conviction in the face of official complacency shows clearly in his account:

> Guilty! Guilty as all hell, and the police be damned!
>
> My hand started toward the phone, came back again. What was the use? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had before. 'You should have seen his face, etc.' And I could hear Boyne's answer: 'Anyone gets a jolt from an anonymous letter, true or false. You would yourself.' They had a real live Mrs. Thorwald to show me—or thought they had. I'd have to show them the dead one, to prove that they both weren't one and the same. I, from my window, had to show them a body.

Cornel Woolrich, 'It Had To Be Murder', http://www.miettecast.com/woolrich.pdf (accessed 1/12/17).

to help confirm Hal's suspicions, but in doing so he also comes to stand in for Hal, implying a sense of equality and identity:

> I called Sam in. 'I want you to do something for me that's a little risky. In fact, damn risky. You might break a leg, or you might get shot, or you might even get pinched. We've been together ten years, and I wouldn't ask you anything like that if I could do it myself. But I can't, and it's got to be done.'[16]

Sam is less than enthusiastic—'I'm just an easy mark for you,' he complains—but we learn of Hal's earnest concern for Sam's welfare as the story continues:

> I watched him at it. There wasn't any way I could protect him, now that he was in there. Even Thorwald would be within his rights in shooting him down—this was break and entry.[17] I had to stay in back behind the scenes, like I had been all along. I couldn't get out in front of him as a lookout and shield him. Even the dicks had had a lookout posted.
>
> He must have been tense, doing it. I was twice as tense, watching him do it. The twenty-five minutes took fifty to go by. Finally he came over to the window, latched it fast. The lights went, and he was out. He'd made it. I blew out a bellyful of breath that was twenty-five minutes old.[18]

This is interesting in itself, referencing as it does the sense of black-white kinship that evolves in the American Romance quest narrative, but in addition, and similar again to Jim with Huck, Sam taps into the folkloric traditions of black wisdom which he passes on to Hal, who uses it to solve the crime.[19] Here is the first intimation of something sinfully amiss out the rear window:

---

[16] Ibid.

[17] The likelihood of this consequence is heightened considerably when one considers that Sam is African-American, so he is putting himself at significant risk for Hal, just as Jim does for Huck at various times.

[18] Op. cit.

[19] Jim's connection to black folklore and superstition is evident in a comic manner in the episode with the prophetic hairball, and in a more ominous manner with the snakeskin on Jackson Island, where Huck learns to trust Jim implicitly on such matters ('I made up my mind I wouldn't ever take a-holt of a snake-skin again with my hands, now that I see what had come of it. Jim said he reckoned I would believe

> A cricket chirped in one of the back yards. Sam came in to see if I wanted anything before he went home for the night. I told him no, I didn't—it was all right, run along. He stood there for a minute, head down. Then I saw him shake it slightly, as if at something he didn't like. 'What's the matter?' I asked.
>
> 'You know what that means? My old mammy told it to me, and she never told me a lie in her life. I never once seen it to miss, either.'
>
> 'What, the cricket?'
>
> 'Any time you hear one of them things, that's a sign of death someplace close around.'
>
> I swept the back of my hand at him. 'Well, it isn't in here, so don't let it worry you.'
>
> He went out, muttering stubbornly: 'It's somewhere close by, though. Somewhere not very far off. Got to be.'
>
> The door closed after him, and I stayed there alone in the dark.[20]

Later, when Hal's vague suspicions begin to crystallize into something more pointed, it is this conversation about the ominous insect that appears to be the unconscious metaphorical agent for his realisation:

> For two days a sort of formless uneasiness, a disembodied suspicion, I don't know what to call it, had been flitting and volplaning around in my mind, *like an insect looking for a landing place*. More than once, just as it had been ready to settle, some slight thing, some slight reassuring thing, such as the raising of the shades after they had been down unnaturally long, had been enough to keep it winging aimlessly, prevent it from staying still long enough for me to recognize it. The point of contact had been there all along, waiting to receive it. Now, for some reason, within a split second after he tossed over the empty mattresses, it landed—zoom! And the point of contact expanded—or exploded, whatever you care to call it—into a certainty of murder. [My italics.][21]

---

him next time.'—
https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/twain/mark/finn/complete.html#chapter29 accessed 1/12/17).

[20] Woolrich, op.cit.

[21] Ibid.

Considered in the light of the American Romance tradition, narrative details like this can take on particular kinds of significance. For example, thanks to Sam Hal discovers that Thorwald lives on Benedict Avenue,[22] a provocative name that might lead one to wonder, in this context, just how far this murderous husband will go to regain the desired state of bachelordom again, to be once more on the run from the 'fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility,' in Fiedler's phrase. Or one might wonder just how jaundiced an eye gay author Cornel Woolrich was bringing to this view of the hidden but violent misogyny of marital relations in everyday American life. The protagonist's suspicions about that life emanate from his own domain of homosocial and racial congeniality within his small apartment, and the truth he arrives at regarding the state of heterosexual union in the American scene is a darkly gothic one—the last time a husband murdered his wife and disposed of her within the fabric of the building itself in this manner was a century before in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Black Cat', a perfect early example of suburban gothic that clearly seems to be referenced here.[23] And it's implications of this kind that lead one to suspect that the dark explorations of Americanness found in the American Romance tradition would have been more than a little concerning for authorities—had they read it—whose task it was to root out the un-American. But perhaps that's enough to go on with, and so I'd like now to turn to Hitchcock's view of the matter.

As I have tried to show, Woolrich's story falls easily within the American Romance tradition, specifically referencing figures and incidents from earlier texts and engaging with ideas of America, Americanness and the UnAmerican in such a way as both to affirm the national mythic belief in American maverick individualism (such as Hal displays here), but also ironically to interrogate aspects of the American imaginary and its pictures of sociality and masculinity. In adapting the story Hitchcock re-figures these elements by co-opting that tradition to the forms and styles of 1950s

---

[22] This sly reference to homosociality was unfortunately changed for the film, suggesting either that the filmmakers didn't think the audience would get the reference or that they missed it themselves.

[23] In this version of the story Thorwald cements his wife into the kitchen floor of the apartment above, which is being renovated. For further discussion of Poe's use of the gothic mode to explore misogynistic pathologies see in particular Joan Dayan, 'Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?' *Poe Studies*, 06/1991, Volume 24, Issue 1-2, 1-12; and Gerald Kennedy, 'Poe, 'Ligeia,' and the Problem of Dying Women,' *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales,* ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp.113-129.

Hollywood cinema.[24] The central requirement of that cinema was the inclusion of the sentimental romance narrative, which previously had been excluded from the American Romance tradition.[25] Nevertheless, if it was the business of this form to negotiate the ambiguous terrain of race and sexuality through gothic-inflected romance narratives, as Fiedler was to claim, then here Hitchcock might be seen as trading Woolwrich's apparent interest in the former for his own in the latter by jettisoning the figure of the African-American offsider and replacing him with female figures who will challenge the dominant cultural self-imagery of vigilant American masculinity, and wilfully reconfigure the mystery narrative of the American Romance as a power negotiation of gender and status.

In this Hitchcock seems to have approached his work in a spirit of real mischief, casting satirical perspectives on both the paranoid vigilance of the nation in time of Cold War and the sexual obsessions and anxieties of its mythic masculine figures as represented here by Jeff, seemingly beset by voyeuristic sexual yearning coupled with an almost pathological erotic timidity. Where Woolrich's protagonist puts American life under inspection, Hitchcock puts the vigilant American under observation by framing him in a way that the story's first-person narrator could not have been since, by definition, in literature it is the narrator who does the framing. Hal tells us about himself as an interested, alert, and suspicious observer of domestic life outside his rear window, and he is quick to point out that he finds himself in this situation through force of circumstance, just in case his actions might be taken the wrong way:

> Sure, I suppose it was a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't my fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all. The bay window was about the best feature my rear bedroom had in the warm weather. It was unscreened, so I had to

---

[24] Again, this needn't have been a conscious intention on Hitchcock and screenwriter John Michael Hayes' part—it is simply the effect that takes place in this instance of adaptation at this cultural moment.

[25] Although it certainly had already figured in previous Hollywood adaptations of the form, such as Howard Hawks' film of *The Big Sleep* eight years earlier (1946), which grafted onto Chandler's hard-boiled detective story a romance narrative between Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall that successfully capitalised on their steamy off-screen liaison.

> sit with the light out or I would have had every insect in the vicinity in on me. I couldn't sleep, because I was used to getting plenty of exercise. I'd never acquired the habit of reading books to ward off boredom, so I hadn't that to turn to. Well, what should I do, sit there with my eyes tightly shuttered?[26]

Jeff, on the other hand, is offered to us as an object for our observation and takes his place within the scene of American life as presented. And that presentation is rich in ironic implication as the American Romance of Woolrich's story becomes co-opted by Hitchcock to an examination of the state of the union—both national and romantic—in 1950s America. Here, the vigilance that arises from Cold War political anxieties becomes subsumed within a larger voyeuristic watchfulness that arises from libidinous masculinity, compounded into a general salaciousness that is figured in that enormous camera lens which L.B. Jeffries will ultimately use to secretly pry into the doings of his neighbours. So, with no disclaimer such as Hal provides for his actions, we are clearly encouraged to read the prevailing vigilance and voyeurism figured in the person of Jeff as different aspects of a generalised American masculine sensibility at once sexually preoccupied but given equally to the paranoid suspicions of the culturally anxious—a paranoia keyed to the threats of romantic love as much as any activities that may be viewed as politically or criminally questionable. This is clear from the opening of the film where Jeff discusses his fear of matrimony as he ogles the cavorting Miss Torso across the backyard while helicopter pilots buzz female sunbathers on the roof, suggesting that this is no longer a story driven by the moral conviction of the inquisitive storyteller, it is about the attractions of the rear window and the drives that motivate the figure obsessed with looking out of it.[27]

That's why, from the start of this crime mystery, there's a more obvious crime and, indeed, a more obvious mystery than the murder that will ultimately appear to be the narrative focal point, and both the crime and the mystery relate to Jeff. The crime is invasion of privacy, about which Jeff's nurse, Stella, warns him, taking the opportunity to make a pertinent observation on the general state of surveillance that seems to have arisen:

---

[26] Woolrich, op.cit.

[27] To be fair, when Jeff moves from the binoculars to the camera lens to pursue his inquiry the film is also implicating the viewer in this general vigilance that beset 1950s America, linking cinematic voyeurism with the anxious watchfulness of everyday life.

> *Stella*: New York state sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse.
> *Jeff*: Oh, hello Stella.
> *Stella*: They've got no windows in the workhouse. You know in the old days they used to put your eyes out with a red hot poker. Are any of those bikini bombshells you're always watching worth a red hot poker? Oh dear, we've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change.

But Jeff feels himself above such criticisms, and that's the problem with him—he habitually feels himself above the normal run of things, looking out on the world in rather a godlike manner, giving names to the characters within the human drama he witnesses and bestowing narratives upon them as if they existed for his own detached amusement. And he certainly is the detached type, although he thinks he is immersing himself in experience by running around the world taking photographs of mountaintops and remote villages. But, as we see when he looks out his own back window, his binoculars and his camera lens are really the means by which he distances himself from the world and shapes it according to his own view. Indeed, so detached does this make him that he appears to have stood in the middle of a motor racetrack, thinking he could photograph the cars without being touched by them, as we see from the photograph on his wall in the opening pan—

—which is why he is now in a wheelchair with a broken leg.

This gets us to the mystery I mentioned before, which is less of a mystery now, perhaps. That is, why is Jeff so resistant to the attractions of Lisa and the promise of domestic bliss she seems to offer? In fact, Jeff has an aversion to this kind of domestic happiness, as he tells his editor in that conversation I mentioned earlier: 'If you don't do something to pull me out of this swamp of boredom,' he says, 'I'm gonna do something drastic… I'm gonna get married, and then I'll never be able to go anywhere.' This is an issue that doesn't arise for Hal in the largely womanless world of Woolrich's story, but Jeff clearly represents that kind of rugged masculinity driven by physical excitement—which seems to be a surrogate kind of sexual drive—but not driven by mature romantic interest, which would result in that precipitous 'fall of sex, marriage and responsibility' that is to be avoided at all costs. However, Jeff's broken leg has now curtailed his 'man on the run' days and he finds himself an observer rather than an actor in the dramas of life, looking out on the day to day world of 1950s domestic America, and I think it is the irony of this situation that might have appealed the most to Hitchcock when he came to adapt this story—or, as he put it, when he came to 'forget all about the book and start[ed] to create cinema'. Coupled with his horror of boredom and thirst for adventure, there is something inescapably adolescent about this mixture of sexual longing and romantic timidity that we see in Jeff, and the film's interest in these aspects of his personality reveal Hitchcock's recurrent fascination with the American male and his sexual proclivities, inhibitions and anxieties.[28]

So here, as American Romance meets Hollywood romance, we are given the opportunity to observe Jeff, immobile but ever-vigilant in his voyeuristic thirst for mystery, watching and responding to the varieties of

---

[28] Hitchcock seemed to delight in exploring the darker areas of Jimmy Stewart's screen persona for the purposes of deconstructing American masculinity—a persona that included the image of the man who had featured as the all-American Boy hero of *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), who became a real life war hero in the air force in the Second World War, and who then returned to the silver screen as a more mature if slightly less optimistic all-American Boy reviving the American dream of democratic community in another Capra classic, *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946). Against this, Hitchcock was to cast him as Rupert Cadell, the patrician and deeply questionable mentor of the homoerotic murderers in *Rope* (1948), and then, a few years after *Rear Window*, as the sexually obsessed, broken-down police detective Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* (1958).

American heterosexual experience as Hitchcock surrounds him with a kind of laboratory of male-female romantic relationships. Thus, he can watch the first moments of physical attraction as admirers flock to gaze upon the pneumatic attractions of Miss Torso ('She's like a queen bee with her pick of the drones,' he tells Lisa)—

—or he can imagine the frenetic life of sexual passion playing out behind the closed blinds of the honeymooners[29]—

[29] This is another significant departure from Woolrich's story, where the young couple are constantly out jitterbugging. Here, Hitchcock evokes all of the heat of newlywed sexual passion behind the closed blinds, but ironically follows the path of honeymoon passion through long enough for us to witness the beginnings of an exhausted indifference in the young husband that might set this pair on the familiar marital journey that begins with the re-opening of the blinds and ends with the bed on the fire escape for all to see.

—or he can observe a comfortable but jaded marriage where sex plays such a minor part that the couple can sleep in the open and affection has been transferred to the family dog—

—or he can look at the Thorwalds—

—where marriage appears to have broken down irreparably, to the point where he imagines the husband has murdered the wife. And this panorama gives us the clue that this is a film not so much about matters of crime and justice as it is about gender and romance in contemporary America, because all we know about the crime is that it relates to the nature of the relationship between a man and a woman, as does every drama playing out in the flats and balconies behind Jeff's apartment, from the irresistibly passionate to the suicidal and the murderous.

The questions framed by this scenario are very different to any raised in Woolrich's story. In particular, as Jeff surveys the scene outside his rear window we are prompted to wonder: in this world of male authority constructed around masculine values and the voyeuristic male gaze, just how do women negotiate their place? There are those who simply opt out, like the sculptress, perfectly content with the world of art and beauty—as we see at the end:

But then there are those who find such solitude unbearable, like Miss Lonelyhearts, a precautionary figure who shows the devastation suffered by those unable to establish a mature and fulfilling relationship.

The man she brings home one night turns out to be an oversexed adolescent and she is brutalised by the experience. What saves her from her despair is the music of the composer who is writing a song called 'Lisa', which plays at the end of the film. But earlier he and his friends had gathered together around the piano to sing about another Lisa—Mona Lisa, with these lyrics:

> Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, men have named you
> You're so like the lady with the mystic smile
> . . .
> Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa?
> Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art?

This is the dilemma of Jeff's Lisa, caught between two extremes—on the one hand she fashions herself like a sculpture according to an ideal of beauty celebrated by the world of high fashion, but Jeff complains that she is 'too perfect'. She has to show him that she has a place and a value in his world, symbolised by the negative image of the woman in the frame Jeff keeps on his wall—

—because he looks for the opposite of the 'too perfect' magazine beauty.

So we are presented with a crime thriller seemingly more interested in the crime of Peeping Tomism and invasion of privacy than the murder its source story's title stressed with particular insistence was the focus of the matter, and a relationship that can't get started because the masculinity of the man and the femininity of the woman have been fashioned by romance codes that constitutionally cannot accommodate themselves to one another. And there is something about that femininity in particular that Jeff is particularly disdainful of—the woman's way of looking at things. We see this early on, when Stella explains her theory of economic forecasting, about which he is very unimpressed:

> *Stella*: You know, I should have been a gypsy fortune teller instead of an insurance company nurse. I've got a nose for trouble– smell it ten miles away. You heard of that market crash in '29? I predicted that.
> *Jeff*: Now just how did you do that, Stella?
> *Stella*: Simple. I was nursing a director of General Motors—kidney ailment, they said. Nerves, I said. Then I ask myself—what's General Motors got to be nervous about? Over-production I says. Collapse. When General Motors has to go to the bathroom ten times a day the whole country's ready to let go.
> *Jeff*: Well, Stella, in economics a kidney ailment has no relationship to the stock market—none whatsoever.
> *Stella*: Crashed, didn't it?

Jeff puts his faith in masculine rationality and discounts the feminine, but as the mystery unfolds he is forced to acknowledge two things: first, that there might be a value in the feminine qualities he has long disdained, and second, that he has developed real and deep romantic feelings for Lisa.

This occurs at a point at which multiple genres shift and integrate, as Hitchcock skilfully weaves together the disparate interests of the various genres at play here. We begin with the American Romance mystery of Jeff's coolness towards Lisa and his maverick activity of illicit surveillance, which develops into the mystery of Thorwald and his wife, which begins to claim more and more of our attention. At this point Jeff as investigator is detached, but this detachment lessens as the investigation proceeds, particularly in that moment when Lisa puts herself at risk by combining Jeff's mystery plot with her love romance plot in a kind of wager in a scene that comically highlights Jeff's sexual squeamishness and her erotic intrepidity:

> *Lisa*: It doesn't make sense Jeff.
> *Jess*: What doesn't?
> *Lisa*: Women aren't that unpredictable.
> *Jeff*: Mmm. Well I can't guess what you're thinking.
> *Lisa*: A woman has a favourite handbag; it always hangs on her bedpost where she can get at it easily. And then all of a sudden she goes away on a trip and leaves it behind. Why?
> *Jeff*: Because she didn't know she was going on a trip and where she's going she wouldn't need the handbag.
> *Lisa*: Yes, but only her husband would know that. And that jewellery. Women don't keep their jewellery in a handbag getting all twisted and scratched and tangled up.
> *Jeff*: Would they hide it in their husband's clothes?
> *Lisa*: They do not. And they don't leave it behind, either. Why, a woman going anywhere but the hospital would always take makeup, perfume and jewellery.
> *Jeff*: That's inside stuff, huh?
> *Lisa*: It's basic equipment. And you don't leave it behind in your husband's drawer or in your favourite handbag.
> *Jeff*: I'm with you sweetie, I'm with you, but Tom Doyle has a pat answer for that.
> *Lisa*: That Mrs Thorwald left at 6 a.m. yesterday with her husband?
> *Jeff*: According to those witnesses.
> *Lisa*: Well I have a pat rebuttal for Mr Doyle. That couldn't

have been Mrs Thorwald, or I don't know women.
Jeff: Oh. Well what about the witnesses?
Lisa: We'll agree they saw a woman, but she was not Mrs Thorwald. That is, not yet.
Jeff: *[Impressed]* Is that so?

In giving Jeff the 'inside stuff' on feminine behaviour Lisa has begun to reveal to him the narrowness of his own perspectives, but his composure is more seriously shaken by what comes next:

Lisa: I'd like to see your friends face when we tell him. He doesn't sound like much of a detective.
Jeff: Oh don't be too hard on him, he's a steady worker. I sure wish he'd show up.
Lisa: Don't rush him—we have all night.
Jeff: *[Puzzled]* We have all what?
Lisa: Night. I am going to stay with you.
Jeff: Well you'll have to clear that with my landlord.
Lisa: I've got the whole weekend off
Jeff: Well that's very nice but I only have one bed.
Lisa: If you say anything else I'll stay tomorrow night too.
Jeff: I won't be able to give you any pyjamas.
Lisa: You said I have to live out of one suitcase. *[Fetches bag]* I bet yours isn't this small.
Jeff: This is a suitcase?
Lisa: Well, a Mark Cross overnight case anyway–compact but ample enough. *[Removes negligee]*
Jeff: Looks like you packed in a hurry. Look at this—isn't that amazing.
Lisa: I'll trade you my feminine intuition for a bed for the night.

In offering to 'trade you my feminine intuition for a bed for the night,' Lisa is proposing to trade her desire for romance for his desire for mystery, and it's at this point that the two plots cross as the mystery shifts gear and becomes a thriller. The point of difference between the two is that the mystery is no longer a puzzle to be solved but rather a threat to be negotiated, and as Lisa enters Thorwald's apartment to carry out the crucial search she becomes an object of real romantic interest for Jeff because her intrepidity here shows him that there is so much more to her than a beautiful surface.

This is the point at which thriller and romance meet and merge: when Lisa finds the ring and places it on her finger, pointedly showing Jeff through the open window, she both solves the mystery and confirms her desirability in his world. Her action of pointing at the ring thus has a double significance: on the one hand she is indicating to Jeff that she has solved the crime by finding the ring, but on the other she is effectively saying to him: 'You have underestimated me: I'm bold enough and clever enough to take my place in your world, and now I've earned the right to have you place your ring on my finger.'

But menaced by Thorwald, Lisa the investigator is now at stake in the mystery, not detached and removed from it, and just as she is drawn into this world of danger, so she draws Jeff after her because her actions have awoken his romantic feeling for her. In this way Jeff is now drawn out of the shadows of his own apartment into the light of the world where he can be seen by Thorwald, put at stake in the game and threatened by the world of mystery he once simply observed from afar.

So while accessing many of the constituent figurative and narrative elements of the American Romance form, and by exploring the ironies and implications of these to probe aspects of the national self-consciousness in that subversive way literary scholarship was discovering to be a feature of the tradition, Hitchcock here also transforms Woolrich's source story through a series of character changes (from Afro-American offsider to feminine love interest) and generic shifts (from mystery to thriller to love romance) in order to render it as a highly effective if idiosyncratic Hollywood thriller. Hitchcock himself said of the film:

> *Rear Window* was structurally satisfactory because it is the epitome of the subjective treatment. A man looks; he sees; he reacts. Thus you construct a mental process. *Rear Window* is entirely a mental process, done by use of the visual.[30]

---

[30] Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock, Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures* (First published 1976; Anchor Books: New York, 1992), p.224.

Indeed, but what is Jeff looking at and reacting to? A mystery, or a woman, or both, because mystery and desire have become one in the thrill of this particular kind of romance. We have moved from a position where women are in the negative in Jeff's world to one where they are in the positive as all romantic relations are resolved throughout the apartment block. The trick here is that, unlike typical crime dramas, this state is achieved not through the solution to the crime but through the process of criminal detection that solution requires, in which Jeff is surprised to discover that the female perspective, which he had originally disparaged, is more than equal to any male view.

Traditionally with the mystery narrative the moral order of things is made unstable by criminality, and if left unpunished our comfortable sense of security in the world in which we live, our faith in the justness and fairness of that world, can be deeply threatened. Consequently, the solution to the mystery should create order where there was chaos and disorder. Here, however, it is the playing out of romantic desire that ultimately creates order in the apartments—the crime is simply incidental to this, although it has been integral to the romantic journey for Lisa and Jeff. That is one of the principal effects of Hitchcock's adaptation here: to relocate the traditional metaphorical and ideological functions of the mystery romance plot within the love romance plot. The other, I think, is the introduction of comic and satiric elements into an otherwise taut mystery narrative in order to underscore the range and character of the film's observations about the state of the union—national and romantic. These might well have been out of place in a tale of this kind in 1942, but as a film of its time *Rear Window* comments archly upon the fevered state of suspicion and paranoia that beset national life in the '50s, metaphorically drawing associations between this and prized cultural values like rugged individualism which, in the generic light of American Romance, can be seen as implicated in a chauvinist view of the world and a hyperactive vigilance arising from a libidinous and adolescent masculine sensibility. The film then moves on to ironically explore other issues pertinent to the times, like the questionable role of institutional authorities, the complexities of masculinity and femininity in the coded realms of an increasingly media-saturated post-war society, and the constrained and problematic opportunities for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the claustrophobic world of modern urban America.

At the end of the film it's still a masculine world, but if at the beginning the woman in the negative indicates the degree to which Lisa will have to modify her nature and desire to accommodate herself to Jeff's world, in the final

image we get a clear sense that that world will now be affected by her influence and Jeff will need to meet certain expectations that she has. And we note too that if Jeff had paid the cost of a broken leg for living that romantically detached but rugged masculine life at the opening of the film, precisely the same cost is ironically exacted by his entry into the world of mature human relations represented by his romantic relationship with Lisa when he breaks his other leg in a fall from his balcony, literalising the metaphorical 'fall of sex, marriage and responsibility' as the American Romance hero lands with a thud in a world of dull, bourgeois routine and, like Rip Van Winkle, he falls asleep.

Which is a very wry take on the American tradition by a very artful British director, and indeed if it weren't for the fact that somewhere in the middle of it all a woman is murdered and dismembered by a psychopathic husband, I'd almost be inclined to call this brilliantly conceived thriller a romantic comedy. Or perhaps, given the characteristic elements at play here, it would be better simply to call it a Hitchcock film.

David Kelly teaches American literature and literature and cinema in the English Department at the University of Sydney.

Conceptual Metaphors of Anger and Embodied Realism in *Middlemarch*

KAMILA WALKER

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is replete with conceptual metaphors, many of which are familiar and carry deep emotional resonance. The recurrence of widespread and broadly familiar conceptual metaphors in this influential novel suggest them to be a major characteristic feature of Eliot's technique. This figurative manner of expression is both a signature discursive structure constituting part of the formal properties of the text's realist aesthetics, and also an indication of Eliot's intuitive creativity at work: her capacity to produce a familiar sensation via conventional language structures. Part of this reliance on metaphor arises from the established conventions in which Eliot works. The nineteenth-century realistic novel preserves, and highlights, a subconscious, normalized linguistic regularity, and therefore draws attention to itself as a genre that establishes its essential distinctiveness, to a considerable degree, through the cultivation and foregrounding of its metaphoric conventionality.

Such orthodoxy of expression is not only a matter of habit, but is also experiential, in that metaphors can become conventional because they reflect the embodied experience of being in the world. For example, in *Middlemarch*, the prototypical figurative model of anger, one of the most evidently embodied emotions, which Eliot extends in original ways, usually has its basis in 'the universal embodiment of anger'.[1] Its external

[1] Kövecses, 'Cross-Cultural Experience of Anger: A Psycholinguistic Analysis,' 157.

manifestation therefore is in recognizable facial,[2] gestural,[3] and vocal expressions.[4] The linguistically-revealed embodiment of the novelistic discourse of anger is contended here to be a re-enactment of a cluster of beliefs about properties of anger. They are characterized, on the one hand, physiologically by 'muscle tension, general restlessness, an increase in heart rate and the face feeling hot';[5] and on the other hand, behaviourally by 'self-assertion, ranging from statements of appropriate self-assertion and defense of one's self to harmful aggressive actions',[6] impaired judgement,[7] and also a tendency to 'lose self-control and to act on impulse and without reflection'.[8] The broad understanding of anger in terms of different, but familiar, kinds of natural response patterns leads to the assumption that the origin of anger metaphors in *Middlemarch* resides in the way people are biologically hard-wired to react to anger-eliciting events. Because novelistic discourse comes to rely on pervasive conventional metaphors, many of which express embodied emotion, such expressions become an identifiable

---

[2] Darwin first suggested (*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*) and modern authority on facial behaviour seems to agree (Ekman, Friesen and Ellsworth [*Emotion in the Human Face*]; Ekman [*Emotions Revealed*]; and Izard [*The Face of Emotion*; *Human Emotions*]) that basic emotions (such as joy, anger, fear, disgust and sadness) have a reliably recognizable facial signature across cultures.

