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### From Myth to Meth: Viewing the American Small Town Through the Lens of Psychoanalytica Fantasy

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From Myth to Meth: Viewing the American Small Town Through the Lens of  
Psychoanalytic Fantasy

by

Christopher J. Boehm

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Introduction: Down on Meth Street**

As a place that belongs both to imaginary and physical landscape of America, the small town seems to garner a socio-political fascination that is disproportionate to its size. Despite the fact that America in terms of population distribution has been primarily an urban nation since the early twentieth century, the quaint small town has remained our collective “home.” The small town is the imaginary repository of all things “home,” that is, where we locate the values of domestic harmony, community, democracy, patriotism, and numerous others that may somehow seem lacking or degraded in the metropolis. In *Methland*, a fascinating examination of the methamphetamine epidemic that has injected the small-town back into the socio-cultural discussion, Nic Reding claims:

Rural America remains the cradle of our national creation myth. But it has become something else, too – something more sinister and difficult to define. Whether meth changed our perception of the American small town or simply brought to light the fact that things in small-town America are much changed is in some ways irrelevant. In my telling, meth has always been less an agent of change and more of a symptom of it. The end of a way of life is the story; the drug is what signaled to the rest of the nation that the end had come. (183)

While Reding overstates his point regarding the death of the small town, what he does illustrate in this passage is the significance of the idea of the place to American history and, more precisely, American myth. Armageddon has come and gone numerous times for the American small town since the middle of the nineteenth century, and the small town lives on even in its process of perpetual decay despite its many deaths. While Reding rightly locates the economic demise of farming and industry in the small town as primary causes for the meth epidemic, the demise of the small-town way of life, as he conceives of it, belongs less to the real places of the small town than it does to that of its ideological position. If Reding means that meth announces the end of a small-town life

dependent upon a dying farming and light industrial economy, then he may be more historically correct – however, the decline in small farming has been occurring since the middle 1920s as we will see in Chapter 1 and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. If, on the other hand, he means the small-town “way of life” as a certain ideal, harmonious existence predicated on the safe confines of the familiar burg, then meth is just another variation of a well-worn narrative.

The title of Reding’s book *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town* is particularly telling. Like so many other historical developments before it, meth once again announces the death of the small town while simultaneously providing new cultural life. The “sinister” and “difficult to define” side of the small town that Reding believes to be relatively new is an important imaginary counterpart to the small town as an ideal place. As Reding indicates in the early chapters of *Methland*, the fantasy of the small town’s social idealism is one to which even its inhabitants are not immune. Tim Gilson, the principal in Oelwein Iowa’s high school (Oelwein is the small town upon which Reding bases his study), implicitly locates the idealistic notion of the small town in how meth enacts a kind of disillusionment, “describing the events leading up to asking the police to patrol the halls, ““On the one hand, I had an obligation to my teachers, who were frightened of their students. On the other hand, is there anything worse than calling the cops on your own children?’ He went on, ‘We’re in Iowa, for God’s sake. We don’t do that’” (Reding 15). For those of us who have grown up in small towns, meth has been a strange, unsettling wake-up call. Rather than waking up to reality, small town folks are rousing to a nightmare. The nightmare presents a decidedly different kind of fantasy than the one implied by Gilson’s comment, which serves as a monstrous counterpart to a