[3] The emblematic gestural expression of anger has been reported to involve 'an impulse to move forward toward the target of anger', and also a tendency to prepare hands with an intention to strike. (Ekman, *Emotions Revealed*, 135, 26). These highly recognizable bodily movements, perceived to be oriented towards inflicting harm, 'show that angry feelings are paralleled by aggression-related motor impulses.' Berkowitz, 'Anger,' 425.

[4] One of the most characteristic features of anger recognized across cultures is the high-pitched tone of voice such as that produced during yelling, shouting or screaming. Green, Whitney and Gustafson (in 'Vocal Expressions of Anger'), demonstrate that there is a considerable similarity in the ways people vocally express anger worldwide.

For a convincing argument that the vocal expression of emotions is, like facial, subject to universal recognition, see also Banse and Scherer, 'Acoustic Profiles in Vocal Emotion Expression.'

[5] Berkowitz, 'Anger,' 412.

[6] Schultz, Grodack and Izard, 'State and Trait Anger, Fear, and Social Information Processing,' 312.

[7] See, for example, Kolts, 19–20; and also Seneca's view of anger as inhibiting rational faculties, referenced by Spielberger and Reheiser, 'The Nature and Measurement of Anger,' 404.

[8] Potegal, 'The Temporal Dynamics of Anger: Phenomena, Processes, and Perplexities,' 386.

quality of the novel, an integral part of its textual apparatus, instinctively deployed as a representational strategy[9] and a generic hallmark of that expressive mode.

Eliot uses and develops these embodied expressions of anger in new and motivated ways, which is to say she deftly experiments with conceptual metaphors to drive and bolster a number of salient features of her narrative, most typically the social and psychological realities of her characters, whose affective worlds are carefully crafted for moral use in the story. But, despite this individualistic deployment of conceptual metaphors for anger, Eliot nevertheless relies on easily recognizable and distinctly embodied schemas which take part in the representation of reality precisely as a result of this universal familiarity. It is proposed here that the language of a realistic narrative, such as *Middlemarch*, can be understood in terms of its aptness to project coherent patterns of embodied experience imprinted on the (English-speaking) mind. In turn, such a novel can be seen as a cultural map of embodied emotional experience—a particularly useful resource for the reconstruction of mental representations of enduring anger concepts.

In order to explore this line of inquiry, this article will examine conceptual metaphors used by Eliot to express anger. The consistency of conceptual metaphors of anger in *Middlemarch* suggests a non-coincidental and non-trivial conceptualization of this emotion that arises from the perceived symptoms of embodied anger—the involuntary mounting of bodily heat proportionate to the experienced intensity of the emotion. When mimetic instances of the experience of anger are communicated, the actual physiology of anger seems to influence Eliot's cognition, or to prime it—and probably other writers' too, given the particularly strong biological basis of this emotion—to conceive of anger characteristically as that which, like temperature itself, has the potential to rise and fall. This mentally rehearsed property of anger is in turn intuitively expected to guide the linguistic representation of this emotion, offering an indication of the way the Victorians metaphorically created, and were controlled by, an emotional reality, structured by these biological patterns. In other words, Eliot tends to use figurative language that configures a typically angry person to have features similar to that of a container under pressure, capable of retaining

[9] Conceptual metaphors, according to the influential theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), are the product of a cognitive processing that functions in ways that we are largely unconscious of. Turner succinctly expresses this idea: 'Constructions have intricate structure and systematic principles that we know intuitively but not consciously.' ('Figure,' 58).

accumulated energy up to the critical release point. The embodied conceptual metaphor here is that a person is a pressurized container, and in turn, anger is imagined as the heated fluid in the container that expands and causes the pressure to rise.

The recognition of the very conventional nature of such habitual forms of expression might lead to the conception of a literary creativity that is of relatively limited conceptual potential, where the metaphorical representation of mental states is more or less restricted by a consistently mechanistic, physiologically-based imagination. The principle of conceptual restriction to which the novel adheres is the consequence not only of automatic bodily responses, but also of the ways of thinking that have become customary both within a particular cultural situation, and also in an individual mind. But along with this inherent conceptual limitation of novelistic discourse comes its particularly persuasive power. When readers recognize the basic metaphorical conceptualization of an emotion—its representative 'image schema'—they are automatically involved in the associated meanings that this conceptualization engenders, and hence are more readily inclined to accept, and even be guided, by them.[10] Conventional conceptual metaphors can thereby be rhetorically deployed specifically for didactic purposes. As Victorian writers used novels, amongst other implicit purposes, as a vehicle for reflecting and even encouraging high standards of conduct, a recourse to conceptual metaphor was a key linguistic strategy for the endorsement of the ethic of self-regulation and the concomitant promulgation of the disparagement of excessively fiery behaviour, an aim encoded in Eliot's linguistic choices.

The narrative tendency to reflect the embodiment of emotions through the pervasive use of figurative language does not, however, equate to a denial of Eliot's creative engagement, or detract in any way from the accepted literary brilliance of *Middlemarch*. Scholars of Eliot's oeuvre have invested much of their critical energy in examining her masterful and original use of metaphor (the early experimentation with which appears in her religious letters as the young Mary Anne Evans[11]). It would be hard to dispute Jan Jędrzejewski's evaluation of *Middlemarch* as a text whose unity of design is uniquely dependent for its success on consciously contrived figurative ensembles:

---

[10] On 'image schema', see Turner, 'Figure,' esp. his discussion of the concept of 'iconicity,' 49–51.

[11] See Henry, 3.

> The immense diversity of themes and motifs that constitute the world of *Middlemarch* is held together by elaborate patterns of imagery integrating all elements of the novel and functioning on a number of levels, from individual, localized metaphors and similes embedded in the texture of George Eliot's prose to broader symbolic structures of the plot and characterization.[12]

Eliot's use of metaphors and imagery, across time and space, has been studied in terms of their complexity, scope,[13] and also with reference to 'how they function as a compressed form of exposition',[14] thereby establishing their relevance to the composite of narrative method. The perceived finesse and calculated unity of her linguistic representation, a discursive technique of levels of quality attributed to Shakespeare,[15] long ago provoked Barbara Hardy to form the conclusion that her creative language reflects an artistic meticulousness which 'we are more willing to give to the medium of poetry than to the medium of the prose narrative'.[16]

Eliot's metaphors, more often than not, seem to be the result of a deliberate demand for stylistic perfection, but when Eliot famously labours to sustain the visual image of Dorothea's marriage in terms of motifs of confinement,[17] or when she consistently configures Maggie's conflicts of

---

[12] Jędrzejewski, 77.

[13] For example, for an excellent discussion of Eliot's intricate metaphorical weavings in *Middlemarch* and other novels, see Hardy, *George Eliot: A Critic's Biography*, esp. Chapter 6, 'Objects, Words and Metaphors,' 147–64. Paxman makes a convincing case for the way the linguistic significance of knowledge metaphors in *Middlemarch* can be broadened when supplemented by a consideration of the novel as inseparable from mechanisms of the cognitive system. ('Metaphor and Knowledge in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*').

[14] Gorbunova references B. R. Naptsok's dissertation (1997) to give an example of an increased focus of Russian literary scholars on Eliot's artistic technique. Gorbunova, 'George Eliot in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia (1917–2014),' 282.

[15] Images of the mirror and the labyrinth in *Middlemarch* are the ones most energetically interpreted.

[16] Hardy, 'Imagery in George Eliot's Last Novels,' 14.

[17] On how metaphors and metonymies of imprisonment figure in literary texts, amongst them in George Eliot's 'Janet's Repentance,' *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Felix Holt*, see Fludernik, 'The Metaphorics and Metonymics of Carcerality.' The association of marriage with enclosure is supplied, at least in part, by the female experience of living within the restricting confines of Victorian patriarchy. Fludernik argues that, through the traditional metaphor 'MARRIAGE AS PRISON',

emotions and ultimate destiny as running parallel with the flow of the river in *The Mill on the Floss*,[18] the figurative threads indicate more than their thematic significance; articulate more than wider social and psychological issues with which Eliot was engaging; and disclose more than that 'fertility of invention characteristic of the best Victorian fiction'.[19] Rather, they register linguistic instantiations of shared, deep-seated cultural models of concepts and ordinary ways of thinking about them. Eliot's creation of these analogies might have a poetic dimension, but it also has a commonplace source of origin. Dorothea's and Maggie's mental struggles are metaphorically anchored in basic figurative expressions that 'are part of those conceptual resources, part of the way members of a culture make sense of the world'.[20] The characters' psychological condition is imaginatively enacted fundamentally via extremely typical conventional metaphors: respectively, marriage is a prison and life is a river. These conventional metaphors function as a conceptual prime, and as such exert a profound influence on the limits in terms of which concepts such as marriage or life can be understood and from which may emerge an immense diversity of artistic elaborations. Similar to the creative principle of poetic discourse, 'authors may call upon our knowledge of basic conceptual metaphors in order to manipulate them in unusual ways'.[21] So, although Eliot's intricately-spun metaphorical webs are indicative of her contemplated effort to unify the recurring images of life and marriage for emotional impact, the conceptual templates to which these images continually make reference are, in the words of L. David Ritchie, conspicuously flat, unoriginal and already

---

Wollstonecraft and George Eliot 'foreground the domination of women by their husbands, exposing the trappings of marital felicity as contemptuous fondling (the spaniel) or disguised subjection.' (241). In support of this idea, I would recommend reading Tadlock's brief essay on boredom as arising in marriage from 'the confinement that comes as a result of conforming to the feminine sphere.' ('Boredom and Marriage in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*,' 82).

[18] On this point, see Rubin, 'River Imagery as a Means of Foreshadowing in *The Mill on the Floss*' and also Makurath Jr., 'The Symbolism of the Flood in Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*.' Sadrin (in 'Time, Tense, Weather in Three 'Flood Novels'') has made a different observation with respect to the metaphoric function of the flood. Unlike in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where 'A simple allusion to the Flood can be a short-cut to a tragic *dénouement* or a means of solemnizing events that otherwise would appear as mere accidents' (98), water deluge in *The Mill on the Floss* is perceived more as 'a means for the novelist of preventing the future of the heroine from being too disastrous.' (103–4).

[19] Bennett, 162.

[20] Lakoff and Turner, 26.

[21] Ibid., 54.

absorbed.[22] Considerations of how the traditional metaphors in Eliot's novel have a conceptual core prompt speculation and reflection upon the scope and limitations of narrative imagination, and have profound implications for thinking about the importance of conceptual metaphor in revising the list of generic features of realist aesthetics. But the novel is not thought to distinguish itself from other literary forms fundamentally due to the connection it establishes between conventional metaphoric language and realist representation; the point is rather that any theory of literary realism can be developed and nuanced by acknowledging the fact that this connection exists and that it typifies the genre.

Literary scholars who work on metaphors in literary texts have tended to focus on a combination of metaphor and literary theories, and their analyses have fruitfully functioned to trace in literary discourse—whether poetry or prose—either a particular imaginative use of language, or a tendency of the literary text to display an intrinsic figurative stagnation. What has been achieved, as a result of these cognitive-linguistic ventures, is a fairly flexible methodology capable of accommodating, and often reconciling, competing insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory variously utilized to comment on the potential of literature to make manifest mental models that fundamentally underlie all creativity. In this context, this article has a double scope. Firstly, it participates in an ongoing cognitivist project of theorizing metaphor as a basis of human understanding, by providing textual evidence for the claim that the structure of literary language reflects an inventory of conceptual schemas that the reader automatically and effortlessly activates to comprehend metaphorically encoded information about the experience of fictional emotions. And secondly, it puts forward an argument that is of particular value in the highly specialized field of narrative realism: that conceptual metaphor has a special prominence in realistic prose as a representational strategy that is both characteristic of the genre and also acts as a structured and highly powerful vehicle for driving narrative meaning.

When talking about the pervasiveness of conceptual metaphor in the novel, it is important not to draw any simple analogies between the actual language that we ordinarily speak and the literary language. Conceptual metaphors of anger like those deployed by Eliot in *Middlemarch* are products of artistic construction in the sense that they are always subject to the author's aesthetic and rhetorical choices, and as such they always

[22] Ritchie, 1–13.

necessarily belong in the linguistic texture of the narrative. The literary context thus can only be expected to betray 'an authorial presence . . . that attunes the reader's attention to what is written, mirroring the authorial attention to detail and structure. The literary artefact is highly intentional, and this makes a difference for the reading experience'.[23] On the other hand, although the intentionality of the language used entails an increased artistic assiduity and highlights its concomitant interest in its own creative reception,[24] the linguistic impulse of the novel is not towards idiosyncrasy of expression. Eliot did not reach out for her metaphors from the depths of her creative mind to foreground her originality by dotting her novelistic landscape with linguistic quirks; rather, she used metaphoric language subconsciously, retrieved from a pool of already existing conceptualizations of emotions and modes of cognition, grounded 'in patterns of what we take to be habitual and routine experience, both biological and social, that [she knew] unconsciously and in rich interactional detail, because [she lived] these patterns'.[25] This recognition enforces the idea that realist discourse is not entirely the product of a type of imaginative thinking that is distinctly innovative, but is rather motivated, to a large extent, by the physiological and socio-cultural facts of our human existence encoded in everyday metaphors.

The metaphorical language of the novel can be analyzed in a similar way as figurative expressions that occur in real speech, because cognitive interpretive abilities that readers activate to process narrative metaphors (although usually below the horizon of their conscious awareness) emanate from readers' 'real' bodily/biological and socio-cultural experience. Thus the principle of mimetic construction is linked to a simulated consciousness that displays 'no rupture in experience between perceiving, feeling and thinking'.[26] One striking instance of the novel's establishing a link between a physiological reaction and a particular, quite standard, metonymic emotion image is when Dorothea enrages Casaubon by denouncing his work as fruitless during their first quarrel in marriage. After delivering this blow of

---

[23] Brandt and Brandt, 'Cognitive Poetics and Imagery,' 125.

[24] Brandt and Brandt offer a comment in this connection to the effect that the more pronounced the shadow of an author and the greater artistic enigma of a literary text, the stronger the demand for an increased interpretive mobility on the part of the reader: 'A text vested with heightened attention calls for a reading vested with heightened attention. The more authorial awareness is present in the text, the more worthwhile the reading of it is.' ('Cognitive Poetics and Imagery,' 125).

[25] Lakoff and Turner, 59.

[26] Johnson and Rohrer, 'We are Live Creatures,' 22.

criticism, she notices that his 'face had a *quick angry flush* upon it'. He opens his reproachful speech with a patronizing tag 'My love', and then continues 'with *irritation reined in* by propriety'.[27] Here, conceptual metonymy[28] calls attention to the assumed structure flushing stands for anger, accorded by the standard rule of metonymy, as articulated fully by Kövecses.[29] An essential biological attribute of anger—heat—constitutes a basis for this metonymic representation of this emotion. The physiological pattern mentally schematizes a human being as resembling a hydraulic pressure system in which the temperature of fluids progressively rises and which, upon reaching a critical point, has to be violently released. This gradual accumulation of energy when in an agitated state allows anger to be linguistically gradated, 'from mild irritation or annoyance to intense fury and rage'.[30] In the subsequent metaphor that features in the passage, irritation is configured as held back, with a possible significance to act as a shortcut to cultural sanctions against socially inappropriate anger displays. Hence for Eliot to metaphorically describe Casaubon's irritation as consciously inhibited (at least insofar as a proper sense of decorum bids him to control his emotion) is to attribute to him a virtue of self-restraint, via the metaphor of irritation is a horse that needs to be controlled. Presumably, the self is doing that controlling in both instances, a conscious suppression that counters the unintentional escape of both anger and irritation. The metonymic and metaphoric depiction respectively of anger and annoyance is realistic, not because it 'mirrors' natural emotional behaviours, but because it comes to establish a level of believability by immediately making sense in a narrative situation, allowing the reader to absorb the conceptual metonymy/metaphor instantaneously. It is precisely because of its intuitive preoccupation with essentially 'naturalized' language (textually reproducing—or imitating—authentic speech acts that feature 'spontaneous metaphorical expressions as they are encountered in concrete uncontrolled language use'[31]), that the novel is proposed here to take on an agency of realism: it physically records the conceptual underpinning of metaphorical language, and betokens the way the reader's mind is naturally hardwired to process that language.

---

[27] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 200, hereafter designated as *M*. As in this example, italics will be used to indicate metaphoric/metonymic expressions of anger.
[28] Oster offers a definition: 'In the lexical approach to the study of emotions, we speak of conceptual metonymy when an emotion is represented by its physiological effects or by the behavioural reactions it generates.' ('Using Corpus Methodology for Semantic and Pragmatic Analyses,' 741).
[29] See Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*.
[30] Spielberger and Reheiser, 'The Nature and Measurement of Anger,' 403.
[31] Steen, 'Identifying Metaphor in Language,' 386.

The presumed familiarity of readers with conventional metaphoric expression is reflected by their demonstrated ability to understand it. In the mindset of the literary reader, the novelist takes for granted their internalized metaphorical structures, and is expected to have implicitly invited a construction of an analogy between authentic and fictional discourse when reading. What is notoriously significant is the organic interrelatedness of a fictional (literary) metaphor with the 'real' metaphor (that is, produced by real people in real life contexts)—there are, the argument holds, cogent resemblances between two distinct realms of shared conceptual understanding. Narrative realism functions such to take a whole range of familiar (and normalized over time) conventional metaphors as input, and to construct their mimetic equivalents as output. This cognitive interchange makes it possible for the conceptual output to be perceived as input, allowing imitative metaphors and metonymies 'to take the reader a short cut to very complex scripts, scenarios and cultural frames which can be evoked with the strokes of a brush'.[32] The realist novel can thereby catalogue English modes of cognition by creating mimetic mental models that account for the life-likeness it bestows.

A consideration of the novel's conventional metaphoric language allows us to allocate a crucial, if not representative, characteristic of the genre that contributes to its reality effect. Such a line of inquiry, moreover, permits a consideration, with the assistance of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, of how generic realist narrative conventions are transformed and expanded upon at a linguistic level, a creative zone that interacts with culturally specific image schemas and mental models. One of the recognized cognitive exploits of the novel is its ability to invite an emotional response from the reader. Several theorists focus the explicit goal of realist fiction to engage readers emotionally, each differently addressing the deeper problem, indeed the psychological oddity, of how it happens at all that we feel any emotions towards characters that we know to be imaginary. Broadly, we can discern amongst a variety of approaches two strands. In the first strand, a realist narrative has been perceived as engaged in the process of constructing a 'sense of character as person',[33] recruiting an emotional connection with the fictional character by using the representational technique of presenting the imaginary with the plausibility and credibility of the real. Taken as such, novels do not contrive to depict characters as though they were real people

[32] Fludernik, 'The Metaphorics and Metonymics of Carcerality,' 242.
[33] Nash, 14.

with real emotional instincts, but rather to project human figures with personalities, frailties and motivations that correlate closely enough with those of the real people to then be taken as such. This evocative capacity of the genre conforms to ideas fundamentally encapsulated within the concept of what Marie-Laure Ryan has suitably termed 'embedded narratives', encompassing 'any story-like representation produced in the mind of a character and reproduced in the mind of the reader',[34] which stresses the centrality of the novel's desire to deliver human simulations: 'intelligent beings who produce a variety of mental representations such as beliefs, wishes, projections, intents, obligations, dreams, and fantasies'.[35] Our affective response to fictional characters thus consists in a novelist's construction of humanlike behaviours and emotional states, and the reader processing this information as that belonging to 'persons, real persons' without ever assuming 'that they are real persons', in Radford and Weston's configuration.[36]

The second strand to reading literary emotions has mainly been developed to add theoretical weight to the first. Amy Coplan, for example, has re-examined and consolidated empirical research on narrative affect to resolve the confusion associated with the customary ascription of 'empathy' towards, or 'identification' with, characters of a novel as an indispensable component in fictional realism, offering a theoretical adjustment in the form of the introduction of a concept known as 'self-other differentiation'.[37] Most influential has been her distinction between 'empathy' and 'sympathy', which Radford and Weston probably had in mind when formulating their pioneering theory about the potential of the novel to involve the reader into its emotional scenarios. For Coplan, 'sympathy' is that which 'involves caring about another individual—feeling *for* another'.[38] It is essentially the non-'get 'inside' the other'[39] affiliation with someone who experiences a difficult emotional moment. In the case of sympathy, people show 'concern for another's well-being' without sharing their emotions. Sympathy is thus separated from 'empathy', the latter which Coplan defines as the affective state that occurs when we 'take up [another's] psychological perspective and imaginatively experience, to some degree or other, what he or she

---

[34] Ryan, 'Embedded Narratives and Tellability,' 320.
[35] Ibid., 320.
[36] Radford and Weston, 'How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?' 78.
[37] Coplan, 'Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions,' 144.
[38] Ibid., 145, italics in original.
[39] Davis, 5.

experiences'.[40] Empathizing with fictional characters thus involves the enactment of the characters' primary condition, 'by *pretending* to be in their "mental shoe"',[41] whilst simultaneously preserving a separate version of one's own experience—an essentially simulation-oriented theory that does not depart far from that of Radford and Weston.

To rationalize fictional emotions as reconstituted real affect (because readers recognize fictional characters' emotions to be *like* their own, and verify them against their own evocative stimuli) has been instrumental in strengthening the novel's claim to be realistic. When we understand that connecting fictional language with real-world language of emotion relies on conventional metaphorical language to produce an imitative mental state, then we discover more about the mechanics of narrative realism. Particularly relevant to this project is the emphasis on the role of conceptual metaphor in the creation of literary realism, specifically as a result of the universal embodied experience that underpins such metaphoric expression. Such emphasis can be construed as a response to the appeal of F. Elizabeth Hart working in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, who, aware of how increasingly sophisticated and multi-pronged the study of literary texts is rapidly becoming, insists upon 'the possible relevance of cognitive linguistics to literary studies',[42] recommending an interpretive approach that takes advantage of 'a new, metaphor-centered model of language . . . one that situates the subject within its material world both inside *and outside* the text'.[43] In other words, insights from Cognitive Linguistics, which Hart recognizes particularly valuable in discussions of literary texts, have created a window of opportunity to explain how the novel's recourse to basic, readily comprehensible metaphors participates in framing the mechanisms of realist aesthetics, technically 'by positing the nature of language as a cognitive and not a transcendental phenomenon, and by showing language to be imaginatively *embodied*'.[44]

This article has two aims: to de-emphasize the novel's innovative metaphor usage, and to consider its language more as a product of experiential cognition that confines meaning to a largely subconscious awareness of biological universals—precisely to investigate what makes the

---

[40] Coplan, 143.
[41] Gallese, Ferrari and Umiltà, 'The Mirror Matching System,' 36, italics in original.
[42] Hart, 'Cognitive Linguistics,' 3.
[43] Ibid., 2, italics in original.
[44] Ibid., 2, italics in original.

realist novel realistic. Thus what I will call 'embodied realism', as a mark of differentiation from all other existing theories of literary realism, is one that acknowledges a discourse that activates reading that switches between two levels of awareness: the first—'bio-(pre)perceptual'—which involves an acknowledgement (tacitly but nevertheless) of our own bodily responsiveness to an emotional stimuli; and the second—'narrative-reflective'—requiring establishing the point of maximal convergence of realistic/imagined and probable/real emotional scenarios, and thereby reducing the distance between the two ontologically separate worlds. Engaged reading derives from an embodied realism that is encoded within linguistic form via metaphorical means. Cultural models of emotions embedded in conceptual metaphors compel the reader to keep track of the embodied nature of their own emotional states, thereby orchestrating an empathetic response to fictional characters. Readers are textually cued to select from a range of possible emotions the ones that are most appropriate to the fictional situation being communicated. This logic precludes interpretive misfits and is most appropriate to the fictional situation being expressed. Such frameworks are thereby as much signals of particular emotions that fictional characters undergo, as organizing procedures for rendering them intelligible in a narrative context.

A consideration of the figurative language in *Middlemarch* aims to illuminate how Eliot subconsciously engages with conventional anger conceptualizations, in order to communicate to her readers the ethical messages of her own social/cultural milieu. In particular, it will be shown how Eliot in her aesthetic effort to propagate a concept of anger as a breach of etiquette educates her audiences to regulate their angry emotions through the metaphorical representation of that regulation as a laudable characteristic of English civilized society. Eliot's standard metaphoric language for analyzing demonstrations of anger serves as a visual reminder of the shared responsibility of individuals to effectively control this emotion when it strikes. What these common anger images seem to suggest is Eliot's interest in the linguistic enactment of the cultural scripts that describe appropriate anger behaviours (a culture's own '*display rules*'[45] in the form of 'role performances'[46]) to be learned, and ideally, acted out under trying circumstances. The ideal behaviour, in her ethical schema, involves cultivating emotional states that reflect and are driven by rational thoughts

[45] Display rules, Ekman explains, 'are socially learned, often culturally different, rules about the management of expression, about who can show which emotion to whom and when they can do so.' (*Emotions Revealed*, 4, italics in original).
[46] Matsumoto and Wilson, 'Culture, Emotion, and Motivation,' 541.

and moderation. Of course, Eliot, as an English writer, and as a promulgator of realist aesthetics in particular, was not completely at liberty to invent radically new ways of conceptually representing socially-prescribed norms about the expression of anger. Her formation of ideas of self-control in *Middlemarch* will be shown to be principally based on instantly familiar configurations of anger—most prominently, but not exclusively, in terms of boiling or burning—that are mainly inspired by a reliance on analogies with the physical body, and produced reflexively rather than consciously or highly creatively.

The figurative representations of anger are both conceptually recognisable and discursively creative. The result is a paradox of familiar innovation, which achieves embodied recognition as well as distinctive literary potency. For example, Eliot clearly depicts anger of a resentful kind in *Middlemarch* in her presentation of the emotional behaviour of Dorothea. Eliot's use of this specific anger variant for both characterization and mood development is enhanced by a range of metaphoric elaborations, grounded in the longstanding belief that anger is prone to explode, to manifest itself as a sudden rush that is difficult to stop. Already during her honeymoon, Dorothea is disappointed with Casaubon's emotional placidity, and is depressed by the prosaic servitude to which he has reduced her by commanding an intellectual debasement. Her marital expectations thwarted, Dorothea realizes that her initial perception of 'some spiritual communion' (*M* 22) with Casaubon was false, and this pang of awakening leads her to 'becoming more and more aware, with a certain terror, that her mind was continually sliding into inward *fits of anger* or repulsion, or else into forlorn weariness' (*M* 196). Further, in using the expression 'fits of anger' here, which could be construed as an instance of the conceptual formulae anger is an illness, the narrator hints that Dorothea's quick temper is a symptom of psychological deficiency, or lack of individual control. It is thereby implied that Dorothea is conditioned by social conventions to contain her 'inward fire' (*M* 14), to constantly monitor her emotional thermometer, the compulsory task the narrator repeatedly emphasizes to be contradictory to her nature, and the resulting impulses her flaw, at least in comparison with her more congenial sister Celia. Collectively, these expressions suggest that Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage is a combustible one, and this evaluation can be made by way of extracting from a conventionally intricate metaphorical/metonymic pattern elements that make up the atmosphere of conflict. Dorothea, often against herself, shifts to making peace, motivated, it is implied, by an awareness of how an outburst of anger can generate destructive energy in a marriage. Her intentionally calculated anger

discipline may be conceptualized metaphorically as a monitored release: 'anger can be let out under control',[47] a figurative category that can be modified, by conceptual analogy, to encompass deliberate restraint. The proposed extension of this principal metaphor—anger can be controllably suppressed—signifies Dorothea's conscious suppression of this emotion in pursuit of domestic harmony:

> There had been no clashing of temper between Dorothea and her husband since that little explosion in Rome, which had left such strong traces in her mind that it had been easier ever since to *quell emotion* than to incur the consequence of *venting it.* (*M* 282)

Clearly the passage uses conventional language, which is a metaphoric seesaw of anger suppression and release: through Dorothea's psychological resolve, a very specific—and rather predictable—chain of highly uniform anger conceptualizations is established (denoted by the persistence of this binary configuration). This chain places the reader under a condition of expectation. Once she returns home from her wedding journey, Dorothea is no longer capable of basing her attitude toward her husband on her respect for his superior knowledge and to continue the relationship in blind reverence. In the concomitant absence of emotional intimacy, her marriage becomes a sacrificial quest for devotion and understanding, a moral endeavour to respond in sympathy to her husband's emotional and, it is hinted, sexual limitations. Intellectual and spiritual needs not being met, she commits herself to a life of emotional celibacy, adopting the role of a dutiful wife-martyr. So, the more then she is frustrated by Casaubon's distrust in her pure intentions when he imposes on her his jealous prohibitions of her seeing Will Ladislaw, her confidant, but also, after all, his family relative. Frustration is bound to trigger Dorothea's righteous anger, and as she comes to see her husband as 'stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust' (*M* 282), the metaphor anger is bad weather inside a person gives us a clue that she has reached the most dangerous level of this emotion, beyond which it is impossible for her to '*stride the blast*' of the '*storm within her*' (*M* 282). Casaubon's sanction of Ladislaw's visits is a provocative stimulus for Dorothea's automatic physiological and behavioural reactions that are visible signs of fury. Three of the commonly recognized symptoms of intense anger seem to be involved in Eliot's metonymic representation of

[47] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 18.