misperceived innocence. To wake up into reality would be, as Reding does in his economic groundings for his investigation, to anchor the development of the drug in certain socio-economic factors emerging in the devolution of the small-town economy in the last thirty to forty years. However, the drug has not so much shed light on these circumstances as it has been made to fit into certain ready-made narratives both in terms of the “war on drugs” and the small town as a threatening place. What is problematic about the nightmare is that it is simultaneously invested with a new, darker modality of fantasy associated with the small town (more on this later) and it conjures the tired, idealistic image of the small town that once was. Nostalgia for a romanticized past or the ironic distance of jokes regarding “Hillbilly Heroin” or “Redneck Rock” are the primary means of staving off the traumatic impact that the drug has had on rural life. This ideal/ironic duality is part of the historical process of the small town’s transformation from original home for the nation, to the home lost in the urban migration of modernity. Ultimately, the two seemingly opposed poles of imaginary identification establish a representational duality for the small town. In literature, film, television programs, and numerous other representational forms that adopt it as their object, the small town is either an idealized “home” or an obscene place “way out there” where the unspeakable can transpire. Meth does not so much announce the death of the small town or its way of life, as it illustrates the intense generative power the small town has on our collective imagination. This power emerges from its “loss” as our original home. The small town’s life, its captivating force as an ideological object, is predicated on its multiple deaths.

While one could chose from a number of “deaths” of the small town to anchor it historically, the crucial “death” occurs as a result of the shift in the country’s identity



from a primarily rural nation to that of a more urban one. On the heels of increasing industrialization, this transformation is the result of a population shift at the turn of the twentieth century. As Richard Lingeman notes in “The Small Town in America,” “in 1890, seventy percent of all Americans lived in rural regions or small towns of less than 2,500 people” by 1920, “a watershed was reached as over half of the American people were found to be living in urban places” (5). This migration occurred despite an increase in farm commodity prices before and during World War I, and with this increase an improvement in rural living conditions. The exodus from country to city that many took led to a growing concern for the fate of the geographically-substantial rural portion of the country. What was most concerning for both those in rural areas and those in the city is that it was supposedly the best and brightest who were leaving the insularity and banality of the country for the promise of culture and economic opportunity in the thriving metropolis. In *Born in the Country* David Danbom notes this concern *vis-à-vis* the “Country Life Reformers”:

Country Life reformers recognized that the United States was becoming an urban nation, and they believed that rural-to-urban migration refreshed and improved cities and the nation as a whole. But they were concerned that so many bright people were leaving the countryside that it would become blighted, with severe consequences for the nation. (168)

The Country Life reformers were not concerned farmers and small-town officials, but, instead, they were “urban-based educators, religious leaders, social scientists, philanthropists,” as well as government officials (Danbom 168). Primarily through introducing more governmental standards in education,<sup>1</sup> the Country Lifers changed the

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<sup>1</sup> Country Lifers and the indigenous rural population did not see eye to eye on education reform, which centered primarily on the introduction of certain governmental standards designed to move away from one-room school houses to larger school systems:

face of rural America. If the most promising small-town youth was leaving the old hometown for the promise of the big city, then the big city was moving in to change the social fabric quilting together the old hometown. Despite the changes wrought by the Country Lifers and a “rural renaissance”<sup>2</sup> in the 1970s, the socio-cultural tide had irreversibly shifted. The small rural towns that had hitherto been the original home of the nation no longer carried the same weight, at least in terms of physical numbers.<sup>3</sup>

The migration from country to city is mirrored in a representational shift in the small town in literature. Richard Adicks, in “The Small Town: Magnet and Storehouse,” traces the literary historical development of the small town through four distinct phases. From its early days in American Literature, the town had been inextricably bound to a notion of nostalgia and comfort for some, and the threatening proximity of some unsettling neighbor for others. As a wilderness settlement, the small town initially promises shelter from the threatening uncertainty of untamed nature; as Adicks claims, “As long as there was a frontier, the town was measured against it, and a person loved it

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Rural resistance did not stop reform, it only meant that reforms would come more slowly and be undertaken less voluntarily. Gradually, states set curricular requirements and minimum teacher qualifications that moved rural schools in the direction desired by Country Life reformers. By providing special financial inducements or by denying aid to schools under a certain size, states advanced the goal of consolidation. (Danbom172)

As the rural migration was changing the cultural orientation of the nation to a more urban one, urban influence was transforming the socio-political face of the rural.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lingeman notes, in his essay “The Small Town in America,” the signs of this resurgence of the rural, “The Census Bureau’s preliminary figures for the 1980 census showed that rural counties has increased 15.4 percent in population during the 1970s, compared with a 9.1 percent growth for the city and suburban counties” (8). While the city was hardly in danger of losing its stranglehold on population density, the movement suggests a certain desire for a rural lifestyle that had less to do with an “overwhelming dissatisfaction” that comes with living in the city. Instead, as Lingeman notes, rural migrants expressed a “pull” towards the country, which was not uncommon for most American citizens at the time: “Polls have shown as many as eighty percent of Americans expressing the desire to live and work in a small town” (11).