Dorothea's pent-up emotion: a change in voice; a flash of light in the eyes; and a verbal outburst directed at the offender:

> With her first words, *uttered in a tone that shook him*, she startled Mr Casaubon into looking at her, and meeting *the flash of her eyes*.
>
> 'Why do you attribute to me a wish for anything that would annoy you? You speak to me as if I were something you had to contend against. Wait at least till I appear to consult my own pleasure apart from yours.' (*M* 282)

Dorothea believes herself to be in the right, and receiving no apologies, she persists in anger, where the lack of appeasement is captured via the great generic anger is fire conceptual metaphor: 'the *fire was not dissipated* yet' (*M* 282). As it psychologically appears to her, in self-defence she 'has at least attempted to assert herself and show the other to be wrong, and in thus relieving her feelings has at least declared her own position and so has taken a step towards re-establishing herself'.[48] But the quarrel is not ultimately resolved in her favour; in fact, it appears to scale towards Casaubon's side when he is shown to subdue his own wrath by trying to turn to his writing. We need only our human experience of bodily changes frequently attending this emotion to appreciate, and to make sense of, the metonymic designation of one distinguishing mark of anger, namely agitation: 'his hand *trembled* so much that the words seemed to be written in an unknown character' (*M* 282-3). Casaubon is generally never shown to be given to excessive emotional expressions, and on this occasion he invests a great deal of mental effort to arrange his conduct around considerations of self-restraint, an effort that should not go undervalued, especially as his early suspicions towards Ladislaw prove to be not entirely unfounded at the novel's climax.

Eliot depicts Dorothea's emotionally complex position via these figurative expressions of familiar embodied sensations and identifiable states of mind. Dorothea's short-sighted conviction (short-sighted, because it is, like all her thoughts, 'largely spun out of illusory suppositions',[49] rather than grounded in objective reality) that it is not her who is to blame for the tension in marriage, Casaubon's 'unresponsive hardness' (*M* 425) being proof of her helpless entrapment, gives way to the display of an emotional behaviour that corresponds exactly with what Peter van Sommers metaphorically terms the

---

[48] Taylor, 86.

[49] Bonaparte, 126.

''incubation' of hostility'.[50] She spends much time ruminating over what she stubbornly considers to be illegitimate reasons for Casaubon's displeasure with her, exaggerating his insensitivity and expanding her own self-pity out of proportion. Since the narrative emphasis has been on Dorothea's cultivation of 'inward misery' (*M* 426), it comes as no surprise that, when her dying husband rejects her gestures of genuine sympathy, Dorothea rages characteristically in the privacy of her room:

> She was in the reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage. Instead of tears there came words:—
>
> 'What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me.' (*M* 426)

Dorothea takes Casaubon's refusal to be comforted as a calculated insult that is beyond her endurance, and she remonstrates, in a fit of petulance, against her unrequited self-sacrifice as a wifely paragon who has laboured to perfect the act of giving in to please her husband. The eruption of Dorothea's repressed anger takes place under the sudden impulse of rebellion, for up till now 'she had never deliberately allowed her resentment *to govern her* in this way before' (*M* 426). Access to her retaliatory anger that results from the perceived absence of due recognition from Casaubon is granted through both or either of two major image-schemas activated in the reader's mind: that induced by a standard conceptualizing of anger as a loss of control over outside force and/or that invoked by a well-entrenched metaphor 'anger is a social superior'.[51] Perhaps by way of association with the idea that anger is an enemy, the 'anger is an opponent (in a struggle)'[52] metaphor supplies an additional conceptual input for the metaphorical portrayal of how Will Ladislaw internally wrestles toward the novel's end with having to renounce Dorothea due to his financial poverty, and hence his unsuitability as a future husband:

> He went and leaned on the back of the chair again, and seemed *to be battling with his own anger*, while she looked towards him sadly. (*M* 811)

[50] Van Sommers, 42.
[51] Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion*, 21.
[52] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 22.

It seems that the unconscious conjuring up of these schematic images is a prerequisite for understanding the emotion of anger being narrated which is always already steeped in our fixed and widely shared preconceptions about it. Metaphoric realism here is the novel's inherent entanglement with the conceptual material that yields the standard folk practices of deriving meaning from set knowledge.

Another example of Dorothea's propensity for solitary anger outbursts behind locked doors is when she erroneously sees herself betrayed by Will Ladislaw and develops, in response to her 'jealous offended pride' (*M* 787), an unfair prejudice against him. Her anger, digested internally, is reinforced by the deployment of the conceptual metaphor 'anger is fire',[53] which, beside 'anger is the heat of a fluid in a container',[54] (made distinctly perceptible by Aristotle[55]), is one of the two main subgroups of the mega-metaphor anger is heat:

> *The fire of Dorothea's anger was not easily spent*, and it *flamed out* in *fitful returns* of spurning reproach. Why had he come obtruding his life into hers, hers that might have been whole enough without him? Why had he brought his cheap regard and his lip-born words to her who had nothing paltry to give in exchange? (*M* 787)

This metaphor of anger as fire is probably 'the central one'[56] in our conventional view of anger, and probably as a result of this centrality the least creative one. But, at the same time, the lack of originality makes it somewhat easier for the reader to process, and subsequently to share more directly in Dorothea's mental crisis. The ease of conceptual understanding here is partly attained by Eliot's use of everyday language, and in the implicit knowledge of anger that we have already accumulated. If we were not already tacitly sensitized to the alliance of these cognates, Lakoff and Johnson conclude, we would not be able to think and talk about concepts as

---

[53] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 13.

[54] Ibid., 13. A variation of this metaphor, ANGER IS A MOLTEN FLUID, is utilized in the novel in reference to the great anger of Caleb Garth, whereby the narrator states that 'Caleb's *wrath was stirred*' (*M* 696), though this usage could also suggest the broader metaphor: ANGER IS AN ACTIVATED SUBSTANCE OR ENTITY.

[55] This conceptual metaphor has a long history. In terms of physical effects, anger, at least from Aristotle onwards, has been explained in terms of 'a boiling of the blood and hot stuff about the heart.' Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, 129 (I.1).

[56] Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion*, 22.

we do, and 'act according to the way we conceive of things'.[57] Thus, the emotional connection with Dorothea is achieved through a metaphorical shortcut. In allowing herself to burn in 'a private and self-absorbing despair',[58] that finds its articulation in 'loud-whispered cries' (*M* 787), Dorothea psychologically matches the profile of those suffering from jealous anger. Metaphorical clues aside, anger recognition in this narrative context also lies in the narrative context itself, essentially a reiteration of Mikhail Bakhtin and V. N. Vološinov's idea that we can ascribe meaning to any speech act (and impute new connotations) by virtue of its antecedent history of use, and derive its ideological purport based on whatever normative sense of a lexical item has been customarily made in a given community and at given point in time.[59] In other words, the reader's ability to identify anger in Dorothea is as much a matter of seeing her within the embodied framework of anger, as it is seeing her in a situation that elicits from us a homogeneous notion of what constitutes the thoughts, feelings and behaviours typically associated with this emotion.

The embodied realism of these anger episodes arises from the fact that anger metaphors are born out of the fully absorbed embodiment of this emotion (it builds up in increments and explodes when in excess) and the culturally encoded convention that it takes control like a social superior does. Lexically, Eliot induces in readers certain affective familiarity via conventional expressions, and by default she draws attention to the relatively stable conceptual core from which literary metaphors can be variously elaborated for particular effect. In such experientially-based mimetics, the conceptual content is very much an inception: it is a departure point, but not a destination; where it starts is in 'known constructions [of concepts] and modes of expression';[60] where it ends is in their inventive range, original largely to the extent that the conservative realist discourse will allow aesthetic concessions, and variable according to the circumstantial specificity of a fictional action. There emerges, in other words, a possible rule of realistic expression, where a semantic variability (in the generation of metaphor) does not in principle occur outside a habitual nuclei: of biology and culture.

---

[57] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.
[58] Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 100.
[59] See Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, and also Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.
[60] Brandt and Brandt, 124–5.

It is possible that Eliot's predilection in *Middlemarch* for the use of conventional primary metaphors (whether based on embodied experience or other routine cognitions) would be dismissed as accidental on the grounds that they have been used quite randomly, rather than remarkably consistently, and therefore do not constitute sufficiently representative examples, and less so exemplify the sort of narrative realism they have been proposed to enact. But there is evidence in the text to discount this possibility. For instance, an even more extreme case of anger than Dorothea's, the mighty wrath of Will Ladislaw which metonymically engulfs his whole body in predictable ways is transmitted metaphorically via some staple source domains in nevertheless imaginative collocations. When Dorothea accidentally catches Will in an intimate, though completely innocent conversation with Rosamond, his blood is up once he realizes he has become a victim of intrigue. A series of stock metonymic expressions are collectively highly suggestive of Will's extreme, impulsive anger. In order of appearance they are: 'aggressive verbal behavior stands for anger',[61] the change of colour in the face stands for anger and 'aggressive visual behavior stands for anger' ,[62] with the concomitant embodied metonymic sensation of tingling:

> *'Don't touch me!'* he said, *with an utterance like the cut of a lash*, darting from her, and *changing from pink to white and back again*, as if his whole frame were tingling with the pain of the sting. He wheeled round to the other side of the room and stood opposite to her, with the tips of his fingers in his pockets and his head thrown back, *looking fiercely* not at Rosamond but at a point a few inches away from her. (*M* 777)

A desire for confrontation is intrinsic to anger, as this emotion is evolutionarily designed psychologically 'to help us deal with setbacks, with things that thwart us from pursuing what we want, and with a range of threats to our survival. Anger prepares us to engage—to force a change—and it does this by getting our bodies ready for *action*'.[63] Will's anger comes as a response to his recognition that his already limited prospect of an imagined future life with Dorothea has now practically diminished to an impossibility. His frustrated disappointment, like Dorothea's in regard to Casaubon, helps explain why Will is on the threshold of attacking Rosamond verbally, thereby attenuating his proper behavioural control. Two conceptual

[61] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 25.
[62] Ibid., 25.
[63] Kolts, 13, italics in original.

metaphors deployed—anger is a heavy object and anger is an accumulated force that needs releasing—function jointly (and in conjunction with the following simile of the panther) to signal the forthcoming abuse, heaped as punishment and released for the purpose of relief:

It would have been safer for Will in the first instance to have taken up his hat and gone away; but he had felt no impulse to do this; on the contrary, he had a horrible inclination to stay and *shatter Rosamond with his anger*. It seemed as impossible to bear the fatality she had drawn down on him without *venting his fury* as it would be to a panther to bear the javelin-wound without springing and biting (*M* 778).

Will's anger is at its highest point, and the significance attached to his failed impulse control is that of contemporary concerns with social etiquette and standards of conduct. The protocol of Victorian polite society ensured that irascible gentlemen were viewed with disdain and severely judged their unguarded anger. This is suggested in the herculean effort that Will is represented as making to restrain his violent outburst.[64] Through the 'intense anger produces steam'[65] and 'anger is a dangerous animal'[66] conceptual metaphors, Eliot creates a complex figurative moment of anger inhibition:

> *He was fuming* under a repressive law which he was forced to acknowledge: *he was dangerously poised*, and Rosamond's voice now brought the decisive vibration. (*M* 778)

If it had not been for the sound of Rosamond's voice, Will, more than likely, would have limited himself to meaningful words of counsel and a cordial termination of their friendship. But Rosamond bites back with an icy retort, and her speech only provides further fuel that reignites Will's anger. Provoked by Rosamond's deliberate sarcasm, Will lashes out despite himself and against prevailing norms of self-restraint. To mark this angry explosion, that is, to make it mentally accessible through the provision of its 'image-schematic structure'[67]—an implicit aim which becomes an ultimate

---

[64] Relatedly, on the need and rationale behind the conscious regulation of anger at home to offset pressure at work in a contemporary cultural context, the so-called 'Victorian' American society, see Stearns and Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History*.

[65] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 15.

[66] Ibid., 25.

[67] This expression is used by Barcelona in his empirically-tested hypothesis of metaphor as essentially motivated by metonymy, where the metonymic basis is

condition of figurative mimetics—the narrator marshals a range of clichéd metonymic and metaphoric expressions with the effect of indexing Will's state of mind as currently beneath that of individuals graced by so-called excellent character. In an image of a split self, he is 'ready to curse her' (*M* 778), thereby acting beyond his conscious control, and against his better judgment. On hearing Rosamond's sardonic suggestion that he pursue Dorothea and declare his preference, Will furiously exclaims: ''Go after her!' *he burst out, with a sharp edge in his voice*' (*M* 778). Will's vocal expression of anger is accompanied by a display of animal-like intent at physical injury: '*He began to move about with the restlessness of a wild animal that sees prey but cannot reach it*' (*M* 778). Rosamond's condescending tone gives new impetus to Will's otherwise subsiding anger: 'He found another *vent for his rage* by snatching up Rosamond's words again, as if they were reptiles to be throttled and flung off' (*M* 778). As might be expected of a man socially trained to display the kind of behaviour associated with good manners and cultivated taste, Will calms down and even attempts a gesture of reconciliation. Before he takes leave of Rosamond, we are told, 'he felt checked and stultified in his anger' (*M* 779), though as the narrator adds by use of the 'anger is fire'[68] metaphor, '*the vindictive fire was still burning in him*, and he could utter no word of retraction' (*M* 779). The narrator, just a moment earlier, had insisted that it be

> forgiven to Will that he had no such movement of pity. He had felt no bond beforehand to this woman [Rosamond] who had spoiled the ideal treasure of his life, and he held himself blameless. He knew that he was cruel, but he had no relenting in him yet (*M* 779).

From this remark, Eliot reflects that it was considered in Victorian culture to be pardonable (if justified), even acceptable (if instructive), to engage in a certain cruelty involved in righteous anger, but one had to overcome venomous feelings, as Will eventually does, if one's proper emotional decorum were to be maintained.

These examples suggest that there is nothing discernibly unconventional in the way Eliot narrates the experience of anger serially in *Middlemarch*, but collectively, they are narratively distinctive, and can be

---

interpreted in terms of 'being a conceptual prerequisite for (metaphor).' ('On the Plausibility of Claiming a Metonymic Motivation for Conceptual Metaphor,' 31).

[68] Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*, 13.

seen to be substantial contributors to the effect of the text's conceptual and emotional realism. The remarkable consistency of metaphoric constructions in terms of heat that exerts pressure on a container, causing it to eventually explode, provides linguistic proof that the subconscious organization and categorization of anger does not occur in a novelistic context in an ad hoc manner, but rather is based on what is universally known and individually experienced about the physiology of anger. What is known, and felt (and sometimes observed in others) comprises a necessary restriction—'the constraining effect of universal embodiment',[69] as Kövecses calls it—that provides the cognitive motivation for metaphorically projecting anger in exactly this way. Undeniably, the scope of conceptual thinking about anger in *Middlemarch* extends beyond the instances of the great generic metaphor 'the angry person is a pressurized container'.[70] We have seen how Eliot effectively makes use of other main (archetypal) metaphors for anger that are widespread in everyday English language, by resorting to familiar idiomatic expressions that have been long recognized and neatly assembled together by cognitive linguists into the unitary metaphors anger is a social superior, anger is an opponent (in a struggle) or anger is a dangerous animal. Notwithstanding the rich variety in Eliot's selection of metaphorical source domains to depict anger, her default choices seem to be those that are demonstrably sub-metaphors, or satellite instantiations, of the anger is heat master-metaphor, and which are intelligible primarily in the light of that metaphor. The implication is that there is no single identifiable origin or source from which spring Eliot's ways of conceptualizing anger, but rather there are many such motivations, not distinctly cultural—the experiential sensation of embodied anger being the most dominant. Any hypothesis that Eliot's imaginative creativity may typically proceed outside these 'presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared . . . by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it',[71] would be discounted by the sheer volume of the novel's metaphors of anger whose strikingly consistent design suggests something much more than chance. On the contrary, their regularity and interpretive resonance points to a conceptual understanding of narrated mental states that governs the representation (and endorsement) of a commitment to emotional sophistication through the practice of self-restraint.

---

[69] Kövecses, 'Cross-Cultural Experience of Anger,' 162.
[70] Ibid., 157.
[71] Quinn and Holland, 'Culture and Cognition,' 3–40; qtd. Radden, 'How Metonymic are Metaphors?' 102.

This regime of conceptual understanding is the building block upon which embodied realism is based, one unit, amongst possible others, of mimetic construction. The particular pre-comprehensibility of the experience-motivated metaphors of anger testifies to what Margaret H. Freeman has already pursued in her cognitive/linguistically-informed theory of literature, expressly that 'literary texts are the products of cognizing minds and their interpretations the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and are read'.[72] To the extent that the figurative language of emotion in *Middlemarch* solicits the information from the physiological attributes and behaviour that have come to characterize the Victorian conception of anger, the novel is calculated to orient its recipients toward established conceptual frameworks in an act of enforcing emotional vigilance. This is why narrative realism is said here to be discursively embodied. But embodied realism is discursively realist not because the reader is believed to automatically make sense of modalized anger metaphors, but because it involves us in a text that includes instantaneously decodifiable metaphoric language necessary for sense making. The characters and situations of *Middlemarch* are realistic precisely because Eliot artfully deploys metaphors that are individually both familiar and emotionally resonant, and collectively managed into complex discursive clusters that drive narrative recognition and reader engagement.

Kamila Walker teaches in the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research applies Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Science to the study of English and Slavic literary texts. She examines the conceptual structures and mental schemas as they interact with narrated social, cultural, psychological and emotional realities. Her other related studies include "Conceptual Metaphors of Pride in *Middlemarch*," *George Eliot—George Henry Lewes Studies* 69.2 (2017) and work in preparation on metaphor and emotion.

[72] Freeman, 'Poetry and the Scope of Metaphor,' 253.

Myth and the Limits of History in *Nostromo*

ALEX JONES

In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx claims that the historical speed of modernity outstrips myth of its relevance in the epoch of bourgeois capitalism: 'What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier?'[1] By suggesting that myth is an outdated art form, Marx is tapping into, as well as solidifying, the nineteenth-century disavowal of myth as a primitive pseudo-science.[2] This approach would see history as the unwilling sibling of the prodigal counter-discourse of myth. Such a binary has exhibited a lasting influence on prominent twentieth-century studies of mythology. Although less strident, Paul Ricoeur intuitively picks up on this dichotomy when he stresses the temporal distinctions between myth and history. '[M]yth is a narrative of origins, taking place in a primordial time, a time other than that of everyday reality,' whereas history is 'a narrative of recent events, extending progressively to include events that are further in the past but are, nonetheless, situated in human time.'[3]

I would like to thank Professor Peter Marks, Dr. David Kelly, Dr. Matthew Sussman, and Associate Professor Sarah Gleeson-White for their advice and comments which helped to shape this work.

[1] In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (Second Edition)*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p.661.

[2] This view was most forcefully offered by E.B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958).

[3] 'Myth and History,' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), p.273.

Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostromo* reacts against both of the approaches proffered by Marx and Ricoeur.[4] This article responds to two ongoing and interrelated debates in critical scholarship on *Nostromo* that have failed to achieve a middle-ground. The first concerns the status of history in Conrad's novel, which investigates the modernist claim of attempting to evacuate history from art. In 1984, Marianne Dekoven briefly used *Nostromo* as an instance of modernist fiction that unsuccessfully 'suppressed' history, revealing a Freudian sense of the weight of historical process in those writers whom had a 'disgust with history, for writing about it at all.' Framing his work within Conrad's own flight from his revolutionary Polish forebears, William Deresiewicz closed an article in 2008 with the assertion that 'freedom from history' was the 'characteristic desire' of Conrad's early twentieth-century fiction, including *Nostromo*. The second debate regards the hierarchical categorisation of myth as subservient to history, which Conrad scholars see as animating the Polish émigré's mid-career works. Andrew Roberts, in 1987, wrote of *Nostromo*'s construction of myth and history as two mutually exclusive discourses. Most recently, in 2015 Seamus O'Malley fiercely contended that, 'For all of Conrad's suspicion of historiography, the text implies that only narrative history can rescue meaning and value from obfuscating myth'.[5] What these two groupings of critics fail to realise is that they are engaged in the *same* debate: it is Conrad's formalist experimentation with myth that functions as a structuring principle in *Nostromo*.[6] The novel reacts to the burden of history on modernist writing

---

[4] Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*. *(1904)*, edited by Jacques Berthoud & Mara Kalnins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.63. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

[5] In order, see Marianne Dekoven, 'History as Suppressed Referent in Modernist Fiction,' *ELH* 51:1 (1984), p.137; William Deresiewicz, 'Conrad and History' *Raritan* 28:2 (2008), p.49; Andrew Roberts, '*Nostromo* and History: Remarkable Individuality and Historical Inevitability' *The Conradian* 12:1 (1987), p.10; Seamus O'Malley, *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.56.

[6] Interestingly, a reading of *Nostromo* that foregrounds the presence of myth in the novel has been done before. In her chapter, 'An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's *Nostromo*', Claire Rosenfield details the quest motif at the heart of the novel, the problematic status of Nostromo as a mythic hero, as well as the depiction of the San Tomé mine as a fallen Eden. Published in 1966, when Northrop Frye's brand of archetypal criticism reached its peak, Rosenfield's piece is content-based, casting a wide net on the mythic tropes of *Nostromo*. Though informative, it does not (due to its time period) incorporate a narratological interpretation of mythopoeia in Conrad's novel, the focus of the present article. Rosenfield's essay is collected in *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice*, edited by John B.

not with an anti-historical or ahistorical stance, as Dekoven and Deresiewicz assert, but with a nuanced mythological discourse that inhabits history, thus collapsing Roberts' and O'Malley's dichotomy.

Nostromo undertakes a mythologisation of history as it simultaneously thwarts any strict separation between mythical and historical time. Such interactions between myth and history in the novel point towards what Claude Lévi-Strauss enticingly calls the 'intermediary level' of their discursive interaction.[7] For my current purposes, I define myth as both a narrative method employed by Conrad, and a socially-embedded phenomenon which allows the collective voice of the people in *Nostromo* to interpret and codify the historical unravelling of Costaguana. Drawing attention to Conrad's nuanced understanding of mythopoeia, I track the residual overlap of pre-modern myth in *Nostromo* as it obfuscates the neat temporal segmentations of modernity—divisions of hours, days, months, and years. *Nostromo* represents the comingling of an oral tradition of myth, thought of as timeless, and associated with preliterate, superstitious cultures, with the practice of written history in Western societies, the domain of the scientific and the learned. Citing a letter written by Conrad, Mario Curreli writes that myth for the author was used as a way of 'controlling the disorder of modern life.'[8] Deploying narratology as a theoretical framework, I investigate the potential of myth as a discursive strategy, weaving its way into *Nostromo*'s fictional history of Costaguana. It must be noted here that the setting of Costaguana is a 'cartographical composite' of Columbia, Venezuela, and Mexico;[9] likewise, its broad treatment of revolutionary politics is an amalgamation of nineteenth-century Latin American histories. As Jacques Berthoud notes, Costaguana is 'the prototype of a Spanish

---

Vickery (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp.315-34.
Likewise, more recently, Yael Levin analyses the interrelation of oral storytelling (including myth) and written history in the novel. Using Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', Levin contrasts these competing modes in *Nostromo* as different forms of presence and absence, yet is not sufficiently formalist to take into account how myth functions in Conrad's text as a discursive method. See Chapter 3, 'A Spectral Temporality: The History of *Nostromo* as Perpetual Return,' in *Tracing the Aesthetic Principle in Conrad's Novels* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

[7] *Myth and Meaning* (London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.40.

[8] 'Conrad and Myth,' in *Conrad's Art: An Interpretation and Evaluation*, edited by R.N. Sarkar (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008), p.134.

[9] Robert G. Hampson, 'Spatial Stories: Conrad and Iain Sinclair' *The Conradian* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), p.62.

American state at the end of the nineteenth century',[10] an ideal location for Conrad to fictionally tease out the complicated relationship between historical particularity and mythical generality, as well as the link between fictional histories and the fictions of history.

The narrator of *Nostromo* uses the mythopoeic voice of oral narrative in the presentation of the history of Costaguana, though the narrator's scope and incredible range of information is built upon an ostensible paradox. At times, the narrator maintains a veneer of distance from the main characters reminiscent of a Flaubertian narrator, remaining above and apart to ironise their actions and intentions. However, many of the narrator's anecdotes, descriptions, and metaphors are rooted in local superstition and folk wisdom that suggests a dependence on the common people, the 'mestizos' and 'cholos' at the fringes of the text.[11] The narrator draws upon the well of cultural knowledge of Costaguana's inhabitants to situate the Latin American republic within the lineage of a premodern mythopoeic consciousness. As Mario Curreli writes, Conrad often draws upon the fact that 'in preliterate cultures myth is transmitted orally over generations,' as the collection of hearsay, whisperings, and rumours.[12]

This is particularly the case in Part First, 'The Silver of the Mine.' The following set of five examples of oral communication are by no means exhaustive, yet illustrate a general pattern in the narratorial method of the novel. 'The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun—*as the sailors say*—is eating it up' (7); 'Sky, land, and seas disappear together out of the world when the Plácido—*as the saying is*—goes to sleep under its black poncho' (7); 'whether true or not, *it was generally believed* in the town that the Garibaldino [Giorgio Viola] had some money buried' (15); '*extraordinary stories were told of his [Hernandez's] powers*' (81); '*What was currently whispered was this*—that the San Tomé administration had, in part, at least,

---

[10] 'The Modernization of Sulaco', in Gene M. Moore (ed.), *Conrad's Cities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), quoted in Hampson, 'Spatial Stories', p.62.
[11] The *Oxford English Dictionary* categorises a 'cholo' as 'an Indian of Latin America,' whereas a 'mestizo' is given as 'a person of mixed European (esp. Spanish or Portuguese) and non-European parentage; spec. (originally) a man with a Spanish father and an American Indian mother; (later) a person of mixed American Spanish and American Indian descent.'
[12] 'Leitmotifs from Coleridge and Wagner in *Nostromo* and Beyond' *The Conradian* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), p.101.

financed the last revolution' (87).[13] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan contends that such 'qualifying interjections' allow the reader and the narrator to 'dissociate' from the primitive 'fictions of the local inhabitants.'[14] Her argument is that the vein of historicism in the novel will extirpate the fallibility of such myths from the history of Costaguana. Yet often, as in the cases of Viola's stash of money hidden from the revolutionary mob, and Charles Gould's instalment of the Ribierist dictatorship, the narrator goes on—without explicitly stating it as such—to verify that such rumours are indeed true. Hearsay is substantiated; the word of the people takes on the validity of fact. This is why the narrator's incorporation of provincial rumours and folk wisdom does not take on the function of a disdainful or arrogant detachment from the public voice. The narrator is a part of, as opposed to apart from, the iterations of the public voice in *Nostromo*.[15] Local myths clarify the history that the narrator presents, rather than rendering it fictitious.

Interestingly, the novel often mimics these manifestations of the public voice in its presentation and development of Costaguana's central characters (Charles Gould, Mrs. Emilia Gould, Dr. Monygham). This is particularly the case for the titular character, Nostromo, the 'Capataz de Cargadores', a longshoreman whose local influence and intrepidity is used by political loyalists (the 'Blancos') to guard capitalist interests in Costaguana. For instance, we hear of the daringly brave exploits of Nostromo not in descriptive paragraphs that concisely summarise the history of the Genoese sailor, but in a manner that gestures to the oral nature of information that circulates in the novel. The initial narrative section detailing Nostromo's rescue of local autocrats in Sulaco, the capital of Costaguana, alternates between paragraphs using third-person indirect discourse and the direct speech of Captain Mitchell, the English Superintendent of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company. Noticeably, the tone of these segments is nearly identical: even in the former instance we are presented with the

[13] All italics from these five quotes have been added.
[14] *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.72.
[15] Although it falls outside the scope of this article, it would be an interesting project to compare the use of oral narrative in Conrad's earlier works, such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, with *Nostromo*'s later construction of a mythopoeic consciousness shaped by verbal discourse. *Nostromo* is tantalisingly subtitled '*A Tale of the Seaboard*', though it shares comparatively little with the orality of Conrad's previous 'sea yarns', which utilise the mythmaking, narratorial figure of Marlow.

conversational voice of the absurd old captain. In third-person indirect discourse, we read of the escape from the revolutionary mob during the novel's initial political instability: '*Providentially*, Nostromo—invaluable fellow . . . a fellow in a thousand,' while Captain Mitchell's communication with unknown others three short paragraphs later runs thus, ''Under *providence* we owed our preservation to my Capataz . . . a man absolutely above reproach'' (11-12; italics added). Towards the end of Part First, even this use of the word 'invaluable' is subtly redirected—or more accurately, returned—to Captain Mitchell, who in conversation again speaks of Nostromo as 'invaluable for our work—a perfectly incorruptible fellow' (94).

We hear of Nostromo yet we never, at least initially, see his exploits; his is a presence made infinitely stronger, or at least more alluring, by the character's paradoxical absence. Hence the Signora Teresa's lament that her surrogate son, Nostromo, has not yet arrived to save the Violas from the rampage of the mob (16). Helen Funk Rieselbach is correct to note that Nostromo's peripheral representation in the text is coordinate with his 'almost mythic stature' that appears to make him 'larger than life.'[16] Nostromo, as the sum total of what others think of him, a hollow construction of public opinion, enters the narrative by way of the eyes of others. Hence his shadowy appearance at the edge of the Campo, noticed by Sir John and the chief engineer (34), and his materialisation near the Casa Gould, as perceived by Decoud and Antonia (134). Notably, in both instances, Nostromo is spotted from above—those who manipulate his abilities look down at the Capataz literally as well as figuratively.

It should be mentioned that there is a temporal dimension to this narrative strategy, as well. Nostromo's peripheral appearance, and his representation by way of the public voice, highlights the fact that the novel does not stop for his sake, even though he bears its title. There is no softening analepsis to sketch out Nostromo's personal history. The Capataz is continually in the process of becoming, not a subject so much as one who is subjected to the needs of the community that constructs him. Interestingly however, the narrative halts at places to delineate some of its minor characters. Indeed, this is precisely the case with Viola, the bastion of Italian republicanism. In the midst of the riot that temporarily ousts the Ribierists from power, the narrator stops almost entirely to present the reader with the

---

[16] *Conrad's Rebels: The Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostromo to Victory* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p.12.

past of the old Garibaldino. That is, during one of *Nostromo*'s few 'action' set-pieces, the narrator indulges in the novel's longest analepses (in story-time, not discourse-time), encompassing forty years of Viola's history. In 'The Discourse of History,' Roland Barthes calls this narrative technique 'zigzag history.' The logic of this formal method could be described rather crudely as two steps forward, one step back. This 'confrontation with historical time,' as Barthes terms it, and the historian's willingness to backtrack and 'explore this time,' however, should not be read as indicative of a hierarchical scale of character importance, as Viola is a minor player in the novel.[17] It is, rather, a means for Conrad to chart his characters' differing relations to, and investments in, the past.

A preliminary question: *why* does history slow down for Viola, but not for Nostromo? A reasonable response is that Conrad is seeking to play off Viola's diehard allegiance to the political ideal of republicanism against what the Garibaldino (and the narrator) view as the deplorable ruffianism of the mob. Drawing upon the idea of the 'chronological looping method' in Conrad's fiction, Ian Watt writes that the effect is to draw out 'certain continuities of theme or the illumination of character which arise from the immediate juxtaposition in the narrative sequence of episodes which were not in real life temporally contiguous.'[18] In this instance, however, Conrad is highlighting a discontinuity as opposed to a continuity. As Viola muses, the mob 'were not a people striving for justice, but thieves . . . [they] did not know the meaning of the word "liberty"' (17). The use of the chronological looping method therefore depicts Viola's estrangement from current political activity in Costaguana by firmly anchoring him to an increasingly outdated past.

As for Nostromo, he cannot be connected with the past because he is a prey to the whims of the current ruling powers, that is, to the blowing winds of an increasingly chaotic history. I also suspect that Conrad is linking Nostromo's presence with a deconstruction of the cultural tropes of both the 'rags to riches' fable, otherwise known as the iconic Western myth of the 'self-made man.' Such narrative arcs run counter-intuitively to the novel's critique of Western capitalism as well as Western liberalism: history is never bent to the force of an individual will. Nostromo is a *composite product* of the public voice whose mythical status fulfils the communal need for a hero.

---

[17] *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p.129.
[18] Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.37.

As Signora Viola scathingly comments after the riots that begin the novel, 'They will be showing him to everybody. "This is our Nostromo"' (19). Conrad consequently eschews a biographical account of Nostromo, as he is careful not to give the Capataz any kind of mastery over his destiny. Any historically situated sketch of Nostromo would lend itself to a sense of personal agency for the Capataz that Conrad wishes to remain illusory; Nostromo's mythic status thus comes at the price of a personal past.

Concomitant with this denial of Nostromo's past, the novel grimly determines a future for the Italian shipmate in a manner correlating to mythopoeic suggestion rather than historical fact. This is borne out in Part Three, Chapter X, where Captain Mitchell gives his inflated account of the history of Sulaco to a 'privileged passenger' from the O.S.N (341). Captain Mitchell relates that Nostromo's should be the first name etched into the base of the newly-designed 'marble shaft commemorative of Separation' (346). This process of remembering whereby society literally and figuratively sets in stone the narrative of its prime movers is heavily ironised by Conrad. Although *subject to* the caprices of the Sulacan oligarchs prior to the secession of the Occidental Republic, the construction of the marble shaft solidifies Nostromo's prized position as the *subject of* communal adoration. He is the collective subject of the people. Yet the reader must simultaneously juxtapose this with the real-life degradation of Nostromo as he pilfers more and more of the smuggled silver from the Great Isabel, ostensibly lost while escaping from the Monterists. Nostromo comes to reenact the novel's opening mythical tale of the gringos of Azuera, whose souls are chained to the riches they eternally crave. That is, the beginnings of a personal history for Nostromo that are outside of and unbeknownst to the wider public—and which sharply diverges from the image they have constructed of him—regresses into myth.

Captain Mitchell's account leads to further questions: What are his sources of information? In what sense is it biased? Can it be substantiated against the mimetic presentation of events in the novel that he describes so pompously? This last question is the most problematic, because the action for which Nostromo is to be principally remembered—the heroic ride to Cayta to retrieve the army of Barrios and thus save the Blanco oligarchs—is elided by Conrad in the discursive presentation of the novel.[19] There is the

[19] Ludwig Schnauder notes that the novel also purposefully avoids representing other 'macro-level events,' such as the defeat of the Monterists or the miners' march on Sulaco. 'Free Will and Determinism in *Nostromo*,' *The Conradian* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), p.68.

foretaste of what such a dangerous mission would entail, 'a ten days' ride at least . . . [requiring] a man of courage and resolution, who would avoid arrest or murder' (272). This is followed by Captain Mitchell's post-analysis of the deed, including Nostromo's surreptitious escape via ship, then the journey of 'four hundred miles' via horseback, and the qualities needed for its success, most of all 'courage, fidelity, [and] intelligence' (346). In other words, the reader has the tantalising foretaste of the mission, and then an elaborate retrospection of the deed, but not the ride to Cayta itself. The event is psychically blotted out from *Nostromo*.

Seamus O'Malley correctly views Conrad's use of such elisions in *Nostromo* not as a shy move away from the raw matter of history, but as a modernist exploration of the discursive possibilities by which history can be represented. For O'Malley, a 'decoupling of events from history,' does not necessarily presume the modernist author's 'anti-historical' stance.[20] Yet O'Malley's intense focus on the formal strategies by which Conrad manifests the historical event does not answer a crucial question, namely, that of how the event will be inferentially constructed in the minds of those in Costaguana, and what ideological assumptions inform the conclusions they make of the ride to Cayta. (In the novel, this task falls to Monygham and Captain Mitchell, respectively.) As Mieke Bal has noted, by reducing story-time to zero, the ellipsis lays bare the burden of proof craved by the reader. To retrieve or recreate the ellipsis's missing contents, the reader must rely on deductive reasoning that is anchored to the practice of 'realistic reading.'[21] Although it is not my intent to argue for *Nostromo*'s anti-realist status, the novel's invocation of mythopoeic narrative—as through the focus on the oral nature of gossip, hearsay, and rumours—calls into question the extent to which the reader can logically reconfigure the missing episode. As mentioned previously, *Nostromo* often retrospectively substantiates the seemingly uncorroborated whispers of the people. Yet ironically, though the ride to Cayta occurs *after* the Capataz's realisation that he has been betrayed by those he serves—a deconstruction, as it were, of the myth that is Nostromo—the only way for the reader to clarify the events of the ellipsis is to fall back upon the mythic capabilities of the novel's hero. The hermetic sealing off of history-as-event via ellipsis from *Nostromo* ensures that any retrospective narration of the trip to Cayta, such as Captain Mitchell's account, is left is with little choice but to resort to myth to colour the textual gap.

---

[20] *Making History New*, p.21.

[21] *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Third Edition)* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p.101.

At the moment in which *Nostromo* deflates Captain Mitchell's credibility as the 'unofficial historian' of Costaguana,[22] it correspondingly pushes towards the permanence of his verbal pronunciations in constructing, indeed solidifying, the mythic nature of the events he narrates. This is achieved by formal means that highlight Conrad's mischievous narrative construction of Chapter X, where Captain Mitchell provides a whistle-stop tour of the Occidental Republic for the unnamed passenger. This one-sided conversation is presented almost entirely with the authority of reported speech, suggesting the singularity of the event. It is replete with Captain Mitchell's idiosyncratic summations of people and events, the conversation's paratactic jerkiness further pointing towards the episode's historical specificity: 'we'll lunch at the Amarilla. Interest you, I fancy. Real thing of the country. Men of the first families . . . Fine old bishop with a broken nose in the patio. Remarkable piece of statuary, I believe' (341). Indeed, two separate chronological accounts of *Nostromo* categorise this event as occurring in 1897, six years after the end of the civil war, suggesting a critical consensus on the conversation's isolation in time, so to speak.[23]

Yet this critical consensus is belied by the narrator's dependence, or perhaps more accurately, willing utilisation, of the habitual past aspect, a flexible aspect of English grammar. Through the use of the auxiliary verb 'would,' Conrad implies that the episode is far from unique. Indeed, conversations like it have occurred over and over again, so Mitchell's reported speech becomes *generally indicative* of a diachronic phenomenon, as opposed to a synchronic representation of a unique event. The following examples are taken from Chapter X: 'And it *would* be into the Harbour Office that he *would* lead some privileged passenger'; 'And Captain Mitchell, seating himself at his desk, *would* keep on talking hospitably'; '"Here," he *would* say, pointing to a niche in the wall of the dusky aisle, "you see the bust of Done José Avellanos"'; 'And the lunch *would* begin'; 'Captain Mitchell *would* lay back in his chair' (341, 343, 344, italics added throughout). This use of iterative narrative—where what has occurred x times is narrated once—gives a sort of condensation or synthesisation of

---

[22] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, p.74.
[23] See Ian Watt (ed.), *Joseph Conrad, Nostromo* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xxv; also, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, edited by Jacques Berthoud & Mara Kalnins, p.431.

events that ironically reduces the singularity of the history Captain Mitchell describes.[24]

The iterative mode allows Captain Mitchell to situate the varied events of the Occidental Republic's separation from Costaguana into a biased 'history from above', centred on the individual heroism of political elites. Captain Mitchell obfuscates the events in question more than he clarifies them. In this sense, his narrative is symbolic of the dual meaning of the word 'history', as it demonstrates the process whereby the raw material and subject-matter of the past is transmuted into a discursive form which smoothes over the idiosyncrasies and discrepancies of the events and people it narrates. After Captain Mitchell's narration, the listening passenger is unsurprisingly 'annihilated mentally by a sudden surfeit of sights, sounds, names, facts, and complicated information imperfectly apprehended, would listen like a tired child to *a fairy tale*' (349; italics added). The surreality of the narrative is bolstered by the narrator's pun on the phrase 'imperfectly apprehended,' as it can easily apply to both Captain Mitchell and the passenger—that is, the teller and the told. Captain Mitchell's role as tour guide is one that rests on a relentless adherence to routine, so much so that the narrator quips that the 'programme' is akin to a 'law of Nature' (345). We have then in this chapter an *oral* history of Costaguana that continuously, indeed endlessly, circulates throughout Sulaco.

Yet to be fully appreciated, Captain Mitchell's oral history must be juxtaposed with the intratextual *written* book in *Nostromo*, Don José Avellanos's *Fifty Years of Misrule*, which is literally as well as symbolically annihilated during the battle for Sulaco. With a Dickensian flourish of detail that verges on hyperbole, Avellanos's text is found by Decoud 'littering the Plaza, floating in the gutters, fired out as wads for trabucos loaded with handfuls of type, blown in the wind, [and] trampled in the mud' (170-71). In an essay from 1904 titled 'Henry James, An Appreciation,' Conrad described the practice of writing history with evident displeasure, noting the discourse's dryness and inability to operate without an overarching *telos*.[25] The date of Conrad's essay is important. Remembering that *Nostromo* was also published in 1904, we can then reasonably assert that at this time Conrad was confronting the limits of history as a discourse of knowledge unchallenged in telling the story of nations, colonialism, and the circulation

---

[24] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp.116-17.
[25] In *Notes on Life and Letters*, edited by J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.19.

of capital. *Nostromo*'s mythopoeic dimension and achronological structure represent two (often overlapping) means of confronting the shortcomings of written history: on the one hand, a reach back into premodern forms of storytelling, and on the other hand a proto-modernist experiment with form that frustrates linear narrative.

It must be conceded that the novel does at times complicatedly jostle with the suggestion that history-as-event may overtake myth or strip myth of its relevancy (see the aforementioned quote from Marx's *Grundrisse*), as when Nostromo tells Signora Viola that he cannot secure a priest for her in the Padrona's dying moments. '"I am needed to save the silver of the mine. Do you hear? A greater treasure than the one in which they say is guarded by ghosts and devils on Azuera. It is true"' (184-185).[26] Erdinast-Vulcan argues that *Nostromo* plays upon the transferential capacity of myth in the novel, opining that the mythic conception of the Capataz himself is shifted onto the 'fabricated myth of material interests.'[27] Although I agree with her basic contention, I would qualify Erdinast-Vulcan's approach by pointing out how Nostromo's entrancement by the fetishistic capacity of the silver can only take place *in relational terms* to the mythic scope of the Azuera treasure, as in the example I have just cited. Ironically, this relational aspect signifies Nostromo's deeper investment in the myth of the silver, suggesting the durability or reproducibility of myth when confronted by historical reality. Nostromo can only make sense of the historic significance of the action that awaits him by viewing it through the lens of mythopoeia; history is tied to myth even in its attempt to break from it.

By stating that the treasure is 'greater' than that of the Azuera's, Conrad plays on the indeterminacy and thus the mystical allure of the treasure—any conversion of the silver into a specific monetary amount would reduce the mysterious appeal surrounding the object. The episode is largely symbolic

---

[26] Interestingly, there are discursive as well as thematic parallels between the Azuera myth and Nostromo's elided journey to Cayta. In the Azuera myth, two gringos go missing in the search for magnificent riches, Conrad drawing upon the story of El Dorado and the Spanish conquistadores. Their disappearance is missing from the textual discourse of *Nostromo*. Indeed, the myth is a product of the episode's elliptical mystery. The common people rationalise the Azuera enigma into myth as a didactic tale of the link between riches and spiritual poverty. Myth is history *sans* primary sources, without an eyewitness account. Myth is the interpretative schema that smoothes over the gaps of history.

[27] *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.80.

of Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the bricoleur, where the component elements of myths shift over time—due to a finite amount of materials—yet maintain foundational security. Nostromo's destructive enchainment to the silver bolsters the myth he refers to, as opposed to historical reality superseding the 'primitive' nature of the Azuera story. In the excerpt I have just cited, this is underpinned by the textual space between the last two sentences. Nostromo's defensive posture ('It is true') implies the indignation and scorn of the Padrona that is perhaps stronger for being discursively suppressed from the text. Fittingly, as the novel's most superstitious character, Signora Viola converts the pejorative sense of that word into a knowledge of the power of myth to influence the actions of people who believe they are actively shaping history. For the Padrona, Nostromo's desire to smuggle the silver of the San Tomé mine out of Sulaco—'"the most desperate affair I was ever engaged on in my whole life"' (185)—replicates the logic of the original Azuera myth rather than providing a historical check on its lasting import.

Nostromo's seeming reproduction of the Azuera myth brings to the fore issues of character agency and the extent to which events in the novel are historically determined. Determinism does not so much nullify any traditional relationship between cause and effect as reduce them to props in an unremitting, relentless chain of events. Conversations regarding the importance of determinism in *Nostromo* (and to Conrad's sense of history) are linked to the novel's depiction of events as inextricably tied to the 'material interests' flowing from the San Tomé mine.[28] This Marxist-style argument of economic determinism in *Nostromo*, however, does not pick up on the power of myth and mythical time to shape the novel's *discursive presentation* of events.

Another of the reasons the novel's characters (particularly Nostromo) have so much difficulty positioning themselves within history is because the text largely abandons 'objective' linguistic markers to denote time: 'In the year 1885 . . .'; 'At 8.45am . . .'; 'On the first day of February . . .'; and so on. *Nostromo* disavows mechanical clock-time and the Gregorian calendar, also known as the Western calendar.[29] This suggests an approach to marking

---

[28] See Schnauder, 'Free Will and Determinism in *Nostromo*'.

[29] In an article titled 'Joseph Conrad's 'Sudden Holes' in Time: The Epistemology of Temporality,' John G. Peters uses a vast array of the author's oeuvre (though barely touching upon *Nostromo*) to argue that Conrad rejects the notion of mechanical clock-time altogether, instead insisting upon his

time that, although similar to these methods in that it is socially constructed for humanity's convenience, rails against not just the 'speed of modernity,' but modernity itself. Conrad's approach in the novel is to delineate time through a variety of methods that often baffle the (presumably Western) reader.

In saying this, it is not to be denied that Conrad, although sparingly, invokes broad historical eras and historical figures (who featured prominently in the history of Latin America) to help the reader locate the contextual background upon which the fictional Costaguana draws. Yet all of these, such as the opening sentence's immense evocation, 'In the time of Spanish rule' (5), and the references to Garibaldi, Bolivar, and Juarez (25, 37, 118), all signify events and people that prefigure, or set the scene, for the drama we are about to witness.[30] Much like its links between myth and history, the novel's temporal markers are purposefully vague, ill-defined and, most of all, *functionally relational*. They can only be understood in relation to, or in comparison with, another time, yet this latter time is paradoxically also void of the specifics (dates, times, years) required to make sense of the initial time mentioned by Conrad. So, we have 'in the time of the tyrant Guzmán Bento' (39), 'for three generations' (63), 'the dawn of a new era' (103), 'on feast days' (73), and 'as compared with the epoch of civil wars' (86).

The first of these examples, variously stated in *Nostromo* as 'Guzmán Bento of cruel memory' (37), or 'Guzmán Bento of fearful memory' (86) is particularly useful to explicate. John H. Arnold helpfully highlights modernity's clinical adherence to the numerical division of time, in contrast to the pre-modern practice of defining eras by the people who figured most prominently within them ('During Queen Elizabeth's rule . . .'), or the particular shade of feeling which characterised a period ('The Black Death'). Arnold notes, 'Thinking in 'centuries' as opposed to, say, 'kings' reigns' has only been common in the last two hundred years or so.'[31] There is the residual echo of such a method in the various utterances regarding the rule

---

characters' subjective experience of temporality. *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 32, No. 4 (2000), pp.420-441.

[30] I am indebted to Richard Niland for pointing out *Nostromo*'s mention of the nineteenth-century Mexican President, Benito Juarez. 'The Political Novels' in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, edited by J.H. Stape (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.34.

[31] *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.101.

of Guzmán Bento. As *Nostromo* is predominantly set in the late nineteenth-century, it may seem reasonable to pinpoint a certain temporal backwardness in Costaguana's lingering practice of marking time via 'kings' reigns.' Yet, Conrad is careful to note that in his fictional South American nation '[t]he material apparatus of perfected civilisation . . . had not intruded as yet' (73). This tongue-in-cheek euphemism for the peculiar pros and cons of capitalist enterprise as it enters Costaguana's market-style economy highlights that, if anything, the nation is in a transitional stage *between* the pre-modern and the modern.

Given his role as a despot, it is unsurprising that this framework for conceptualising time is inextricable from the particular *mentalité* that the reign of Bento evoked in the people, one of persecution, and terror. It highlights by comparison the cold detachment of Western modernity's clock-time, where an historical period is simply bracketed between two points on the scale of time. I would further suggest that the pre-modern approach to time in *Nostromo* can be usefully connected to the mythic fabric of the novel, where the past seeps into and distorts the presents.[32] Of Bento, the narrator notes that he 'reached his apotheosis in the popular legend of a sanguinary land-haunting spectre whose body had been carried off by the devil in person from the brick mausoleum in the nave of the Church of Assumption' (37). Here, Conrad skillfully plays upon and inverts one of the major doctrines of Catholic theology. While the earthborn Mary ascends to Heaven to assume immortality, Bento descends to earth via 'the devil' as a 'land-haunting spectre.'[33] Like the gringos of the Azuera myth, Bento achieves eternal life 'within men's memor[ies]' by performing a didactic or moralising function for the people of Costaguana (6). The present time constructs itself against the 'iron tyranny' (86) of Bento, while ironically the history of his barbaric reign is transmuted into myth, signifying its perpetuity in the cultural landscape, or *mentalité*, of Costaguana.

---

[32] The line '[I]n the time of Guzmán Bento' resonates with the fairy tale method of beginning a story that occurs at an indefinite historical moment: 'There once was a prince . . .'; 'Once upon a time'; and so on. *Nostromo* also picks up on this approach by universalising the thematic lessons of traditional fairy-tales and myths.

[33] This ability of Bento's to inhabit two differing spheres simultaneously—the earthly and the other-worldly—is played upon by Conrad in another biblical allusion. Bento's official title as the 'Citizen Saviour' (265) of Costaguana link to the Christian practice of referring to Jesus Christ as 'Our Saviour,' someone in this world but not of it.

Nostromo deploys myths that will not stay primitive, will not disappear into the dim recesses of the past, but instead actively inhabit and haunt the present. Writing on the back of the vein of historicism from the nineteenth-century which rejected myth, Conrad's artistic achievement was to cast myth and history simultaneously into the arena of narrative representation. Myth obstructs modernity's adherence to mechanical clock-time, and the illusion of history marching swiftly forth towards progress. Most of all, myth for Conrad is a discursive strategy, reaped from the past yet alive in the present, that gnaws at the singularity of the historical moment.

Alex Jones received his PhD in English Literature from the University of Sydney. His research focuses on interart emulation in postwar American fiction, particularly the relation between the plastic arts and literature as they play out in the American cultural imaginary.

Richard Steele's Female Readers and the Gender Politics of the Public Sphere in *The Spectator*

RYAN TWOMEY AND DANIEL CARRIGY

Introduction

The Spectator's most significant legacy is its profound transformative influence on the emerging English middle classes, especially in shaping women to roles that accorded to the newly cast social milieu at the beginning of the Eighteenth-century. Carefully woven with humour, wit, satire, critique, and reflection, Addison and Steele sought not only to engage with their audience, but to influence them, creating a community of readership bound by each author's vision of a proper, polite and upstanding English society during the final years of Queen Anne's reign. As English society moved to a commercially focused and permeable class system, *The Spectator* developed a significant relationship with the rising English middle class.[1] Terry Eagleton's suggestion that 'the main impulse' of Addison and Steele's work was one of 'class consolidation, a codifying of the norms and regulating of the practices'[2], points towards Addison and Steele's continuing endeavour to regulate their audience's behaviours and actions, both public and private, and in turn mould the new middle class according to their vision.

A crucial social and cultural paradigm during this period was the rise of, and subsequent distinction between, both the private and public spheres in Eighteenth-century England. As Jurgen Habermas argues in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, *The Spectator* was fundamental to the rise of the English middle class, their morals and behaviours, as well as influencing both the public sphere and the private

[1] Donald Newman, *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses* (Boston: Rosemont Publishing, 2005), p.16.
[2] Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso Publishing, 1984), p.10.

realms.[3] Habermas theorises that the bourgeois public sphere developed out of the preexisting public sphere, which consisted of state apparatuses such as the court, the church, and educational institutions. The new bourgeois public sphere[4] was an arena for private individuals to come together to discuss and critique broader society. The development of the public sphere and widespread social and political debate was born largely from the evolution of the private realm. Habermas argued that Addison and Steele's periodical was crucial to the transformation of the public sphere largely because of the way it held up a 'mirror'[5] to its readership and broader society, allowing them to be critical, informed and self-reflexive.

While Anthony Pollock maintains that Habermas' argument 'remains an unavoidable starting point for studies of early eighteenth-century print culture'[6], he argues that the model advanced has been criticised for its 'blind spots […] especially regarding issues of gender.' Although Habermas argues that *The Spectator* greatly influenced the organisation and democratisation of critical thought in the public sphere,[7] the reality for the female reader in the early eighteenth century was rather different. Coupled with widespread thought that inappropriate reading was dangerous for the female mind, women were not nearly as involved in public debates or discussions as men were, especially in the social and cultural microcosm of many of London's coffeehouses. Whilst women were a significant part of *The Spectator'*s readership, Erin Mackie has argued that records of 'women in English coffeehouses is scanty and does not include any representation of their participation in the debates there.'[8] Furthermore, Brian Cowan argues that women who did find themselves in the masculine coffeehouse environment were certainly 'not considered to be a legitimate part of it.'[9] The consequence was *The Spectator* usually engaged with its female readers in a more

---

[3] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* Trans. Thomas Burger (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), p.43.

[4] Henceforth referred to as the public sphere.

[5] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* p. 43.

[6] Anthony Pollock, 'Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere,' *English Literary History,* Volume 74, Issue 3, 2007.

[7] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* p.41.

[8] Erin Mackie, *Being Too Positive About the Public Sphere,* In *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses,* p.84.

[9] Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 251.

individual, intimate and private setting, than it did its male readers.[10] Female exclusion from various aspects of the public sphere meant that reaching them in their private realms and domestic spaces was vital for Addison and Steele.

The aim of this article is to examine Habermas' neglect of *The Spectator*'s female readership through investigating the periodical's positioning of women in the public and private spheres. In doing so, focus will be given to essays written by Richard Steele, rather than those by Addison, as Steele's progressive deliberations make for a more appropriate point of consideration. Whilst *The Spectator* encouraged its female readers to think critically about literature and the arts, the extent to which Steele afforded his female readers agency and autonomy is directly related to, and hence limited by, the very real boundaries of the home and the public sphere. As will be shown, women were permitted to engage in debate with men in the home, yet ultimately forced to be reliant upon and subservient to men in public.

The confinement of women in the private sphere

Any examination of *The Spectator*'s construction of feminine place in the public sphere must first be grounded in an understanding of the way the periodical positioned and addressed women in the private sphere. *The Spectator*'s instruction on the reading process for women was complex and diverse, extending far beyond simply encouraging women to read the periodical. Addison and Steele often emphasised the importance of engaging with *The Spectator* each day, and even in some instances encouraged dialogue and exchange with men. However, whilst Steele ascribed his female readers a certain level of agency, the periodical's core vision for its female readers was underscored by a desire to ground the female in domesticity. *The Spectator* encouraged attentive, critical, female readers, yet demonstrated an agenda of keeping them confined to the domestic space.

Spectator 11 demonstrates how the periodical encouraged and constructed domestic behavioural norms for female readers. In *Spectator* 11, Steele uses modelled behaviour to encourage critical readership practices amongst the journal's female readers, but tethers these practices to the ideal of female domesticity. Steele's essay recounts Mr. Spectator's visit to the

---

[10] See *Spectator* 46 (April 23rd, 1711) for an example of the way the periodical models the debates and discussions of its male readers in the coffeehouse setting.

home of a female acquaintance, Arietta. Upon entering her home, Mr. Spectator observes her debate with another male guest on the topic of 'constancy in love' and the vices of men and women alike. The debate establishes the home as a pseudo-coffeehouse environment, legitimising female participation and expression. Most importantly, Steele uses the character of Arietta and her actions in the debate to model an ideal vision of a female reader that is critical, knowledgeable, and autonomous.

Steele's initial characterisation of Arietta at the start of the essay lays the foundation for his use of modelled behaviour throughout. Upon entering her home and seeing her debate with an unknown gentleman across from her, Steele proceeds to illustrate Arietta as a woman in possession of ideal female characteristics. She is 'neither affected with the follies of youth nor the infirmities of age', seemingly at a perfect, undefined median. She is 'agreeable to the young and old', of respectable behaviour and ambition and able to converse intelligently with men. She even resists the urge to interrupt the man she debates with when he demonstrates a profound ignorance of classical literature in order to argue about the general follies of the female sex, 'repeat[ing] and murder[ing] the celebrated story of the *Ephesian Matron*' in an effort to 'distinguish himself before a woman of Arietta's taste and understanding.' The effect of Steele's deliberate juxtaposition of the two characters at the beginning of *The Spectator* essay is twofold. Firstly, it provides the framework that allows Steele to critique male vices, whilst praising ideal female qualities. Secondly, and more importantly, characterising Arietta as a type of female ideal means that what she subsequently says, or how she behaves, is therefore also ideal.

Steele's inclusion of the *Ephesian Matron* is indicative of his belief that an intelligent, virtuous, and accomplished female reader should be well acquainted with both classical and modern literature. Arietta analyses the gentleman's argument based upon her extensive knowledge of classical literature and her understanding becomes crucial to her success in the debate. She is well read and knowledgeable, and embodies a woman who is not only capable of reading, understanding, and critiquing higher literature, but can also use it to successfully debate and defeat the gentleman. It is only through her understanding of the classics, argues Horejsi, that Arietta is able to refute 'the misogyny of the classical tradition and the translation of antifeminist elements into modern contexts.'[11]

---

[11] Nicole Horeksi, 'A Counterpart to the Ephesian Matron: Steele's "Inkle and Yarico" and a Feminist Critique of the Classics,' *Eighteenth Century Studies,* Vol. 39, Issue 2, (2006) p. 217.

Arietta does not counter the paradigm supplied via the *Ephesian Matron* with another classical model; rather she interprets it, critiques it, and counters it with a modern narrative from Europe's encounters with the New World—the *Inkle and Yarico* tale. In so doing, Steele, through Arietta, establishes a hierarchy for classical and modern literature and the way each communicates values to modern readers. Classical literature, whilst informative, is philosophical, and by the very nature of its age less applicable to the eighteenth-century woman. Modern, contemporary literature, however, is more practical, and often expands paradigms identifiable in classical literature with tangible examples and scenarios. This is especially the case with the *Inkle and Yarico* narrative, in which the Native American woman is sold into slavery, losing her liberty because of her love. Steele saw an accomplished and critical reader as one who could seamlessly interpret and understand literature, both classical and modern, and Arietta displays this. The combination of Arietta's superior understanding of classical literature, and her subsequent use of *Inkle and Yarico,* personifies Steele's notion of an ideal female reader.

Further, Steele's description of Yarico compliments the modelled behaviour exhibited by Arietta. Katherine Shevelow argues that while a 'noble savage', Yarico 'behaves very much like the virtuous and domestic English middle class wife.'[12] Her primary occupation is that of Inkle's carer and lover; he is her primary concern. Furthermore, her natural goodness and tenderness in the improvised domestic space of the cave is mimetic of the domestic spaces inhabited by the female readers of *The Spectator*. It is through the opposite yet complimentary characters of Arietta and Yarico that Steele constructs an ideal woman that is critically engaged with literature, yet firmly tethered to and concerned with the home environment.

Whilst confined spatially to the domestic, Steele's female reader is intellectually very much equal to or greater than her male counterpart. Mr. Spectator even becomes an unreliable narrator in the conclusion of the essay to demonstrate as such, 'I left the room with tears in my eyes, which a woman of Arietta's good sense I am sure, take for…applause.' Not only does Steele's narrator deliberately project his own emotion onto the reader to convince them of Arietta's success, but his self-assurance that she non-verbally understood his tears as compliment, furthers his construction of an

[12] Katherine Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture. Construction of Gender in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.144.

intelligent, aware, and virtuous female reader. Arietta is able to construct a successful and sophisticated rebuttal to her male counterpart with a firm understanding of modern and classical literature. Intellectually, she is by no means inferior to the male guest; she is limited only by the social convention that dictates she must be grounded in domesticity. It is in this sense the female reader was almost a subset of the male reader. She is equal in intellectual capacity, but ultimately separated by her isolation in the domestic environment.

Public Propriety

Issues of public propriety and civility were central to Addison's and Steele's efforts to construct a virtuous England, and similarly, therefore, lie at the heart of how *The Spectator* constructs notions of female reading and readership. Whilst Steele's writing resonated with women in the private sphere, *The Spectator*'s female readers, and women in general in the early eighteenth century, were by no means wholly confined to the home. Consequently, Steele's 'polite' ideology hinged more on the types of public activities, engagements, interactions, and behaviours that connect Englishmen and women than their private affairs. This is because the public arena was where the polite society manifested itself, where its virtues (and vices) were on display. Therefore, Steele must inevitably address issues of public propriety for his female readership.

Whilst *The Spectator* did, at times, address men at home as well as in the public sphere, there was not the same level of diversity for the periodical's female addressees. This phenomenon is evident in several prominent essays from *The Spectator.* For example, once again in *Spectator* 11, Mr. Spectator praises Arietta's aptitude for debate and criticism in developing a model for feminine virtue, the setting is a salon or private party, situated in her own home rather than the masculine coffeehouse environment. Arietta's display of feminine virtue is further reinforced by the subject of the debate in question, that is, constancy in love, in which Arietta convincingly argues that the faithfulness of women is superior to men. Other prominent essays demonstrate this trend as well, for example *Spectator* 92 features a woman named Leonora writing to Addison for advice on what literature she should read. Leonora calls upon her servant for breakfast, only for the servant to reply that 'The Spectator was not yet come in; but that the Tea-Kettle boiled, and she expected it every moment.' The synonymity between breakfasting and reading *The Spectator* demonstrated by Leonora

not only suggests that the periodical (and therefore reading) is as vital to her daily functioning as tea and bread, but more importantly breakfasting at home with *The Spectator* itself re-enforces the boundaries of domesticity upon the female reader.

Both the subject matter, constancy in love, and the fact that a woman is involved in the discussion required Steele to set the debate in the domestic sphere and not the coffeehouse as was the established domain. The practice of debate in Arietta's home mimics that which would have taken place in the coffeehouse, and the act alone transforms the space from private to public, guests such as Mr. Spectator set foot in and out of her home to observe the debate without ever so much as saying a word to Arietta herself. Furthermore, in so doing, Arietta takes on a more dominant and masculine role in the debate. The depiction of the coffeehouse in *Spectator* 46 renders the converse image, where each member of the crowd depicted is male, gendering the coffeehouse—an emblem of the English public sphere—as a predominantly masculine environment.

Steele's *Spectator* 155 explores the effects of constructing the coffeehouse (and by a process of metonymy the broader public sphere) as masculine, serving to illustrate how its exclusionary basis presents complications for Steele's female readers. Mr. Spectator starts this number by explaining how often he overhears inappropriate conversations in public, or an 'indecent license taken in discourse', happening when 'travelling together in the same hired coach, sitting near each other in any publick Assembly, or the like.' Most importantly, he explains how these conversations are often conducted by vain and conceited men (referred to as 'coxcombs') at the expense of any woman nearby, and has been frequented with letters of complaint from his female readers regarding such an issue.

The issue of impropriety in male-female relations becomes the central theme of Steele's essay. To further demonstrate such a calamity of impoliteness, the essay includes a letter from a female proprietor of a coffeehouse whose experience of ownership illuminates the gender complications regarding the public sphere and coffeehouse environment. The woman constantly overhears her male customers describing 'the improper discourses they are pleased to entertain me with', striving to say 'the most immodest things in my hearing' whilst 'at the same time half a dozen of them loll at the bar staring just in my face, ready to interpret my Looks and Gestures according to their own Imaginations.' The confronting nature of the male customers speech and action demonstrates the extent to

which the female in the public sphere was viewed as the other. The way the men ridicule her in her own coffeehouse is indicative of how coffeehouses were constructed as masculine environments. Despite her ownership of the property they exhibit immodest, misogynistic behaviour in an attempt to exert control over the space of the coffeehouse traditionally seen as a man's environment.

Edward Bramah maintains that women were forbidden (albeit not explicitly) from partaking in the masculine coffeehouse culture.[13] Brian Cowan argues that such a phenomena was mainly because the themes of discussion and debate, such as business and politics, were often male centered and therefore female discussion and participation was unnecessary. In particular, Cowan refutes Paula McDowell's assertion that female news hawkers (who would show up in coffeehouses to sell their wares) were powerful agents of political discourse and 'were not merely the producers and distributors of others political ideas.'[14] Cowan asserts that these hawkers 'can hardly be considered full-fledged participants in the masculine public sphere to whose needs they catered' and that 'these poor and illiterate women may have made their way into the coffeehouses, but were not considered to be a legitimate part of it.'[15] The treatment of the female coffeehouse owner at the hands of her male customers presents a unique problem for *The Spectator'*s female readership. That is, how can a woman maintain her civility and propriety when surrounded by dominant masculine incivility and exclusion of the female sex in the coffeehouse environment?[16]

In addition to the complexity of being isolated females in a dominantly masculine environment, Cowan highlights how social perceptions of female coffeehouse owners further contributed to the poor treatment and incivility they experienced from their male patrons. Cowan points to female owners of coffee houses as the only tangible example of female presence in the environment. These 'coffee-women' made up approximately twenty percent of coffeehouse owners in 1692.[17] However, they were considered 'suspect figures', and Cowan writes, 'the low social status of the coffee-house keeper

[13] Edward Bramah, *Tea and Coffee: A Modern View of Three Hundred Years of Tradition* (Essex: Hutchinson & Co, 1972), p. 47.
[14] Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 31.
[15] Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, p. 251.
[16] This question is addressed in the third section of this article.
[17] Ibid. p. 251.

only accentuated the coffee-woman's vulnerability to the solicitations of her customers.'[18] The coffee-woman in Steele's essay is certainly indicative of this historical phenomenon; she is the only woman in a masculine environment, and from the way the male customers stare at her in her own establishment, it is clear she is seen as an exotic entity. The traditionally masculine nature of the coffeehouse renders her as foreign and as the other.

Steele's inclusion of the coffeehouse owner's letter, and his sympathy towards her 'melancholy circumstance' at the hands of the male 'rogues' and 'coxcombs', serves to illustrate the alarming complications women faced due to masculine dominance. Such implications were, however, mostly a result of the behaviour of impolite and improper men in the public space. Steele writes that the coffeehouse owner's dilemma is not unique, having received 'innumerable messages' from his female readers regarding similar issues. Women's treatment by men in public had a unique relationship with the nature of trade and economy at the time. As the public sphere transformed, so too did English commerce. Habermas' examination of emerging debate and criticism is that commerce was linked to England's ability to produce and disperse periodicals such as *The Spectator* at a high rate. There was an inextricable connection between commerce and publicity and print culture and debate.[19] But for women, this time of social and economic transformation created a problematic public sphere mostly ruled and occupied by men. Women in the public sphere were often viewed as goods themselves—commodified by men and male observers. From the news hawkers who catered to the needs of the masculine public sphere, to the female owners of coffeehouses, women in the public sphere were often associated with 'some form of sexual immorality', particularly prostitution.[20] We see this phenomenon discussed by Steele in response to the coffee-shop owner's letter; the woman in Steele's essay is viewed as a sexual object and as something that can be purchased. Steele writes:

> They tell me that a young Fop cannot buy a Pair of Gloves, but he is at the same time straining for some Ingenious Ribaldry to say to the young Woman who helps them on. It is no small Addition to the Calamity, that the Rogues buy as hard as the plainest and modestest Customers they have; besides which,

---

[18] Ibid. p. 251.
[19] David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 35.
[20] Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse,* p. 253.

> they loll upon their Counters half an Hour longer than they need, to drive away other Customers.

The 'young fop' mentioned by Steele is just as interested in the woman selling him the gloves as the gloves themselves. For the customer, she is seen as indistinguishable from the goods she sells, and so determined were men such as these to acquaint themselves with women shopkeepers that they loitered in the stores to 'drive away other customers.' Women in the public sphere were often seen as 'sexually vulnerable, even available' argues Will Pritchard, and that 'inevitably, women who sold were suspected of being themselves for sale.'[21] Even some time earlier the French philosopher Samuel de Sorbiere remarked that there were 'to be had.. fine shop women'[22] in London, implying that women in the public sphere were like consumer goods, to be looked at, inspected, even purchased. The anxieites of female shopkeepers in this regard is confirmed by Steele, when he writes that the 'very excellencies and personal perfections' of women such as her, subject them to be treated by men 'as if they stood there to sell their Persons to Prostitution.' This notion put forth by de Sorbiere strengthened perceptions of female coffeehouse owners as prostitutes, if not commodities.

Furthermore, the use of the feminised 'young fop' by Steele reinforces the gendering of public spaces. The fop's focus on fashion and shopping for clothes undermines his masculinity, his partaking in an activity that is usually reserved for women. Certain activities enforce or undermine gender norms and expectations. On the one hand, this man is portrayed as less masculine due to his shopping for clothes (an entirely different and far less masculine economic activity than trade and commerce) and the shop environment was far more intimate and far less public than the coffeehouse or royal exchange (a more common, and masculine scene of business portrayed in *The Spectator* 69). On the other hand, Arietta in *Spectator* 11 is seen as more masculine and dominant because of her partaking in the traditionally masculine pursuit of cultural and political debate and discussion. Further, her home becomes a more public setting, acting as a pseudo coffeehouse, with Mr. Spectator seamlessly entering and exiting.

---

[21] Will Pritchard, *Outward Appearances: The Female Exterior in Restoration London* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press), p. 163.

[22] In 'The European Magazine, and London Review' *Philological Society of London,* 1815 Vol. 16 p. 122.

The Challenges of Impropriety and the Desired Feminine Response

The question at the crux of this cultural issue for Steele's female readers was how to act in response to such implications of masculine impropriety. Steele subsequently uses analogy to define and defend his female readers against such male behaviours. Steele's use of analogy to compare women in the public sphere to prostitutes is termed by Pritchard as 'usefully imperfect.'[23] Pritchard argues that Steele's use of the analogy to draw an absurd comparison to prostitution in effect defends women and sets a precedent for which 'legitimate female economic activity' is established. The effect of Steele's analogy is to legitimise the presence and activity of women in the public sphere and provide a new model for their proper entry into the broader affairs of the public domain. Yet, whilst the shopkeeper is just one type of female reader of *The Spectator,* her letter is representative of *The Spectator'*s female readership as a whole. Therefore, it is assumed that other female readers shared the concerns and anxieties presented within her letter, especially when Mr. Spectator writes that he often received correspondence on such a topic. For the female readers that associated with such concerns and anxieties, Steele is encouraging them to partake in the activities in the public sphere, be they coffeehouse owners, shopkeepers, news hawkers, or otherwise. Steele does not provide them with a behavioural taxonomy to do so, but instead chooses to use analogy and absurdity against men who would seek to undermine their activities in public life.

This understanding of the masculine dominance of the public sphere led Steele to target his male readers, and in so doing, create a symbiotic relationship between men and women in the public sphere. Steele constructed men as the regulators; the behaviour and actions of men determined whether such exchanges between the sexes were misogynistic and in poor taste, or are encompassed by what Mee terms 'a polite circuit of trade.'[24] Such was the importance and role of men in empowering female agency that Steele encouraged men to exhibit notions of idealised masculine virtue so as to support and enable women. He states that 'a man of honour and sense' should have in mind the state of women when interacting with them, and therefore be grounded in respect and politeness. That being said, the labeling of women as 'helpless' creates a paradigm of a 'damsel in distress'. Consequently, women are so reliant upon men to regulate their actions with each other, that when the very little agency and freedom they

---

[23] Pritchard, *Outward Appearances: The Female Exterior in Restoration London,* p. 164.
[24] Ibid. p. 53.

experience in the public sphere is under threat, they must consult another more significant man in Steele for assistance. For *The Spectator'*s female readers, the realisation is that all activity in the public sphere—even when legitimate—will be regulated and impacted upon by men both negatively, as demonstrated in the behaviours of the coffeehouse customers, and positively, in models of propriety exemplified by Mr. Spectator, or the 'virtuous' men that Steele deploys.

The female reader here is ultimately left to make her own choices about how she is expected to act in the public sphere when encountering men. She is encouraged to acquaint herself with good men of 'honour and sense'—an impossibility for the shopkeeper who relies on customers, be they polite or not. Alternatively, when a situation arises in which she feels undermined or disrespected by men in the male dominated arena, she cannot speak for herself, but rather seek out a man of 'honour and sense' to rectify the situation on her behalf. In either situation, it can be seen that the female reader is fundamentally dependent upon the assistance of men in the public sphere.

Spectator 336 provides an alternative examination of Steele's efforts to mould his female readers actions in the public sphere. Steele employs a direct reader to author discourse, which exemplifies a modelled, implied, and ideal form of relationship between author and reader. This discourse promotes a broad vision of ideal readership that has an intimate reliance on *The Spectator,* similar to Addison's corresponder Leonora, and her connection to the periodical as a 'fair disciple' in *Spectator* 92. In *Spectator* 92 Addison quotes Leonora's letter, but also provides his own argument. Steele refrains from the same discourse in *Spectator* 336*,* constructing his argument solely via the letter of one 'Rebecca the distress'd'. Whilst the essay starts on an unrelated issue of young men respecting their elders, with an epigraph quoting Horace on the matter as well as a male reader's letter, it is Rebecca who presents an argument against vanity and superficiality. Rebecca's argument is that the women who frequent her china shop have no interest in purchasing any of her goods, but do so only to construct an air of superiority and sophistication for themselves.

Steele's reliance on Rebecca's words rather than his own amplifies the effect created by Addison's action in *Spectator* 92. Through the absence of his own writing or other related material, be they other letters or classical quotes, Steele employs the woman's voice to impart information directly to the reader. The fundamental reliance on Rebecca's letter means that Steele's

reader has no indication of what argument will be presented within, but more importantly, the reader becomes ultimately dependent upon her letter for meaning and understanding. As Katherine Shevelow argues, the use of, and reliance upon, Rebecca's letter highlights how Steele uses it to serve an 'illustrative and regulatory function' becoming an 'additional moral voice'[25] in the argument.

Steele's reliance on the letter ultimately creates a framework for his readers to examine and imitate the behaviour exhibited by Rebecca within it. Rebecca becomes an additional didactic voice, the underlying implication being that by including her letter, Steele is providing an illustration of how he expects his female audience to operate in the public sphere. The inclusion of her letter without any additional discourse is suggestive of Steele's tacit approval of her behaviour. However, Steele's approval is not just of how Rebecca operates in relation to *The Spectator,* but more importantly, how she carries herself in public and transmits the ideals and values within the periodical into public life. Demonstrating her behaviour without additional paratext is Steele's approbation and appreciation of what she does, it takes precedent in that issue's argumentative hierarchy. Furthermore, it is Steele's way of implicitly declaring he expects other readers to do so as well.

The idealised reader/author of *Spectator* 336 exhibits ideal types of public behaviour, and in so doing lays a foundation for an exemplary model for other female readers. Besides 'waiting patiently' for Mr. Spectator's papers, a virtue she has in common with Leonora in *Spectator* 92, this Rebecca is a china merchant, who receives 'as fine Company as any o' this end of the Town.' Rebecca certainly seems a devoted, upstanding reader of *The Spectator,* and a woman of fine taste. Yet it is Rebecca's actions in treating the female rakes that elevates her character and serves as a model for Steele's female readers. She is patient with her frustrating customers and adopts an attitude of servitude and restraint, the latter of which is particularly important. Rebecca's patience and politeness are ideal virtues for conduct in this social situation, evidenced by Lawrence Klein's argument that politeness in early eighteenth-century England served as a 'normative framework for human relations, since its conventions relied on freedom, equality, activity and restraint.'[26] Restraint, alongside respecting the freedom

[25] Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture. Construction of Gender in the Early Periodical,* p. 114.

[26] Lawrence Klein, 'Enlightenment as Conversation,' in *What's Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 158.

and (albeit intolerable) activities of the rakish women is how Rebecca's politeness is manifested. Furthermore, despite 'not being a shilling better for it', this female shopkeeper does not compromise her integrity in order to make a sale by cheapening her tea.

Crucially, Rebecca is of a notably higher class than the female coffeehouse owner in *Spectator* 92*,* and this distinction in class serves to highlight the diversity of *The Spectator*'s female readership.[27] Furthermore, it means that the construction of an ideal female reader was not dependent upon class, creed, or socioeconomic distinctions, but instead deals with unifying characteristics such as politeness, patience, and propriety that transcends social and class boundaries. Just as inside the masculine coffeehouse male customers were 'Like Noah's ark, every kind of creature, in every walk of life…town wit, grave citizen, a worthy lawyer…voluble sailor',[28] so too did *The Spectator* transcend social and class boundaries to unite its female readers in a common quest for civility.

As a 'Spectator' herself, Rebecca's gaze upon customers reveals their vanity, rakish qualities, and the ridiculousness of their going about town to keep up appearances, but the reader's gaze upon Rebecca demonstrates the constitution of her own character. Patient, humble, aware of her domestic duties, uncompromising in her ideals and virtues, a woman in public should never seek out attention, but be guided by said virtues. Her role as a 'Spectator' also brings her into alignment with the other members of 'The Spectator Club', such as Mr. Spectator, and his friend Will Honeycomb. Furthermore, such an alignment affects the gendered nature of her presentation because it applies a type of masculine power and privilege to her as a 'Spectator' that the public sphere would prohibit, but with which Steele empowers her.

Lawrence Klein highlights how this particular importance on politeness in the face of social faux pas was an integral part of both *The Spectator'*s didacticism and eighteenth century England in general, arguing that, 'politeness was sometimes viewed as the necessary means for bringing out

[27] Coffeehouse owners were of lower social status than not only other women of trade such as china merchants like Rebecca, but often their male patrons who extended inappropriate solicitations. See Cowan, Brian, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 251.

[28] Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities; A History of the Coffee-houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), p. 46.

the best in oneself and in others. By being agreeable, it was said, social actors establish a trust that allows them then to tell the truth, to criticise, and to urge reforms on others without offending them.'[29] Rebecca, as both a 'Spectator' and social actor, is able to tolerate these women through politeness, but more importantly, is able to initiate a discourse with *The Spectator* in her attempt to facilitate the paper's project to reform inappropriate behaviour. As a model, her actions create crucial implications of this issue for Steele's female readers in public life. The female reader of *The Spectator* is to be defined in accordance to Rebecca, to use such a definition of her own character to attempt to reform those around themselves as an agent of change for the periodical. The female reader must maintain order and politeness in the face of impoliteness and disorder in the public sphere.

Spectator 336 demonstrates that Steele's method for developing the parameters of his ideal female reader lies in his characterisation of stereotypical models of womanhood. The women rummaging through the store are destructive to polite society. Termed 'Day-Goblins' by Rebecca, they strongly resemble the eponymous supernatural creatures in their behaviour. David Morrill has explored cultural perceptions of faeries and goblins in the eighteenth century, and makes the case that goblins were often seen as vampiric rather than faerie-like.[30] The women leech off the virtue and politeness of Rebecca to sustain their self-aggrandisement, threatening the sanctity of Steele's polite society in the same way they upturn the sanctity of Rebecca's china shop. The dehumanisation of these women through the term 'goblins' creates a potent nomenclature for the implied female readers to define themselves in opposition to. Furthermore, as a symbol of order, politeness, and Englishness, the china shop represents a range of virtues that Addison and Steele value in polite society. By illuminating improper behaviour, Rebecca is characterised in juxtaposition to the group of 'female rakes' who frequent her shop. She is presented as a laudable model for public propriety, displaying the essential virtues extolled by Addison and Steele. In this sense, Rebecca and her china shop serves as a broader societal microcosm for polite society. The store is an ordered and structured environment, which, through Rebecca's ownership and maintenance, is defined by politeness, patience and humility.

---

[29] Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,' *The Historical Journal,* Vol. 5, Issue 4, 2002, p. 857.

[30] Morrill, David S. (Spring 1990), 'Twilight is not good for maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in Goblin Market,' *Victorian Poetry* 28:1, pp1-2.

However, the way in which *The Spectator* encouraged its female readers to personify *The Spectator's* polite society varies with regard to whether she is interacting with men or women. *Spectator* 336 seeks to make its female readers agents of politeness and propriety in the public sphere. The shop serves as a microcosm for broader English society, and Steele uses the shop owner Rebecca as an example of modelled behaviour for his readers, but also characterises ideal behavioural traits in juxtaposition to the actions of the female rakes that visit the store. Rebecca serves as a lamp on a hill, a beacon of civility in the shop, in which by exhibiting ideal characteristics that personify *The Spectator*'s polite society she becomes an agent for it.

Conclusion

The Spectator's implied female reader is defined by politeness, civility and even submissiveness in the public sphere. The only instance in which she is afforded a significant sense of agency and power is when she interacts with other women. In that scenario, the female reader (like Rebecca the china shop owner) is encouraged to act as an agent of change and politeness amongst peers of her gender. Amongst men, however, it is assumed that such women cannot stand up to and defend themselves against the misogyny of the public sphere. As a result, women such as the coffeehouse owner, must use men of 'honour and sense' to act as intermediary for her.

For *The Spectator*'s female readers the realisation is that their activity in the public sphere, whilst certainly legitimate, was one that would always be regulated and impacted upon by men both negatively (coffeehouse customers) and positively (Steele). The subsequent ramification is that male dominance in public and coffeehouse culture meant that women would inevitably have to encounter and interact with men. Upon interacting with men, the female's power and agency is subsequently shifted to the male subject, men whom, according to Steele, belong to one of two groups. The first group are men who use the transfer of power to suppress women. Yet, the second group are men of 'honour and sense'. It is the group of men with 'honour and sense' that Steele's female readers are encouraged to associate with, authorising them to be their proxies against undesirable and improper men who would seek to suppress them. Such was the nature of the woman's position in English society at the time; her very freedom of movement and economic activity in a male dominated public sphere was one that *The Spectator* defined as being inevitably dependent upon men.

Ryan Twomey is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at Macquarie University. His main areas of research are literary juvenilia and the Anglo-Irish author Maria Edgeworth. He is the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, and co-editor of the Juvenilia Press Edition of Edgeworth's *The Double Disguise*.

Daniel Carrigy is a PhD Candidate at Macquarie University. He is currently researching reimaginings of the American frontier space in post WWII American literature. In particular, the ways in which late twentieth century examples reflect, interrogate, and highlight intrinsic anxieties about American identity, both national and individual.

Abject Humanism in Tom Perrotta Adaptations: *Election* and *Little Children*

WYATT MOSS-WELINGTON

One of the key figures in the development of a suburban ensemble cinema over the past two decades has been author Tom Perrotta, whose novels typically feature multi-focalised structures, blended affect, and suburban scrutiny. Two of his books were translated to cinema, *Election* (1999) and *Little Children* (2006), directed by Alexander Payne and Todd Field respectively, and more recently *The Leftovers* has been adapted as an HBO serial. *Election* and *Little Children* are both high-profile examples of the suburban ensemble dramedy, a millennial American filmmaking mode similarly featuring multiple protagonists, usually half sentimental and half satirical, set in different iterations of the American suburbs; other popular titles include *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) and *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010). These films have often been called 'human dramas' and are an example of what I call narrative humanism. In this paper I wish to extend the scope of literary and narrative humanisms, using the Perrotta adaptations to articulate the role abjection might play in suburban ensemble cinema. The paper also demonstrates how a humanist hermeneutic method that accounts for the abject can produce a new, complex ethical inquiry that is focussed on honouring the challenges we face in living up to the prosociality humanism espouses.

Narrative humanism refers to attempts to understand and record versions of human social complexity in narrative, the remit of the human drama. In a way, narrative humanism is the philosophy of kindness: it makes kindness central to theory, and how we achieve a more generous concept of one another through storytelling. It asks how we go about promoting kindness in those contexts that seem to inhibit it, and an abject humanism studies more carefully those inhibitions to expressions of kindness. When

Murray Bookchin longs to return to a sense of 'enchantment' or 'wonder' in the human, Edward Said enthuses about the close listening of philology, or Cristine Gardner documents the use of humanistic anthropology in listening across cultures, these terms appear to be different lexical means getting at a similar question: how do we think more generously about one another *through* our stories, given an intellectual tendency to locate problems, and potentially to overemphasise the worst qualities in others?[1] Perrotta's works effectively foreground human cruelty to destabilise any sense of an inherent prosociality, but then ask what is salvageable in spite of such cruelty; how do we square our need to see one another as fundamentally good with the worst human behaviours? Like many other humanisms, however, this essay is also ethically centred: it asks how narrative media can harness our aware cognition in ways that might improve our relations. These questions chime with the literary humanism of figures including Andy Mousley and Bernard Harrison who have attempted to restore ethical agency to literature, presenting literary works as an essentially practical component in asking how we ought to live, with epistemic value in their facilitation of searches for meaning.[2] Narrative humanism expands from literature to focus on the history of storytelling practices and adaptation across media. It expresses complex modeling of the interiority of others and their social worlds as a generosity of thought, and asks how such a generosity of thought translates between stories across time.

The suburban ensemble dramedy is one such example of a narrative humanism in practice. These films tend to reject the utopian/dystopian binary discourse that developed around American suburbia, prompted in particular by late 1990s fantasy features including *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998). The open sociological reflection embedded in Perrotta's multi-protagonist prose, contrasting a range of affective politics across various lives in suburbia rather than

---

[1] Murray Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Anti- Humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism and Primitivism* (London: Cassell, 1995); Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Cristine Gardner, 'Humanism in the Narrative Voice,' *Anthropology and Humanism* 19.2 (1994) 166-168.

[2] Bernard Harrison, *What Is Fiction For?: Literary Humanism Restored* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); see also Richard Gaskin, *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

recapitulating a geographically homogenised 'type,' fruitfully informed new suburban cinema over the turn of the millennium. Recent works of suburban media criticism by scholars including David R. Coon, Robert Beuka, Claire Elizabeth Perkins, Melanie Smicek and Joanna Wilson, working in part from Robert Fishman's earlier monograph *Bourgeois Utopias*, all reify a version of the restrictive utopian/dystopian binary.[3] In lieu of such a division, the suburban ensemble film asks questions of the lived experience of suburbia with all of its indivisible pains and pleasures, joys and sorrows.[4] If the compound *sub-urban* might suggest the spaces in between the rural and urban, the suburban ensemble dramedy locates the in between of emotional space—cinematic blended affect, bittersweetness, not knowing whether to laugh or cry—that can convey something of the richness of domestic experience rather than symbolise and moralise about suburban constituents.[5] The suburban ensemble film typically presents a cross-section of an American neighbourhood with concerns equalized across generations; it contrasts personality types, gender, sexual, ethnic, ideological and other differences. It tends to look at suburbia as geographically amorphous rather than replicating the imagery of 1950s domesticity. The Perrotta adaptations could be considered on the darker side of the suburban ensemble dramedy, and this is what makes them interesting: the sense of threat and imminent collapse circulating such humanistic ideals and relational sentimentality.

The following, then, uses readings of the two Perrotta film adaptations to articulate a concept of abject humanism. To do so my analysis seeks to exhume some of the ethical scripts underscoring the two films; *Election*

---

[3] David R. Coon, *Look Closer: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television* (New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Claire Elizabeth Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Melanie Smicek, *American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares: Suburbia as a Narrative Space between Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary American Cinema* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014); and Joanna Wilson, 'The End of the Good Life: Literary Representations of Suburbia and the American Nightmare,' *Forum* 20 (2015): 1-16**;** Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

[4] Wyatt Moss-Wellington, 'Sentimentality in the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy: A Response to Berlant's Optimism-Realism Binary,' *Forum* 20 (2015): 4.

[5] C.f. Ed S.H. Tan and Nico H. Frijda, 'Sentiment in Film Viewing,' in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 48-64.

addresses questions regarding how we ought to think about ourselves in relation to others, while *Little Children* illuminates the ways that such thinking translates to socially dynamic moral behaviours in suburban settings—in particular, ostracism and implicit social exclusions. In addressing the moral consequences of these behaviours I will turn to broader fields, including anthropology and social psychology, to help answer some of these tandem questions of interpersonal ethics. If narrative humanism seeks to make our understanding of others more generously complex, then it makes sense to pay attention to social sciences that also attempt to resolve questions of relational complexity.

Like many of the suburban ensemble dramedies, *Election*'s ethics are intergenerational and arise partially from a comparative deconstruction of midlife crisis and coming-of-age tropes. As the filmmakers envisaged *Election* as somewhat rhetorically responsive to the character types that populate similar films, the following reading also engages with media responses to the philosophical interventions staged by Perrotta, Payne, Field, and others working in the suburban ensemble mode. Finally, this investigation also performs something of a historical function, documenting how the concerns of suburban ensemble cinema may have morphed over the first decade of the millennium, from the foundational works of 1999 to *Little Children*'s reflection on indices of suburban intimacy, conflict and altruism in 2006.

Humanism in 'Election'

Election, Payne's 1999 adaptation of Perrotta's then-unpublished novel, pits humanistic schoolteacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) against upwardly mobile, achievement-centric student politician Tracy Flick (Reece Witherspoon). Using Jim as a cipher, this early film laid the groundwork of self-reflection and interrogation of humanistic convictions that would sustain throughout later ensemble dramedies. Although we ostensibly follow the teacher's moral undoing and potential rebirth, we are also permitted ingress to a number of other characters' internal dialogues and affective space. When we follow Tracy or fellow student candidates Paul (Chris Klein) and Tammy Metzler (Jessica Campbell), the varied incidental music, for instance, allows us access to their emotional world even while we are invited to view them critically, evoking American national political

players and ideologies as they do.[6] We adopt their subjectivities, yet return to Jim's warped vision of others, as Derek Nystrom puts it: 'we see Tracy largely through the eyes of high school teacher Mr. McAllister … whose annoyance at her relentless striving is mixed with a barely sublimated desire for her and resentment at his own station in life; any disdain for Tracy we might share with him is thus called into question.'[7] It is this comparative work that distinguishes the satiric multi-focalisation of *Election*; the subjectivities of other protagonists send up both Jim McAllister's presumption of neutrality and centrality, and any impulse for unconstrained sympathetic identification on behalf of the viewer. Relentless lampooning prevents us from championing anyone in particular, but we are primarily focused on the relationship of the frustrated humanist to his uncomfortable and long-unheeded dissatisfactions. For example, he feigns apathy in student politics but through its moral prism runs up against confusion about ambition in his own life (much of his indignation toward Tracy stems from attempts to bury his own ambition and suppress his envy); he refuses to face conflicts in his desire to referee people toward their full potential and simultaneously promote fairness (he sabotages the election partially to punish Tracy for her hardline politicking and perceived character flaws); and his inability to conceive fuses with his misogyny (he rolls his ire at women in his life together in a disturbingly comedic angry sex scene).[8]

Although Jim tries hard to serve others, via the incongruity of unreliable narration he inadvertently reveals resistance to recognition of his own personal trials. Jim describes his marriage in glowing terms while the camera bears witness to a sadder reality, for example. The aversion to complication means that he cannot approach or overcome the moral paradoxes within his humanist convictions. Payne has said that he and his team 'find very unaware people interesting. Jim McAllister is constantly, unconsciously, totally

---

[6] Saul Austerlitz, *Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 443. Perrotta also suggests that the characters reflect a move to personality politics, or what he calls the 'character issue' during the Clinton era, and through this prism *Election* makes a point of the conflation of sexual and national politics. Greg Veis, 'Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick,' *New Republic*, February 16, 2009, http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/the-plank/tom-perrotta-the-evolution-tracy-flick

[7] Derek Nystrom, 'Fear of Falling Sideways: Alexander Payne's Rhetoric of Class,' *Postmodern Culture* 16 (2005), https://muse.jhu.edu/article/192266

[8] This sequence echoes the masturbation scene in Payne's satirical horror comedy student film *The Passion of Martin* (1991), with its copious visualizations of an angel/whore complex.

creating the crisis in his own life, so that he can break out of it. And it's all in denial.'[9] Jim's attempts to conceptually divorce morality and ethics in the classroom reveal a fundamental confusion he starts from. He preaches positive change, but his life in service to others promotes stasis; he teaches political awareness, but will not make the time to evaluate his personal life; he adopts both the language of destiny or fate and the language of responsible self-actualisation when it suits him; he wants to allow the ambitious to succeed, but also wants to prevent the ruthless from ascending; he wants to care, but we all live with some hate.[10] Abject humanism finds its concentration in these kinds of contradictions. Finally and perhaps most crucially, Jim presents as selfless, but as well all do, he puts together a hubristic autobiographical narrative of his life in which he is the locus, and others, especially the women around him, are subject to *his* life story. Thereby he is surprised when his wife Diane (Molly Hagan) and neighbour Linda (Delaney Driscoll) are revealed to have a complex relationship reaching beyond his simple solipsism, as they abruptly terminate a one day old affair that he conceptualised as his rebirth. So *Election* is an ensemble narrative moving between equally unreliable first-person accounts of unfolding events, however it seriously upbraids the supremacy of its main protagonist in a way that destabilises the masculinist, privileged righteousness of *American Beauty*, released the same year and perhaps a more influential text in shaping future suburban ensemble dramedies.[11] The transformative role reversal of characters such as Tracy and Jim is seen by Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Pablo Echart to be 'undermining any self-satisfied or pragmatic philosophy of success' that Payne's middle-class characters cling to with such comically inflated desperation.[12]

In 2006, Payne told journalist Matt Connolly that he 'has always aspired to be a humanist,' causing Connolly to reflect on Payne's method:

---

[9] Annie Nocenti, 'Adapting and Directing *Election*: A Talk with Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor,' in *Alexander Payne: Interviews*, ed. Julie Levinson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), ebook edition.

[10] For more on the fusion of self-actualization with religious imagery, see Lesley Brill, 'Chance And Choice, Biology And Theology In Alexander Payne's *Election*,' *Senses Of Cinema* 65 (2012).

[11] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, 'Too Close for Comfort: *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif,' *Cinema Journal* 44 (2004): 69-93.

[12] Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Pablo Echart, 'Tales of Rebirth: Alexander Payne and the New American Dream,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44 (2016): 104.

> Looking at all his films through a humanist lens, you can see where he is coming from. The multiple perspectives through which *Election* is refracted defuse any sense of one character possessing smug superiority over the others. Each is flawed in its own individual way. Conversely, the characters that populate [*About Schmidt* (2002)] and *Sideways* [2004] are royally skewered for their petulance, lethargy, and pomposity. As always, though, they are brought back from the brink of mockery by the inherent empathetic detail Payne and Taylor imbue in even their most unattractive moments.[13]

Humanism here means exhibiting the kindness of closer listening to the details another's lifeworld, even toward those lives that are the subject of an author's criticism. Although in later models of the suburban ensemble dramedy a clear protagonist became harder to identify, *Election* can be seen early on modifying the formula to see how humility might be admitted in spite of the individualist orthodoxy of heroic film conventions. In *Election*, individualism and American politics are juxtaposed and critiqued—both the book and film leave us with the lasting impression that all politics and all democracies, from the private to the institutional, the federal to the family, are subject to human frailty.

Concurrently, Payne reveals human detail beneath the surface pathology of a character we may otherwise identify as the principal antagonist: Tracy is genuinely disappointed in her own lack of connection to others, such that a short-lived affair with a teacher she considers one of the closest relationships of her school years. The alienation she confronts—especially in the form of resentment from characters such as Jim—leads her to give up on connection to others in favour of solitary work on her political career. Just as Jim feigns disengagement from the affective politics of his students, Tracy feigns her smile, even while being congratulated for her achievements. Payne will often hold the camera on Witherspoon until after the smile falls, and we see its artifice in its deconstruction. While reviewers erroneously assumed Tracy as the story's villain, a number of articles have since re-evaluated the iconic status the character generated as an archetypal

[13] Matt Connolly, 'Film Commentary: Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor.' *The Wesleyan Argus*, April 12, 2006, http://wesleyanargus.com/2006/04/21/film-commentary-alexander-payne-and-jim-taylor

Machiavellian overachiever.[14] (Or as Perrotta puts it, an 'unapologetic achiever.')[15] In conversation with Annie Nocenti, screenwriter Jim Taylor said, 'we didn't want her to be just a femme fatale,' and Payne agreed, drawing attention to the exploitative affair with her former teacher: 'I was very conscious that she be presented more like a victim and not really like a full participant. That she's a really sweet girl. And what you see visiting high schools is that they're just kids. They're not the beautiful vixen sexpots you see in teen movies. That's completely fake … Tracy Flick's a kid.'[16] As Perrotta himself said, quite simply: 'I just think people are made uncomfortable by ambitious women.'[17] Apparently this included *Election*'s early critics.

By the film's close, Tracy, initially the object of ridicule looks potentially less foolish than the allegedly humanistic Jim. An alternative ending leaked online also emphasises her working class background.[18] In recognising her circumstances, Jim is forced to confront his hypocrisies.[19] In contrast, Tracy's class status is broached halfway through Perrotta's novel, which spends slightly more time backgrounding the genesis of its characters' longings and sadnesses, in particular the sadness of incremental estrangement from family members and loved ones.[20] The novel thereby comes across as less brutally satiric than the film, and more openly concerned with its characters' welfare and possibilities for conciliation. Jim, for example, manages some manner of reparations with most of the women he has wronged throughout the novel, including his wife Diane. Perrotta's book also makes it clear that Tracy's alienation from her peers is partially due to the notion, inherited from her hardworking mother, that their compromised class status means she will have to make her entire life about

---

[14] Garance Franke-Ruta, 'Why Washington Needs More Tracy Flicks,' *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2012; Leigh Kolb, 'Women in Politics Week: *Election*: Female Power and the Failure of Desperate Masculinity,' *Bitch Flicks*, November 28, 2012; Jillian Mapes, 'The Enduring Legacy of *Election*'s Tracy Flick and 'Who the Fuck Does She Think She Is?' Women.' *Flavorwire*, April 23, 2014.

[15] Veis, 'Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick.'

[16] Nocenti, 'Adapting and Directing *Election*.'

[17] Veis, 'Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick.'

[18] Whitney Jefferson, 'See The Original, Unused Ending To Election,' *Jezebel*, May 16, 2011, http://jezebel.com/5802300/see-the-original-unused-ending-to-election

[19] The film's actual conclusion sees Jim escape to the city, where we eventually see that his inner problems remain; they did not belong to the suburbs, they belonged to him.

[20] Tom Perrotta, *Election* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 81-84.

work and ambition. Although her mother's influence is clear in the film, the class components of their relationship are minimised.[21]

Perhaps because of the early responses to Witherspoon's Tracy, Perrotta has questioned whether or not the screen adaptations have diminished his humanism somewhat. He references what he calls 'tonal' changes to make *Little Children* darker and the conclusion more horrifying, and *Election* more satirical.[22] He says of *Election*:

> They're comic characters who are doomed to repeat their mistakes because that's who they are: people who make the same mistake over and over again. So it literally went from a book about people who have a traumatic experience, learn from it, understand themselves better, emerge a little bit smarter and more forgiving to a story about people who do horrible things to each other and will continue to make the same mistakes throughout their lives.[23]

Ultimately, however, Perrotta emphasises that

> both *Election* and *Little Children* are technically really interesting films but they're not about technique in the same way that as a writer, I'm not really about style. I put the story and the human element before that. So you can call it a kind of humanistic cinema: that's what I'm looking for.[24]

What we can ascertain from this is that as long as an examination of human complexity comes first, there is a kind of humanism taking place.

---

[21] In his article on Payne's 2004 film *Sideways*, Nystrom speaks of these issues as an 'ambivalent' rhetoric of class across Payne's films, that is, instances of 'class abjection' are coupled with a contradictory interest in the way markers of class distinction cross boundaries and will not stay put, in particular markers of taste and tastefulness. Nystrom, 'Fear of Falling Sideways.'

[22] Ruth Maxey, 'Tom Perrotta in Conversation about Literary Adaptation,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38 (2010): 270-272.

[23] Ibid. 273.

[24] Ibid. 276.

Abjection in 'Little Children'

So what of the abject, then? Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, the lasting treatise on cinematic abjection, refers us to the qualities of film that can make materially proximate those unpleasant aspects of being that we deign to quarantine and separate from ourselves—the impure, the dangerous, the repellent.[25] These concerns are clearly relevant for an abject humanism, too. *Election* studies the existential breakdown resultant when we fail to problematize such separations of self and threatening other. Where Kristeva's study, however, focuses primarily on bodily and material horror (along with their more metaphysical implications), abject humanism is concentrated on psychologically purposeful abjection, including our practical responses to dangerous or repellent personality traits. While *Election* does motivate symbols such as rubbish trucks and garbage as a figurative framing device across multiple scenes, these devices are in effect proxies for the characters' interior conundrums—they are not, as in many of Kristeva's examples, viscerally upsetting in any physiological or corporeal sense. However, abject humanism is not simply concerned with individual thought or notions of a primal psychoanalytic repression, it is concerned too with social action, with the way our ethics might morph in honestly encountering abjected personhood as socially transactive rather than separate to or distant from ourselves, and the ways our identities might change as a result. I now turn to address *Little Children*'s study of problematic socially segregating behaviours such as group ostracism.

For *Little Children*, Perrotta shared a screenwriting credit with director Todd Field. Perrotta's works often take readers to the brink of problems found in suburbia—notably here, sexual predation, paedophilia hysteria and en-masse ostracism—and then pull back at the very end to see what kind of goodwill is reclaimable. Horror is always lurking behind this feature's humanism, which not only makes it a unique experience in the canon, but also provides a clue to narrative humanism's affinity with the abject. Carina Chocano lists its matrix of social studies in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> Firmly rooted in the present and in our current frame of mind—a time and frame of mind that few artists have shown interest in really exploring—the movie is one of the few films I can think of that examines the baffling combination of smugness, self-

[25] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

> abnegation, ceremonial deference and status anxiety that characterizes middle-class Gen X parenting, and find sheer, white-knuckled terror at its core.[26]

Central to the narrative is the idea that we can be stuck idealising or fetishizing our past, especially experiences we feel we missed out on in our youth, and so we become frozen in time and fail to develop in maturity beyond the little children of the film's title. In a way, it is also a critique of a moral language that we may lack when we approach problems in the suburbs. No one in the film ever quite has the language to explain her or his predicaments, desires or miseries, and so negotiation happens at the level of inference, through behaviours like ostracism, social exclusion and inclusion, unspoken social rewards and punishments—something of what anthropologist M.P. Baumgartner describes as particularly suburban 'limited anarchy,' or a general adherence to accepted moral codes while avoiding direct moral conflict.[27] Being inducted into a seemingly rigid system with no recourse to question its boundaries causes the narrative's characters to look back at their youth, and fantasise about what could have been. Examples include the igniting of an affair, and later the elopement plans, of protagonists Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) and Brad Adamson (Patrick Wilson); their fantasies of a different life that was available to them when they were younger are bracingly correlated with the corrosive fantasies of paedophile Ronnie McGorvey (Jackie Earle Haley), who is struggling with his psychosexual disorder. All are fetishizing a version of youth, their former selves, or what could have been. The drama in the film—and the novel—comes from the impingement of those fantasy lives upon the responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood.

The most severe example of these retrospective fantasies is embodied in Ronnie, whose mother (Phyllis Somerville) keeps mountainous display cases full of baby-faced kitsch trinkets, porcelain, and chiming clocks, and habitually infantilises her adult son, coddling him (although interestingly it is not explicitly stated that she has in any way caused his psychosexual disorder, but rather provides him relief by being the only person who accepts him as a human worthy of loving care). Likewise, Brad feels he missed out on the time to be a carefree young man. As he ritually gazes at nighttime

---

[26] Carina Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields; Satire and Anxiety are Brilliantly Blended in Todd Field's 'Little Children.' It's a Suburbia Where Parents are as Unformed as the Kids,' *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October, 2006, E1.

[27] M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127.

skateboarders outside the library where he is pretending to study for his bar exam, the narrator reveals his sad contemplations: they are the age he must have been when his mother died. The trauma has locked him into a belief that he has missed out on formative experiences, which he vicariously attempts to recover by nurturing an obsession with young male activities. Brad's wife Kathy (Jennifer Connolly) has encouraged him to suppress these avoidant compulsions, herself transmitting status anxieties passed on from her mother. Ex-cop Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich) is stuck revisiting the trauma of accidentally shooting a teenager in a shopping mall by transferring his guilt and anger onto Ronnie in the form of a 'Save the Kids' campaign, while former literature PhD candidate-turned-housewife Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) longs for freedom from the shackles of intellectually unstimulating suburban motherhood. Living in a mansion Sarah's husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) inherited from his mother, and that was once the project of his ex-wife, Sarah crafts a small sense of belonging by turning one room into a shrine to the adventure and promise of the texts she studied earlier. She feels the remorse of dropping out of her PhD, and wishes for a more attractive and younger body, something of her former self. They all reach for, and fetishize, the openness and promise of an earlier time in their lives, many marked by a tacit trauma that has kept them rehearsing a fantasy of their former selves at a pivotal life moment, a kind of repetition compulsion or 'repetitive maladaptive behaviour.'[28] The film's narrative spine is the igniting of an affair, and later the elopement plans, of Brad and Sarah. (That this fantasy of escape and a new life is correlated with the destructive fantasies of McGorvey's psychosexual disorder is one of the film's most bracing thematic impressions.) As Chocano sees it, Sarah:

> gets through the days pretending to be 'an anthropologist studying the behavior of suburban women,' not as a suburban woman herself. Her attraction to Brad, therefore, is not only impulsive and romantic, it's intrinsic to her sense of who she is—or was … Sarah is happy to live with him in the past, clinging to the idea that they are hovering in the pleasant limbo of unrealized potential.[29]

Crucially, none of their longings are fanciful or unfounded—it is reasonable, this desire for a better life than the alienating and cerebrally bare circumstance they have arrived at in this amplified picture of small town

---

[28] Brad Bowins, 'Repetitive maladaptive behavior: Beyond repetition compulsion,' *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 70 (2010): 282-98.
[29] Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields,' E1.

America.[30] The guilt over such longings, however, and the cultural barriers preventing deeper discussion to expunge their longings, lead these characters to attempt selfish enactments of their fantasy lives.

We are initially introduced to the difficulty of meaningful connection delivered by this medium-density impasse via Sarah's experiences with a trio of mothers at the local park. Their parenting one-upmanship and protection of pack mentality, buttressed firmly in black-and-white morality, make the ice difficult to break. Sarah feels ostracised and excluded, yet is hesitant to reach out and challenge her loneliness. Sarah in turn rejects them by attempting to send up their values: on a whim she kisses the attractive father who frequents the park (Brad). The ensuing exodus of mothers from the playground is the moment we first bear witness to what Chocano calls the film's 'empathetic, humanistic vision that rejects, even in difficult, extreme cases, the mob impulse to demonize,'[31] a recurrence throughout the film, notably in a central scene of mass panic when Ronnie attends a local swimming pool ostensibly to spy on children underwater (although it is clear he knows he will be caught, and may in fact be seeking reaffirmation of his ostracism from the wider community). The exodus from the pool echoes the earlier exodus of mothers from the park, and similarly represents the problems with collective, public displays of impulsive revulsion, and the norm of rejecting the abnormal in tacitly unified ostracism: even where moral objection is reasonable, the resulting marginalisation of the infringer can compound detrimental behaviour, as with Ronnie.[32] Indeed, long-term

---

[30] A cloying book group conversation stresses to a presumably less literary audience the feminist credentials of *Madame Bovary*. Sarah tells the group that it is reasonable to long for a better life, ruefully reflecting on her own experience of feeling trapped in a gender role performance, of which the affair is a part. However the scene is also about the difficulty of living up to our own convictions; it is followed by sequences detailing Sarah's insecurity about body image and comparisons to Brad's wife Kathy. We can have the knowledge of gender role problems and still be held captive by their anxieties.

[31] Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields,' E1.

[32] Recent pilot programs for preventative therapy have shown some success in reducing emotional deficit and offense-supporting cognitions, as well as improving sexual self-regulation. See Klaus M. Beier, et al. 'The German Dunkelfeld Project: A Pilot Study to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and the Use of Child Abusive Images,' *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 12 (2015): 529-542. Such studies complicate the popular 'hardline' approach of demonizing ostracism the narrative speaks to. *Little Children* reasonably suggests that these behaviors (such as the pool incident) while understandable amount to willful ignorance of the consequences in

ostracism is associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviour, and depletion of coping resources, as Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida write:

> individuals appear to accept the essential message of their ostracism—that they are completely insignificant—and they experience a sense of alienation and worthlessness. They seem, then, to self-ostracize, perhaps in a misguided effort to prevent further rejection at the hands of others; they report high levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, as well as other indicators of psychological difficulties.[33]

A later scene in particular demonstrates the struggle for deeper connection across suburban boundaries through a chain of rejection and ostracism: late one afternoon Sarah finds her husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) masturbating over a soft-core porn website (with images including an adult subject 'dressing up like a little girl and playing with balloons') and immediately feels rejection. She tells him they will 'talk about it later' and leaves for a jog with her friend Jean (Helen Carey), who invites her to a book group, which Sarah appears to feel is beneath her, stalling on the offer. Back out the front of her house, one of the mothers from the park is waiting to warn her about Ronnie. Sarah invites her in for a cup of tea, but the mother is too embarrassed and afraid to take up the offer, rejecting Sarah's olive branch. Once inside, Sarah's husband offers to start a conversation about the earlier incident, but she in turn rejects him and will not talk. This completes a cycle of rejections that typically bridges the narrative arcs of *Little Children*.

---

our responses to pedophilia and child sexual abuse. Ostracism strategies can be seen as another of Baumgartner's conflict-avoidant moral minimalisms. Although calls for alienation of offenders appear to be an ethical hyper-engagement, they actually shirk collective responsibility, exacerbating the problem by increasing subjective distress, which is 'a significant predictor of deviant sexual fantasies, potentially increasing the risk of recidivism and limiting involvement in treatment,' Lauren Ducat, et al. 'Sensationalising sex offenders and sexual recidivism: impact of the Serious Sex Offender Monitoring Act 2005 on media reportage,' *Australian Psychologist* 44 (2009): 156-165. See also Jean Proulx, *Post-treatment Recidivism Rates in Sexual Aggressors: A Comparison Between Dropout and Nondropout Subjects* (Montreal: Ecole de criminologie-Université de Montréal, 1998).

[33] Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida, 'Ostracism: Consequences and Coping,' *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20 (2011): 73.

Such sequences reflect on the thin boundaries between personal rejections, coordinated ostracism and outright demonization. We might feel rejection as a physical pain, as social emotions have physiological and embodied components.[34] But group exclusion, perhaps because recognition by and cooperation within groups is fundamental to our survival, has the ability to threaten up to four of our primary needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence.[35] On the other hand, some ostracism is an acceptable part of life. Think of the way most strangers might avoid one another in public transport, an example of coordinated group ostracism that serves mutual ends; this is generally referred to as *role-prescribed* ostracism.[36] The boundaries of acceptable ostracism, however, are always ambiguous and so can be extended and manipulated—this is how reasonable rejection and unquestioned group ostracism become contiguous. We see these boundaries constantly negotiated in *Little Children*. At the same time, ostracism can be both practical and punitive. The pool scene is dynamic because of the confusion between the two: the practical need to protect one's child is folded into a collective response that reinforces the retributive nature of Ronnie's exclusion. It can be a short distance from defensive to punitive motivations in ostracism.

These events recall the moral minimalism of the suburbs Baumgartner addresses in *The Moral Order of a Suburb*. Baumgartner maintains that greater human density produces more social cohesion, along with more social problems and therefore the generation of more antidotes to conflict. So we find greater altruism in tandem with greater need for social control (such as law enforcement) in urban areas:

> If weak social ties generate weak social control, they undermine strong patterns of mutual aid as well. Much theoretical and empirical work has established that generosity and kindness increase with intimacy and social cohesion. It therefore follows that groups in which people are atomized and separated from one anther by a great deal of social distance—and where moral

---

[34] Mark R. Leary, Erika J. Koch, and Nancy R. Hechenbleikner, 'Emotional Responses to Interpersonal Rejection,' in *Interpersonal Rejection*, ed. Mark R. Leary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012: 146-147.

[35] Williams and Nida, 'Ostracism,' 71.

[36] Kipling D. Williams and Lisa Zadro, 'Ostracism: On Being Ignored, Excluded, and Rejected,' in *Interpersonal Rejection*, ed. Mark R. Leary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012: 29.

> minimalism is likely—will not be very altruistic. This seems part of an even larger pattern in which many human activities rise and fall in intensity together. Highly dense and closely bonded groups appear to produce more music and more religion, for example, as well as more social control and altruism.[37]

In a way, the suburbs are a kind of in-between zone of intimacy. They are not the cohesion-, conflict-, prosecution- and altruism-dense cities, nor are they the distanced tight units of our rural ancestry. The suburbs may have developed partially as a matter of majority preference for a middle ground of density, and likewise a middle ground of pleasures and problems in community attachment. However, this relatively recent living arrangement throws up new dilemmas, addressed by films like *Little Children*. How do conflict-averse communities deal with serious moral infringements without maximising and reinforcing their impact? In the film, documentary filmmaker Kathy's media work, ex-cop Larry's hardline vigilantism, and Sarah's aloof liberalism could all be seen as moral responses to the suburban challenge. One thing is clear: this at times distressing and deceptively cynical picture insinuates that genuine understanding and altruistic care are not only *possible* in the context of American suburbia, but they are currently evolving along with the geographies they are expressed within, despite clear challenges. At the film's close, the major players are all permitted to take a step past their mired craving for yesteryear by recognizing the worth of their care for others as an alternative: Sarah and Brad both confront the folly of their fantasy to run away together by remembering their responsibility to their child and spouse respectively, while Larry races Ronnie to the hospital after Ronnie castrates himself.[38]

The film's closing sentimentality, as with many of the suburban ensemble dramedies, is complicated by the problems the film has surveyed which reach no resolution. *Little Children*'s narrative symmetry belies its thematic and affective open-endedness: the film closes with opportunities for the open conversation and conflict resolution, reassessment and mutual care we have seen lacking, but promises none of it. We do not know if Sarah

---

[37] Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb*, 132.

[38] This is markedly different from the more tentative reconciliation of the novel's ending, which is less redemptive for Ronnie's character; he shows less remorse for even worse crimes. While Taylor and Payne wrote the remorse and reconciliation out of the end of *Election* in favour of a more biting conclusion that suggested repeated mistakes, *Little Children*'s ending was conversely softened to emphasise the potential for moral growth and human change.

will leave her loveless marriage, if Brad and Kathy will work things out, or even if Ronnie will survive. We are left with an empty swing in a dark park at night, creaking ominously as the screen goes black: the site of the castration, unpleasantly impeding upon prosocial sentiment and offering no promises of easy change. Again, not only can all of these things co-exist in suburbia—heartless and altruistic behaviours, pleasure and pain, negative affect at the same time as positive affect—they can exist in *one person* in suburbia too.

The film manages to find dark humour in all these situations, often by drawing attention to its own melodramatic tendency, such as the underexposed, etiolated images, with vignetted smudges of lightlessness advancing their assault on the corners of the frame throughout the picture, or Will Lyman's ironically audiobook-reminiscent narration, with a close vocal compression propelling the voice out of the speakers. Greg Dickinson links Lyman's voiceover to nostalgia in the suburbs.[39] Yet this brisk reading of rose-coloured retrospection does not quite admit *Little Children*'s sense of both terror and irony, and its humorous study of contradictory impressions of progress, ageing, and the passing of time in suburban America.[40] Perrotta explains Lyman's irony: 'It's a very wise, deep, mature voice. So you have a wise voice speaking over sometimes hysterical action and it creates a funny counterpoint.'[41] Nostalgia may be one component in a sense of 'maturity' that is undermined in *Little Children*; after ersatz nostalgia is compromised, we are forced to ask what is left.[42] The soundtrack is also worth mentioning, managing to emphasise the fragile silence of suburban geographies (upset regularly throughout the film by characters suddenly screaming through the silence and shocking others nearby into attention). The roar of atmospheric noise—with almost no sounds of other human life—is clear at the beginning of the film, as we are aware it does not sound like other films set in upper-middle suburbia. In the end, when it stops as abruptly as the movie began, the absence of the buzz track is so disconcerting that we realise we have been listening to it the whole time without noticing it—the sound of no life happening. The soundtrack forms perhaps the most critical insinuation about

---

[39] Greg Dickinson, *Suburban Dreams: Imagining and Building the Good Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 51.
[40] As Mary Douglas has it, 'The mixture of nostalgia and resistance explains why the topic [of the home] is so often treated as humorous.' 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,' *Social Research* 58 (1991): 287.
[41] Maxey, 'Tom Perrotta in Conversation,' 269.
[42] C.f. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

upper-middle, medium-density living: that in its construction we have lost something of real life. The incidental music is usually sparse, ominous, probing and yet magical, with tines and keyboards hanging on minor chords and dissonant extensions. The effect of all this together is to hold our emotional state in that sense of mild dread: something is off, something is not right here in suburbia. We are provoked to ask: what is it? In the end, however, it is not as easy to articulate or resolve as *American Beauty*'s vision of an enlightened Lester rising above his neighbour's rooftops, or the materialist admonishments that had developed throughout 1990s suburban cinema as a fallback critique—*Little Children* is a question more open to examining systems of morality that develop between people living at close quarters, yet who remain estranged. At the same time, however, there are moments of calm in the score. A comforting piano in a major key plays over early flashback montages of a pregnant Sarah at home during rare downtime moments, suggestive of a quiet suburban pleasure she may initially have been attracted to, and the piano part is echoed again, with more reverb and distant strings, when she first visits the swimming pool to find Brad. Thus the theme, belonging as it does to Sarah's interiority, initially plays over a nostalgic flashback montage and then comes to emphasise a potentially disruptive new love interest. It conceptually links the affect of nostalgia and excitement for the new, again destabilising any clear admonishments that might have otherwise been drawn from the film's satire (of suburban nostalgia or of adulterous fantasy). Yet these moments never occur without admitting some frustration that contradicts the sustained affect of the score. While the piano lilts, for example, Sarah's daughter Lucy (Sadie Goldstein) inconveniently refuses to go into the pool and Sarah snaps at her. The piano keeps playing its sweet song.

An Abject Humanism

We could call Perrotta's film adaptations an abject humanism in that they study problems that arise if we fail to admit horror, cruelty and negative affect in our lives—they are part of human experience. When we disavow these things in service of a more symbolically ideal picture of the trials of our suburban being, as does Jim McAllister, our visions of human complexity and ethics become too divorced from the reality they describe. Yet there is a more central dilemma taking place in these films: once we admit the darker emotive complications that we are most loath to let into our self-schemas, how do we keep them from taking over our internal reasoning, from depression, misanthropy or excusing our cruelty to others as natural or

'human'? This kind of humanism asks how we can admit abject qualities in our lives without them becoming a dominant mode for thinking through social interaction; the realism of blended affect becomes not just an aesthetic goal for fiction or film, but is demonstrated as a condition of healthy problem solving, reasoning and living. This is also why the dominant binary discourse of utopias and dystopias in suburban media do little to describe a phenomenology or lived experience of suburbia—they instead ask us to pick a side, the suburbs as ideal or corrupt.

In narrative humanism, it is not enough to conceive of others as complex entities, we also need strategies to determine whether our complex notions of otherness fabricate their identities in some way. Abject humanism simply acknowledges the struggle of integrating the abject into our more positive pictures of human otherness, of remaining hopeful when we must discuss cruelty, and the difficulty of readjustment when the easier road would simply be succumbing to a totalising unification of negative affect and verisimilitude, as in Lauren Berlant's self-diagnosed depressive realism, which she positions as opposed to humanistic sentimentality.[43]

Election and *Little Children* take us to the brink of a suburban abject before locating its redeeming features, and in so doing they provide strategies to achieve more realistically complex social simulations: it is important to check if our models for understanding domestic life include its most painful elements, but equally important to check if our models for depicting pain include the possibilities for its relief—this is the work of humanism. Self-interest exists alongside altruism, cruelty is mediated by the need for loving connection, domestic pleasures are not without their emotional pains; studying their relation leads us to a consequentialist ethic. In our attempts to understand the interrelation of lives that are so difficult to comprehend—the so-called dark triad personality traits or repellent behaviours, for example—we might, hopefully, emerge into more honest attempts to deal with our social ills.

[43] Moss-Wellington, 'Sentimentality' 2-3; Earl McCabe, 'Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant,' *Hypocrite Reader*, June 5, 2011, http://hypocritereader.com/5/depressive-realism

Wyatt Moss-Wellington received his PhD from The University of Sydney in 2017, with a thesis titled 'Humanist Narratology and the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy.' He has recently published work in journals including *Projections*, *Film International* and *Forum*.

.

Neoliberal and Social Democratic Versions of History, Class and Ideology in James Cameron's *Titanic* and Roy Baker's *A Night to Remember*

STEVE CRAMER[1]

In cultural terms, representations of the foundering of the *Titanic* have, in over a century since the event, assumed the proportions of a socio-economic myth. Within academic circles the disaster has widely been seen as paving the way for the onset of literary modernism, shattering the myth of Victorian/Edwardian technological progress and challenging the hierarchical grand narratives of a golden age of mechanical achievement. As Tim Bergfelder and Sarah Street observe:

> Since its fateful maiden voyage and sinking in April 1912, the Titanic has become a monumental icon of the 20th century, and perhaps more generally of the aspirations and anxieties of modernity. The name of the ship itself has entered vernacular language to become a byword of both human hubris and heroism, and of misguided trust in the securities of modern technology. The Titanic's sinking has been interpreted as signalling the end of the imperial, 20th century world order and as a premonition of World War.[2]

---

[1] I should like to thank the English Department of the University of Sydney for their award of a SLAM Research Associateship. Without this, the research for this essay could not have been completed. The staff could not have been more helpful in assisting me. I add warm regards in particular to Professor Peter Marks, who suggested the award as a means of completing my research.

[2] Tim Bergfelder & Sarah Street (eds), *The Titanic in Myth and Memory* (London: IB Tauris, 2004), p.1.

The loss of the *Titanic* is often seen as prefiguring the First World War as the final act in the slow demise of the technologised utilitarian vision of speed and mechanical efficiency which characterised world economic growth since the late 18th century. [3]

What also emerged from the disaster, and its subsequent inquiries, reportage and survivor accounts, was the inescapable issue of class. The hierarchical nature of the loss of life, with vastly disproportionate mortality among steerage passengers of the working or lower-middle classes, by comparison to the wealthy first class and comfortably-off second class passengers, has been inescapably inscribed upon many accounts of the loss of the liner. In the medium of film, however, little was made of this tragic disparity until a half-century after the *Titanic* sank.

Of the pre-1939 feature film versions of the disaster, the first, *Saved From the Titanic* (Etienne Arnaud, 1912), amounted to a short promotional film for its star Dorothy Gibson, who had survived the sinking a few weeks before the film was made. *Atlantic* (Ewald André Dupont, 1929) incorporated several references to the tragedy, but was subject to threats of legal action from the *Titanic*'s line, White Star,[4] which prevented too close a parallel to the historical events in question. Melodrama was substituted for historical accuracy.

The 1943 'Nazi' *Titanic* (Herbert Selpin, Werner Klingler) which saw the death of its original director, Selpin, in Gestapo custody before the film was completed, centred on the moral decrepitude of the upper-crust group of stock-market speculators occupying first class. These characters are condemned by a very Aryan German First Officer implausibly included in the crew of the *Titanic* as a last-minute replacement for a missing British officer. The experience of steerage passengers, who barely appear in the film, is neglected. In *Titanic* (1953, Jean Negulesco), the post-war US version of the story, we see the class narrative enacted mainly between first class passengers. At the centre of the story, which incorporates the subtextual moral and sexual anxieties of the American melodrama of this era, are an estranged couple (Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck) contesting custody of their children. The essential source of tension and marital breakdown between the two is class conflict, where the blue-blooded anglophile Webb's

---

[3] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp.25-26, p.66.

[4] Jeffrey Richards, *The Definitive Titanic Film: A Night to Remember* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), pp.12-13.

character can no longer tolerate Stanwyck's solidly middle class American manners. Class, here, is transformed into a kind of national conflict, speaking to affluent post-war America by making the central issue less about poverty than snobbery.

Of the many cinematic accounts of the vessel's loss, only Roy Baker's[5] *A Night to Remember* (1958) and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) seem to approach the issue in some depth. Each of these films claimed the right to do so by citing their historical fidelity (established through extensive research) to the events of the last voyage of the vessel and, in particular, to its last hours. On the face of it, these claims to historical accuracy are justified. Earlier versions of the story had made tokenistic claims to 'authenticity', with perhaps the strongest being the 1953 version, which in its opening titles claimed that 'all navigational details and conversations are taken verbatim from inquiries held by the US Congress and the British Board of Trade.'[6] But this was, given the general storyline, little more than tokenism.

By contrast, each of the two films under discussion here were insistent on their historical accuracy. As Jeffrey Richards comments of *A Night to Remember*:

> From the outset, the watchword of Baker and [producer William] MacQuitty was 'authenticity'. The poster promoting the film was to proclaim in capital letters 'As it really happened'. Unlike the previous sound film versions, this was not to be a romantic melodrama; it would be a docu-drama.[7]

MacQuitty added that even the film's chief source, Walter Lord's book,[8] from which the film took its title (a tome that remains an authoritative source on the disaster), did not remain entirely unchallenged. Further extensive research was required of Baker and the author of the screenplay, Eric Ambler, in pre-production.[9]

Cameron's film seems to escalate the stakes in the meticulousness of his recreation. He even reconstructs one of the few surviving photographs from Titanic, that taken by the Irish Priest, Father Frank Browne, of a young

---

[5] Later, Roy Ward Baker.
[6] Richards, op.cit., p.24.
[7] Ibid., p.31.
[8] Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, 2005 revised edition).
[9] Richards, op.cit. p.32.

boy playing with a spinning top on the first class boat deck of Titanic, [10]before inserting the entirely fictional Jack Dawson (Leonardo Di Caprio) into the sequence. This was doubtless a wink to any amateur *Titanic* historians, the so-called 'titaniacs', watching the film. Cameron would, indeed, endlessly assert his fidelity to the events of the disaster both before and after the release of the film:

> I made it a sacred goal of the production, a goal that came to be shared by everyone involved, to honor the facts without compromise...I wanted to be able to say to an audience, without the slightest pang of guilt: This is real. This is what happened. Exactly like this. If you went back in a time machine and stood on the deck, this is what you would have seen.'[11]

This, of course, raises the vexed question what might be meant by historical fidelity, and how it is enacted in film. There is certainly an element of Fredric Jameson's 'nostalgia for the present' in Cameron's film, while Baker's might equally be seen to conjure Walter Benjamin's observation that 'history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.'[12]

Cameron, having made his declaration of historical accuracy, rows back a little with his subsequent concession:

> Where the facts are clear we have been absolutely rigorous in restaging events. Where they are unclear, I have made my own choices, a few of which may be controversial to students of Titanic history. Though I may not always have made a traditional interpretation, I can assure the reader and viewer that these are conscious and well-informed decisions and not casual Hollywood mistakes. [13]

This somewhat self-conscious caveat is no doubt part of Cameron's game with the multitude of titaniacs, of recreating, in very precise detail, the artefacts and architecture of the original ship. This tactic facilitates not so

---

[10] Richard Howells, 'One Hundred Years of the Titanic on Film,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 32, No. 1, March 2012, 73.
[11] Ibid., p.74.
[12] Walter Benjamin*, Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007, revised edition), p.261.
[13] Howells, op.cit., p.74.

much a usurping of the 'traditional interpretation', as the imposing of an unconsciously ideological one. Cameron's very sincere interest in the disaster is attested to by his own extensive research, first in fact inspired by *A Night to Remember*, and demonstrated by his personal participation in submersible dives to the wreck[14] which would furnish the first underwater shots of the ship in his film.[15] But he, like Baker before him, tells us more about his own time than about the Spring of 1912.

Baker's film speaks resoundingly of the post-Second World War social democratic consensus within the United Kingdom, where egalitarianism, social responsibility and equality were watchwords for a new society. Under Labour and Conservative governments alike, pre-Thatcher Britain saw higher and lower incomes moving slowly closer together and the new-found disposable income of the poor from the 1950s onwards, making significant changes to lifestyles. Underpinned by Keynesian economic consensus, conditions for both wage earners and welfare recipients improved, bringing, for all the flaws of post-war social democracy, a greater sense of inclusion and a greater emphasis on social responsibility.

Aesthetically, Cameron's film declares a certain attitude to history as something reclaimed for a contemporary consumer audience. In her analysis of the politics of *Titanic*, Alexandra Kellner comments:

> *Titanic*, emerging as it did under the conditions of full-blown, even late-stage postmodernism, also frames its epic story in the generic framework of the historical romance. The difference is the enthusiastic nostalgia *o*f *Titanic*'s generic attachment—nostalgia symptomatic of a strong and significant current in postmodern cultural production. The ease with which *Titanic* presented history, via nostalgia as an eminently consumable commodity, goes a long way to explaining its popularity.[16]

The particular flavour of the film's imagery, piling luxury upon luxury, culminates in the final wasteful gesture of the old Rose Dewitt Bukater (Gloria Stuart) dropping the world's most valuable gem, 'The Heart of the Ocean', off the modern research ship at the film's climax. 'Luxury', Kellner

---

[14] James Clarke, *The Cinema of James Cameron* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p.31.
[15] James S Hurley, 'Titanic Allegories: The Blockbuster as Art Film,' *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture & Politics*, Vol 14, No 1, 2001, 110-11.
[16] Alexandra Kellner, *James Cameron* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.32.

adds, 'is nothing if not about waste.'[17] Rose's gesture perhaps indicates the commodity fetishism at the centre of the film. James Hurley makes the link here to the 'heritage' film, seeing in *Titanic* the last word of the cycle of Merchant Ivory films[18] which through the 1980s and 90s so successfully captured the Thatcherite ethos of 'Victorian values' through the filter of nostalgia.

Given all this, it is surprising that some newspaper critics, perhaps inflamed by Cameron's claim that his film fell 'just short of Marxist dogma',[19] condemned the film in such phrases as 'an exercise in class hatred' and 'leftist propaganda.'[20] Even academic criticism seems to have fallen for Cameron's claim, with James Kendrick somewhat bowdlerising Marx in order to make his case .[21] David Lubin admits the populist and somewhat rudimentary nature of Cameron's politics, but defends these as sincere and effective, in a more extravagant moment comparing the film's ideological stance to that of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*.[22]

At this point, Slavoj Zizek's interpretation of Cameron's film seems relevant, addressing as it does interconnected issues of class and gender. Zizek notes that:

> while Winslet is safely floating on a large piece of wood; aware that she is losing him, she cries: 'I'll never let you go!', all the while pushing him away with her hands — why? Because he has served his purpose. For, beneath the love story, *Titanic* tells another tale, that of a spoiled high-society girl in an identity crisis: she is confused, does not know what to do with herself, and, much more than her lover, Di Caprio, is a kind of 'vanishing mediator' whose function is to restore her sense of identity and purpose in life, her self-image (quite literally, also: he sketches her image); once his job is done, he can disappear. This is why his last words, before he disappears into the freezing North Atlantic, are not the words of a departing lover, but, rather, the last message of a preacher, telling her how to lead her life, to be

---

[17] Ibid., p34.
[18] Hurley, op.cit., 95.
[19] Ibid., 101
[20] Ibid.
[21] James Kendrick, 'Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Fall 1999, Vol 27, No 3, 36-44.
[22] David M Lubin, *Titanic* (London: BFI, Palgrave, 1999), pp.49-50.

> honest and faithful to herself, and so on and so forth. What this means is that Cameron's superficial Hollywood Marxism (his all too obvious privileging of the lower classes and caricatural depiction of the cruel egotism and opportunism of the rich) should not deceive us: beneath this sympathy for the poor, there is another narrative, the profoundly reactionary myth, first fully deployed by Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, of a young rich kid in crisis whose vitality is restored by a brief intimate contact with the full-blooded life of the poor. What lurks behind the compassion for the poor is their vampiric exploitation.[23]

In a more specific context, neoliberalism at its apotheosis of the 1990s is manifested in Cameron's film. With the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama had declared (as might be apparent today, prematurely) the end of history, with liberal democracy on the verge of exercising a worldwide ideological monopoly. The seeming logic of this position led to an embracing of the neoliberal consensus in most western cultures as a ready explanation of the exhaustion of the left, rather than an historical moment fraught with its own dialectical paradoxes. The struggles and division over such issues as market deregulation, and rollbacks in the welfare state that had occurred throughout the 1980s ended with such parties of the nominal left as Clinton's Democrats and Blair's Labour Party embracing what was, without irony, called the free market. This logic elevated multinational corporations to leaders in globalised capitalism, with politicians and nation states reduced to handmaidens in facilitating this business-based model of expansion as the only practical means of taking advantage of new technologies.

These developments advanced an increasingly Hayekian model of the self-interested individualist as somehow representing the organic paradigm of humankind. The hegemonic growth of this belief is attested to by the broader acceptance of a rigid and stratified social hierarchy, where social mobility came almost entirely to a halt, but the promotion of meritocratic myth to compensate its loss was pushed harder than ever. In the US and UK, poverty became endemic, while the notion of a particular and mythic 'right kind' of poor was promoted; those with sufficient entrepreneurial drive could still 'make it', while the qualities of 'decision makers' were contrasted with a supposed passivity which rendered most of the working class deserving of their perilous existence.

---

[23] Slavoj Zizek, *Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), p.58.

In *Titanic*, Jack Dawson becomes the embodiment of this myth of the ideologically appropriate poor. We are introduced to the character in an act of colossal risk-taking entrepeneurship, gambling everything that he and his Italian travelling companion Fabrizio (Danny Nucci) have on a hand of cards to win his passage on the *Titanic*. Interestingly, this kind of gambling is explicitly condemned in *A Night to Remember*.[24] Jack's cross-class ambitions are manifested when he first sees the young Rose (Kate Winslet), gazing at her longingly from the steerage recreation area as she appears at the rail of First-Class above. His companion Tommy Ryan (Jason Barry) catches the gaze, and comments 'Forget it boyo, you'd as like have angels fly out of yer arse as get next to the likes o' her.' (p.60.)[25] Ryan, incidentally, is introduced as '*a scowling young Irish immigrant*' in Cameron's script, and his first remark, 'That's typical, first class dogs come down here to take a shit,' (pp59-60) marks him out for the grim fate that awaits him. Those who scowl at the class structure are not the right kind of poor in Cameron's universe.

Jack, by contrast, is active in determining his fate. He shows an implausible level of social mobility in his travelling the world as an impoverished orphan, and an unlikely level of ability as an artist, impressing the art-educated Rose with his drawings, produced entirely without education or training. Perhaps most important of all, he is class-blind. Rose, after she has been saved from plunging over the stern of the ship by Jack, explains her dilemma to him, rounding off with:

> *Rose*: Look, I know what you're thinking! Poor little rich girl. What does she know about misery?
> *Jack*: That's not what I was thinking. What I was thinking was … what could have happened to hurt this girl so much she thought she had no way out. (pp.44-45.)

Jack further demonstrates his classless vision of the world when, in a borrowed tuxedo, he appears at dinner among the first class passengers, and impresses all but Rose's monstrous snobbish mother (Frances Fisher) with his relaxed and unpretentious chat. He comes across here as some distant

---

[24] In one scene Lightoller spots a professional gambler fleecing first class passengers at poker in the smoking saloon, and sternly warns the head waiter to discreetly intervene.

[25] James Cameron, *Titanic.* All page references are to the PDF version available online at Daily Script: http://www.dailyscript.com/movie_n-z.html.

relative of Barbara Stanwyck's Julia Sturgess in Negulesco's 1953 version. Yet there is far more evidence for a classless, socially mobile vision of America (however mythic the notion was) at that time than in 1997. Jack's characterisation is also, as Kristen Whissel has pointed out, accompanied by recurrent imagery of verticality and upward trajectory.[26]

Attitudes to class in *A Night to Remember* could hardly be more different. Class there is presented as an intractable barrier to both individual and collective progress. Our introduction to Kenneth More's First Officer Lightoller occurs on a railway carriage where he will be joining the *Titanic*. His first words in the film, immediately after a short prologue reconstructing the launch of the ship, along with the credits, are read aloud from a newspaper advertisement to his wife (Jane Downs). This attracts the attention of an upper class couple (Julian Somers, Ann Lancaster), who share their compartment:

> *Lightholler*: Listen to this Sylvia: 'The new White Star liner RMS *Titanic* is the largest vessel in the world. It is not only in its size, but the luxuriousness of its appointments that *Titanic* takes first place among the big steamers of the world. By the provision of Vinolia Otto toilet soap for her first class passengers, the *Titanic* also leads in offering a higher standard of toilet luxury and comfort at sea.'
> *Sylvia*: Let me see!
> *Lightholler*: For the first class passengers mind you, the rest don't wash, of course.
> *[Mrs Bull indignantly nudges her spouse.]*
> *Mr Bull*: Excuse me sir, but are you a foreigner?
> *Lightholler*: Eh?
> *Mr Bull*: Or a radical perhaps? I ask because my wife and I find your sneering remarks in bad taste.
> *Lightholler*: What's that?
> *Mr Bull*: Let those who wish to belittle their country's achievements do so in private. Every Britisher is proud of the unsinkable *Titanic*.[27]

---

[26] Kristen Whissel, 'Tales of Upward Mobility The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects,' *Film Quarterly* , Vol. 59, No. 4 (Summer 2006), 23-34.
[27] All quotations from *A Night to Remember* are transcribed verbatim from the Criterion Collection DVD, the most complete version of the film commonly available.

Much of the thematic content of the film is encapsulated in this interchange. Far from the endless focus on opulence and luxury of Cameron's film, the social democratic suspicion of ostentatious wealth in a situation of inequality is raised in the film's earliest dialogue. The class-bound culture, which sees any notion of class equality as radicalism, was a recent enough memory to be recognisable to a contemporary audience, while the trumpeting of national achievement ill-accorded with post-Suez Britain.

The scene is followed by the departure of an aristocratic couple from their family seat. At the gate of their home their carriage passes an assembled group of children who wave an enthusiastic goodbye. 'Workhouse kids,' remarks a servant, explaining that they are hoping for Christmas charity. There follows shortly a scene in which a group of Irish agricultural labourers prepare for their journey to the *Titanic*'s steerage accommodation. Throughout, the film divides its time very evenly between the classes. In contrast to the poor of Cameron's *Titanic*, whose very occasional appearance merely acts to frame Rose's romance with Jack, working people in *A Night To Remember* are given separate storylines that intertwine with those of the wealthier passengers at the moment of catastrophe. The scene in which, close to this finale, a group of steerage passengers, attempting to escape from their entrapment below decks, burst inadvertently into the first class dining room cogently makes its point almost entirely without dialogue; as the sudden sight of the room, the characters freeze in a tableaux of intimidation and fear that speaks more articulately of the hegemonic muscle of the British class system than the single, terrified whisper of a woman among them: 'First Class.'

A Night to Remember never glamorises, as Cameron does, the effect of the lack of space and Spartan accommodation for the steerage passengers. It represents the space, as Richards points out, in the style of Italian neorealism.[28] In Baker's film, the scene of singing and dancing among the steerage passengers, which Cameron will imitate later, is a slightly desperate, mend-and-make-do affair, fraught with ethnic conflict and tension, with an attempt by an Irish passenger to flirt with an Eastern European girl creating ill spirit. Cameron's version, almost an up-market tribute to its forerunner, creates a joyous celebration in which Rose shows off her ballet skills to suitably impressed working people. The later film implies a certain contentedness with their lot among the poor, which, as

[28] Richards, op.cit., pp.38-39.

Kellner puts it, 'chillingly implies that the poor have an almost genetic will to poverty.' [29]

The ethnic makeup of the steerage passengers of the *Titanic* is, in *A Night to Remember*, exemplified at the moment of the ship's final plunge into the Atlantic through a sequence in which prayers are said by the poor in a bewildering series of languages, the camera cutting from face to face, illustrating the variety of peoples who make up steerage, and the capacity of the catastrophe to affect all in the same manner. *Titanic* scholarship contains many contemporary accounts of the sinking drawn from both the American and British enquiries and newspapers, which would shock any modern reader. From the endless casual references to 'dagoes' (usually prefixed with 'cowardly') to the very frequent jibes at 'Chinamen', contemporary documentation is flooded with repulsive terms. The soon to be notorious J. Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star line, complained, in *The Daily Sketch*, that after his own lifeboat was launched 'it was discovered that there were four Chinamen concealed under the thwarts at the bottom of the boat.' [30] That these were in fact two Lebanese men[31] and (probably) two from the Philippines[32] did not to save them from all-encompassing Orientalism. The survival of Rose in Cameron's film, is of course secured by a floating door, but in the historical event, the person rescued from this object was a Japanese man, Masabumi Hosono. As Fifth Officer Lowe, skippering a rescue boat into the wreck site passed Hosono floating on the door, he was quoted by a passenger as remarking 'there's others better worth saving than a Jap'[33] and was only persuaded to return to him after passing his near-dead body.

Cameron deals with the wide mix of ethnicities aboard the *Titanic* by simply eliminating most of them from his story. Although 'third class passengers boarding at Cherbourg were Syrian, Croatian, Armenian and other Middle Eastern nationals,'[34] none of this mix is evident in *Titanic*. Nor are any of its Asian passengers. A particularly sharp-eyed viewer might spot

---

[29] Kellner, op.cit., p.33.
[30] Dave Bryceson, *The Titanic Disaster as Reported in the British National Press April-July 1912* (London: Norton, 1997), p.106.
[31] Frances Wilson, *How to Survive the Titanic: or The Sinking of J Bruce Ismay* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p.8.
[32] Tim Maltin (ed), *Titanic: First Accounts* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.205.
[33] Jack Winocour (Ed), *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors* (Dover: New York, 1960), p.195.
[34] John P Eaton & Charles A Haas, *Titanic: Destination Disaster* (New York: Norton, 1987), p.87.

a tall man in a rather composite Eastern European costume in the background of two shots in the below decks party sequence, but beyond this, emigrants to America are portrayed as exclusively Irish, Italian or Scandinavian. For some viewers of the film, this narrow mix reassuringly fulfils the myth of contemporary bourgeois America, incorporating the most familiar elements of the racial makeup of the American Dream. Old Rose, recollecting the voyage, covers another aspect of American racial composition: 'It was the ship of dreams … to everyone else. To me it was a slave ship, taking me to America in chains.' (p20) Precisely how African-American audiences responded to this conceit is yet to be recorded. What is clear, though, it that Rose's new-found poverty after the disaster has been quickly replaced with upward mobility. The series of photographs and mementoes in Old Rose's cabin that the camera tracks through late in the film show her on safaris, as a pioneering aviator and a world traveller. These confirm, as does her comfortable home early in the film, a life of unusual affluence for its era, achieved by means unknown, given that she has spent her career as an actress whose name no one remembers.

If there is a superficial attitude to class in the film, so too, its pretensions to gender equality seem facile. While Cameron makes it easy to sympathise with Rose, beset as she is by a rapacious and controlling mother and a cardboard cut-out villain of a fiancé (Billy Zane), she requires the appearance of Jack in her life to rebel against her restraints. *Titanic*, of course, is purely Rose's story, built as it is around the metanarrational frame of century-old Rose's voice-over recollections of her shipboard romance, but her liberation from the oppressions of patriarchy (most memorably symbolised by her being painfully strapped into a girdle by her mother) comes in the shape of her 'rescue' by a man: 'I've never spoken of him until now, not to anyone (*to Lizzie*) not even your grandfather. A woman's heart is a deep ocean of secrets. But now you all know that there was a man named Jack Dawson, and that he saved me, in every way that a person can be saved.' (p151) Rose's 'deep ocean of secrets' renders her radically other, the exotic subaltern in her own story.

Baker's film, although it contains the stolid 'family values' characteristic of mainstream British films of the 1950s, finds time to ironise the traditional spousal relationship when, as Liz Lucas (Honor Blackman) refuses to enter a lifeboat with her three children unless her husband (John Merivale) accompanies her, he responds 'My dear, I never expected to ask you to obey me.' In a marriage which has been demonstrated as one of equals

thus far, this quiet undermining of the traditional marriage vows seems ahead of its time.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two films can be illustrated by what Hughes-Warrington cites as Jameson's notion of the 'holes' or 'perforations' in history films, 'leaving us to navigate through gaps and to work at meaning making.'[35] In this sense, both of our films are historical, although Cameron's moments where 'I have made my own choices' seem constantly to cohere around a particular view of the individual as atomised, alienated and self-interested, wherever there seems to be ambivalence in the historical accounts, and at times where there is none. Jameson himself provides a picture of this alienated state within capitalism in *The Political Unconscious*:

> The concept of reification which has been developed in these pages conveys the historical situation in which the emergence of the ego or centered subject can be understood: the dissolution of the older organic or hierarchical social groups, the universal commodification of the labor-power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the market, the anomie of these now 'free' and isolated individual subjects to which the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a compensation.[36]

Thus, in *Titanic*, all opportunities are taken to represent the characters as essentially self- interested, even where the director seems to be stretching the historical records beyond credibility. Perhaps this is most obviously illustrated by his representation of First Officer Murdoch (Ewan Stewart) who is seen to shoot himself with his revolver as disorder begins to break out on the sinking ship. Beyond a few sensationalised newspaper accounts in the days after the sinking, there is little credible evidence of this among witness accounts. Lawrence Beesley, the schoolteacher and second class passenger who was close to Murdoch in the last moments of the ship's life, and who subsequently produced perhaps the most highly regarded and level headed witness account of the tragedy, was especially indignant about these early versions of events.[37] Cameron was required to formally apologise to

[35] Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed), *The History of Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.4.
[36] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell, 1981), pp.153-54.
[37] Winocour, op.cit., p.105.

the Murdoch family for this fanciful representation—the first of a flurry of complaints made against the historical accuracy of the film, particularly from the families of survivors.[38]

A more significant character infused with Cameron's world view is White Star Line Chairman J Bruce Ismay, played with ebullient villainy by Jonathan Hyde as a boastful, egocentric coward. The scene in which, half dictator and half Mephistopheles, he bullies and cajoles Captain Smith (Bernard Hill) to increase the speed of the *Titanic*, is characteristic:

> *Ismay*: So you've not lit the last four boilers then?
> *Smith*: No, but we're making excellent time.
> *Ismay*: *[Impatiently]* Captain, the press knows the size of *Titanic*, let them marvel at her speed, too. We must give them something new to print. And the maiden voyage of *Titanic must make headlines!*
> *Smith*: I prefer not to push the engines until they've been properly run in.
> *Ismay*: Of course I leave it to your good offices to decide what's best,[39] but what a glorious end to your last crossing if we were to get to New York on Tuesday night and surprise them all. (*Ismay slams his hand down on the table*) Retire with a bang, eh EJ?
> *[A beat. Then Smith nods stiffly.]* (pp.48-49.)

What is important about this, and other interchanges about the causes of the disaster throughout *Titanic*, is that it places the blame squarely upon individuals and the choices that they make. In creating a villain secondary only to Rose's fiancé Cal and his odious manservant (David Warner), Cameron shifts responsibility from the systemic structures that prevailed at the time to free individuals making poor decisions, be they Ismay's quest for publicity or Smith's personal weakness in not standing up to him.

The truth about the disaster, and the speed of the *Titanic* in moving through the ice field, is far more disturbing. What emerged from testimony to both the US and British tribunals was that despite international regulations travelling at, or close to, full speed at night through ice was standard practice

---

[38] Robert von Dassanowsky, 'A Mountain of a Ship: Locating the Bergfilm in James Cameron's Titanic', *Cinema Journal* , Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), 21, 33-34.
[39]

across the industry, where the larger and more prosperous lines were concerned. Only ships such as the much maligned nearby vessel *Californian*, of the low-budget, slower and less comfortable Leyland Line, which stopped and floated with the ice, observed the convention because, as Captain Lord (Russell Napier) in *A Night to Remember* puts it: 'Well, our passengers aren't in any hurry. They wouldn't be with us if they were.'

Among the prestige passenger lines such as Hamburg-America, Cunard and White Star, the commercial advantage given by speed in crossing the Atlantic was far too important to be hamstrung by safety regulations.[40] At the British inquiry, 11 captains of the larger lines attested to this practice as commonly observed, leading the inquiry chairman Lord Mersey to exonerate Captain Smith.[41] The *Titanic* was not attempting to break the speed record for an Atlantic crossing because the liner's top speed, although fast by most standards, was inferior to that of several competing liners. So too, the idea, broached in Cameron's version of Ismay, that the *Titanic* was attempting to arrive earlier than scheduled is apocryphal, as no berth would have been available, and this would this would, in any case, have occasioned inconvenience to passengers' transport arrangements.

If Cameron applies the simplistic moralism of Hollywood to Ismay, this character fares only a little better in Baker's film. There, Frank Lawton's Ismay is a rather socially awkward, slightly officious little man (Ismay in fact was quite tall) who interferes with the crew only in so far as his presence puts all who encounter him ill at ease. If Baker falls into the error of the race to New York theory (this time blaming Smith), his picture of Ismay has more of a ring of truth. Wilson's biography of Ismay[42] reconstructs an essentially shy man, forced into the limelight by his inheritance of White Star Line from his ruthless father, a self-made man. Equally uncomfortable among his higher-born aristocratic circle of business acquaintances (who regarded him as an insufferable *nouveau riche*) and more ordinary people, the socially brittle Ismay's famous reclusiveness after the tragedy, was not, in fact, very different from his life beforehand. Both films represent the incident (widely reported in *Titanic* scholarship) where Ismay attempts to assist in the lowering of lifeboats, and is scalded for impeding the professionals engaged in the job. The moment at which Ismay steps into a lifeboat to save his life over others aboard is also included by both films. Cameron turns this into a simple act of cowardice, again emphasising individual responsibility.

[40] Richard Davenport-Hines, *Titanic Lives* (London: Harper, 2012), p.330.
[41] Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: Viking, 1986), p.205.
[42] Frances Wilson, op.cit.

Baker's attitude was more complex, remarking of Frank Lawton's performance:

> He got the character—the panic, the shame and the guilt […] but both Lawton and I felt that he knew that he had to go back and face the music. I couldn't believe that a man in his position with his responsibility would not have known that and would want to face his responsibility.[43]

The sense that capitalism needed to be made responsible for its excesses, and subjected to interrogation at it its failures, pervades the post-Depression ideological matrix of *A Night to Remember*, with every act having both an individual and corporate dimension.

Cameron's world of isolated and atomised individuals, each engaged in self-interested pursuit of empowerment, is, where he echoes scenes from *A Night to Remember*, always apparent. In Baker's film, there is a memorable incident where an elderly waiter finds a child wandering alone and in tears at the loss of his parents amidst the crowds thronging the decks. He lifts up the child and comforts him. Later, he is seen to make a final dying effort to bring the child to Lightoller's upturned lifeboat. In the unsentimental documentary style of the film, the child does not survive and is gently returned to the sea. The parallel incident in *Titanic* sees Cal, having failed to bribe an officer for a place in one boat, pick up a stray and distressed child in order to pose as its parent and save himself, forgetting the child as he takes his seat in the boat. (pp129-30)

It is, though, perhaps the events in Lifeboat 6, incorporated into both films, that best illustrates this disparity of ideological subtext. This is the boat in which the 'Unsinkable Molly Brown' departed the *Titanic*. The extensive witness testimony which exists on this boat was used to quite different purposes in the two accounts examined here. In *Titanic* Kathy Bates' plain speaking middle class Molly, one of the 'good rich' in Cameron's version, confronts seaman Hitchins (Paul Brightwell) about returning to the wreck site to pick up survivors:

> *Molly*: Come on girls, grab your oars. Let's go *[nobody moves]*. Well, come on!

---

[43] Richards, op.cit., p.79.

> *[The women won't meet her eyes. They huddle into their ermine wraps.]*
> *Molly*: I don't understand a one of you. What's the matter with you? It's your men back there! We got plenty a' room for more.
> *Hitchins*: If you don't shut that hole in yer face there'll be one less in this boat. (p.142.)

Ultimately, Molly, looks down in shame as those in the water cry for help, illustrating Cameron's emphasis on self-preservation as the only organic human response to the crisis. In the cinematic version of the film, the scene is longer, but is preserved in the 'extras' section of the video package. Here, there is added a sequence where Captain Smith, armed with a megaphone, calls on the boat to return, but is ignored by those on boat 6. There was, in fact, a reported 'voice from a megaphone' (whether or not this was Smith is unknown) which ordered a boat to stay close to the ship for survivors shortly before it sank, but it addressed Boat 2, under 4th officer Boxhall. This boat stayed close to the *Titanic* until suction forced it away from the ship very shortly before its final plunge.[44] This hazard was well-known, and might have been expected to be significant, for no ship the size of the *Titanic* had ever foundered before. So, too, large crowds of survivors around a boat had been known to sink boats in shipwreck.

In Baker's film, the same incident is central, but here Molly (Tucker McGuire) and Hitchins (uncredited) have a similar interchange as above, to quite different effect:

> *Molly*: Well, what the hell are we waiting for? Those people are drowning. This boat isn't full, we can go and pick some of them up.
> *Hitchins*: Are you mad? We get among that lot and they'll swamp the boat—they'll capsize us.
> *Molly*: We can't just sit here and do nothing. Come on girls, row!
> *Hitchins*: I give the orders round here.
> *Mal Passenger*: Don't you know you're speaking to a lady?
> *Hitchins*: I know who I'm speaking to and I'm in command of this boat.
> *Molly*: You get fresh with me son and I'll throw you overboard. Now come on, row!
> *[they all do so]*

---

[44] Maltin, op.cit., p.127.

> *Hitchins*: Now look here, I tell you you'll drown the lot of us …
> *Molly*: Bah!

Here, all but one in the boat are in favour of the rescue, and the self-centred dissenter is threatened with being thrown overboard. Baker's film represents the precise opposite in human behaviour, as might be expected in an era where shared values involved the sacrifice of individual comfort for the greater good. The lack of lifeboats was a major issue in the investigations of the tragedy, a problem that had been reluctantly addressed after a great public outcry in 1894. The British Board of Trade, responsible for shipping safety for the mercantile marine of the nation, as it began to engage with the issue, was flooded by correspondence from the (at that time) immensely powerful multinational shipping corporations on the question of lifeboats. Seeking to avoid the extra expense of more lifeboats, these companies deployed a language of striking modernity: overregulation would lead to jobs being shifted overseas, the prosperity of the nation threatened, and a loss of talent to other nations less hamstrung by red tape were the familiar rejoinders. The Board of Trade, acting on the word of advisory bodies stuffed with employees of the shipping lines, introduced regulations so lax that they required no change in behaviour, and no change of any substance to numbers of lifeboats.[45] That the *Titanic*'s lifeboat provision was no different than the standard is illustrated by the fact that the vessel fared well against her major competitors in terms of the number of places provided on the boats.[46] Later calls to change the regulations fell upon the deaf ears of Sir Alfred Chalmers, who, Lord explains, 'was, in short, an owner's dream: a regulator who didn't believe in regulations.' [47]

The other great mystery of the *Titanic*, the failure of the marconigram ice warnings to have any impact on the behaviour of the crew, might also be explained by its corporate governance. The two radio officers, Phillips and Bride were not employees of the White Star Line, but of the Marconi Corporation. They were paid poorly, receiving piece work fees for the number of private marconigrams they sent, and remained unpaid for safety messages and other ship's business.[48] Thus of 18[49] ice warnings received

---

[45] Lord (1986), op.cit., pp.83-91.
[46] Davenport-Hines, op.cit., p.71.
[47] Lord (1986), op.cit., p.201.
[48] Davenport-Hines, op.cit., p.262.
[49] Frances Wilson, op.cit., p.248.

over the *Titanic*'s last weekend, only one, or at best two,[50] arrived on the ship's bridge. Fraternal greetings or stock market transactions were of greater importance, and more than two safety messages a day would lead to White Star being charged for the service by Marconi. The last ice warning received by the *Titanic*, less than a half hour before its collision with ice, came from the nearby *Californian*. It was sharply rebuked by Phillips, who snapped back that he was working Cape Race, the relay station for private messages. Evans, the lone radio man on the *Californian*, switched off his apparatus and took to his bed, missing the subsequent distress signals from the *Titanic*.

I detail this action because much of it is recreated in *A Night to Remember*. The two radio men, utterly mired in the vast volume of private traffic brought up to them from the Purser's office, are seen to miss an ice message through overwork. Much of the subsequent drama occurs in Phillips' (Kenneth Griffith) and Bride's (David McCallum) desperate correspondence with other ships, particularly the *Carpathia*, steaming at full speed to the rescue, but too late. Indeed, the film switches its focus frequently, and for substantial periods between the *Carpathia* and the *Californian*. The latter is tragically ignorant of the *Titanic*'s plight, her watch interpreting the distress rockets of the liner as company signals. As Evans sleeps on, and the *Titanic* sends distress signals, a junior officer enters his cabin to practice with the wireless equipment, then thinks better of it, fearing awaking his colleague. In Baker's film, the possibility of rescue becomes the driving force of the narrative. So too, the film clearly signals the regulatory failures that lead to the disaster. Thus, when Captain Smith breaks the news to Ismay that the *Titanic* will sink, he adds dryly: 'I don't think the Board of Trade regulations visualised this situation, do you?'

It is worth contrasting Cameron's version of the catastrophe, where the Marconi apparatus plays a minimal role, and we see no response from other ships until the *Carpathia*'s arrival after the sinking. In two short scenes, Smith visits Bride (Craig Kelly) and Phillips (Gregory Cooke) in the transmission room to order distress signals, (p95) and then is visited by Bride on the bridge and told that the *Carpathia* 'is the only one close.'(p98) This was not strictly true, and while Smith remarks upon the even nearer *Californian*, as little is made of the imminence of possible rescue as can be

---

[50] There is some debate about this among Titanic historians, centred around whether the ice warning Smith handed to Ismay at lunch on Titanic's last day and received back at dinner was the same warning seen by some witnesses on the bridge later. As only Smith could know, there is no possibility of resolution.

called historically accurate. In Cameron's world, we are ultimately on our own.

In the year of *Titanic*'s release, the widely-rumoured cause of the ship becoming holed seemed to be confirmed. In the years after the discovery of the wreck in two halves on the seabed in 1985, the large number of broken rivets scattered across the wreck site had been gathered by submersibles and analysed. In this time, the case for corporate manslaughter against White Star Line was confirmed in the minds of most *Titanic* historians. The rivets were analysed by metallurgists, and confirmed as an inferior form of iron containing slag, which greatly weakened the riveting.[51] The original *Titanic* design required Grade 4 Iron for its rivets, but these were quietly altered to Grade 3 as a probable economy measure as the vessel was built. It is now widely believed that on collision with the ice, the steel of the *Titanic* was not pierced in what was a mere glancing collision, but rather, that the exterior steel plating of the ship was prised apart at its fragile, substandard riveting. In the same year as the release of *Titanic*, the documentary *Titanic: Anatomy of a Disaster* (Stephen Burns, 1997) brought widespread publicity to the research over the preceding years. It seems unlikely that Cameron, who had been close to the Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institute since he began researching *The Abyss* (1989)[52] , would have been unaware of this research, but beyond a possible reference to it when Andrews ruefully quips that he knows 'all three million' (p58) of the rivets on the *Titanic*, nothing in Cameron's film emerges on the subject.

Perhaps something of Cameron's 'private good, public bad' neoliberal economics emerge here. While the original discovery of the wreck by Dr Robert Ballard's party was almost exclusively funded by public finance, from the French government to the National Science Foundation and the US Navy,[53] Cameron's fictional expedition under the buccaneering free enterprise advocate Brock Lovett (Bill Paxton) is quite different. His anxiety to please the private financiers funding the project leads to him flying Old Rose to his ship, and discovering the 'truth' of the *Titanic*'s sinking. Ultimately, the simplistic logic of the evil rich in Cameron's film (though some, such as J.J. Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim and Molly Brown, are quite benign) becomes a spectacle which obfuscates the true economic causes of the disaster. For the historical sinking is difficult to see as anything but

---

[51] Dan Deitz, 'How Did the Titanic Sink?' *Mechanical Engineering*, Vol 120, No 8, August 1998, 54-58.
[52] Clarke, op.cit., p.116.
[53] Lord (1986), op.cit., p.238.

market failure on multiple levels. As with Hollywood films about corrupt, racist and sexually abusive sheriffs in backwater towns that are less about the legislative failures of the state than lawmen born evil, much is done to avoid the subject of systemic failure.

Both *Titanic* and *A Night to Remember* made substantial claims to historical truth, yet each is coloured by the ideological hegemonies of their periods. Tellingly, *Titanic* set records in both cost and profit, its Celine Dion theme song a meticulously integrated marketing tool[54] to a franchise operation. It has been praised for its capacity to meld several disparate genres, Steve Neale singling the film out as showing a capacity to 'abolish the hitherto established hierarchy between the contemporary blockbuster's romance and action/disaster plots.'[55] It is certainly a film that succeeds on its own terms. Yet nothing changes in the film beyond Rose's discovery of middle-class aspiration, replacing Cal's more 'European' view of he and Rose as 'royalty'.(p39) There is little sense of the continuity of history itself being disrupted.

A Night to Remember stands in stark contrast, aggregating personal and political history to its sense of tragedy. It was broadly well received among British audiences and critics, but though it was reported 'in the money' in the British trade press, it did not rank among the top takers of its year.[56] In the key market of the USA, it was a relative failure for both critics and audiences.[57] Yet its greater appreciation of historical forces reflects Alain Badiou's observation that, 'a disaster, in philosophical thought, is in the making whenever philosophy presents itself as being not a seizing of truths but a situation of truth.'[58] The sense, built since the early scene on the train to the *Titanic*, of a society reliant upon absolute philosophical, ideological and economic conviction, is built into the film by the continual assertions of the 'progress' that the *Titanic* represents. The sense of the void beyond this philosophy, of Badiou's assertion that 'every real disaster, particularly historical ones, contains a philosopheme that knots together ecstasy, sacredness and terror'[59] is explored in the latter moments of *A Night to*

---

[54] Jeff Smith, 'Selling My Heart', in Hughes Warrington, op.cit., pp.272-86.
[55] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.218.
[56] James Chapman, *National Identity and British Historical Film* (London: IB Taurus, 2005), p.184.
[57] Ibid., p.190.
[58] Alain Badiou, *Condition*s (London: Continuum, 2008), p.15.
[59] Ibid., p.17.

Remember. Lightoller, ice clinging to his face as he shivers in a lifeboat with Colonel Gracie (James Dyrenforth), encapsulates the sense of philosophical freefall the disaster brought about:

> *Lightholler*: If we'd carried enough lifeboats for the size of the ship instead of enough to meet the regulations things would've been different again, wouldn't they?
> *Gracie*: Maybe. But you have nothing to reproach yourself with, you've done all any man could and more. You're not *[pause]* I was going to say, you're not God, Mister Lightoller.
> *Lightholler*: No seaman ever thinks he is. I've been at sea since I was a boy, I've been in sail, I've even been shipwrecked before. I know what the sea can do … *but this is different*!
> *Gracie*: Because we hit an iceberg?
> *Lightholler*: No. Because we were so sure. Because even though it's happened, it's still unbelievable. I don't think I'll ever feel sure again … about anything.

Perhaps the constant quest for what William McQuitty called 'authenticity', is brought out in *A Night to Remember*, less through its attention to historical detail (though this, by itself, is admirable) than by its encapsulation of this sense of philosophical and ideological catastrophe. The implication that not only Lightoller, but all who had invested in the certainties of this historical moment are changed by the tragedy is pervasive in the film. *A Night to Remember* offers no simplistic redemption at its conclusion (perhaps a reason for its relative failure with US audiences) but instead the possibility of change through the interrogation of existent ethical structures. In Cameron's film, by contrast, there is little change to the implied world beyond the film, only an acquisition by Rose of the individualist ethic of a free market culture. This is illustrated by the finale of the film, in which the older Rose dreams of a reunion of all of the benevolent characters of the film at the ship's grand staircase. Here, the only change to the pre-disaster ship is that abberant characters such as Ismay, Cal and Rose's mother have been purged. Cameron's climax implies that there are no systematic issues or philosophical failures to address. Instead, individuals who have made the wrong choices are obliterated, and the 'good' separated from the 'evil' by a purified version of the spontaneous order of the free market. It is perhaps

this, in spite of the admirable accumulation of detail, that robs Cameron's film of the authenticity sought.

Steve Cramer completed his PhD at the University of Edinburgh. He has worked at *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman*, *The List* and *The Financial Times* as an arts writer and editor, as well as freelancing as a broadcaster and writer across the UK media. He has lectured in English, Theatre Studies and Film at University of Edinburgh and Queen Margaret University, and has taught at UNISA since 2016.