<sup>3</sup> While the tide had begun to incrementally reverse in the 1970s, Robert Tournier in “Small Towns at the Crossroads” illustrates the scope of urban migration from the early twentieth to the late twentieth century; “In 1910, the rural population of our country was about thirty-two million; by 1970, it had fallen to just over nine million” (Tournier 32).

or loathed it according to what he thought of the frontier, the wilderness” (49). Where some found order in the small town, others found a stifling culture of repression. Consequently, for the latter group it was the small town, and not the adventurous potential of the frontier, that proved unsettling. In terms of tracing the small town’s evolution from place to idea, the most significant shifts of Adicks’ four phases occurs in the second and fourth stages. The initial two stages, ranging from early Puritan writing up to the work of Booth Tarkington and Zona Gale in the early twentieth century, involve the establishment of the small town as a certain institution for American readers. Recognized as either a haven from nature or that which stifles a more natural existence, the small town in its early development stands for, as Adicks claims, “simplicity, honesty, neighborliness, and clean living” (50). The crystallization of the small town into a stable institution in Adicks’ second stage establishes certain generic conventions with which the small town in literature, film, and other media will, for better or worse, be bound indefinitely. The small town of the second stage becomes the fodder for parody in the third stage. Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street* marks the shift from second to third stage, and his literary group of “revolutionaries,” with their satiric, unfavorable account of the American small town, unwittingly writes the epitaph for the rural world. No longer sanctuary from the wild or a viable retreat from the iniquities of the modern metropolis, the small town in the last stage of Adicks’ development is, “an institution struggling to hold its place in a rapidly changing society” (49). Rural migration which makes the small town less formidable as a politico-economic entity emerges in literature in the disintegration of small town values or hope for the future of rural America. What

remains in the fourth stage is an ideological battle for the nebulous, nostalgic conception of the small town as it existed in the second stage.

Whether the generic conventions and stereotypes of the small town are either nostalgically recalled, such as in Mark Twain's work in the latter half of the nineteenth century, or are summoned to be critiqued or lampooned, as in Lewis' aforementioned *Main Street*, the small town remains formidable as an important "place" in American culture. What seems to be indispensable in the small town is the sense of "community" that one romantically conjures or retreats to when the metropolis becomes too alienating and consuming. As Park Dixon Goist claims in *From Main Street to State Street*, "for an important segment of the American imagination 'the town' is synonymous with 'community.' Conversely, 'the city' has frequently been the antithesis of community" (3). Goist cites George Hillery's notion of "community" to clarify its importance to the small town. Essential to Hillery's notion of community is the value of "self-sufficiency," a common set of "norms," a sense of "homogeneity," a shared set of "institutions" (church, the courthouse, the coffee shop, etc.), an emphasis on "localism," and a sense of "group uniqueness" (4). Geographical specificity, the emphasis on a particular location, is critical for Hillery's definition of community, insofar as the "local" is an indispensable component of a community's self-identification. However, as Goist points out, the rapid technological developments of modernity, some of which spur a migration from the indigenous rural communities to the urban metropolis, threaten the isolation that makes such localism part of community identification. Telephone, radio, train travel, and the automobile in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as television and air travel later collapse the subjective experience of distance essential to geographical

specificity of community (Goist 4). The technological collapse of space is mirrored by population migration that shifts the nation's identity from predominantly rural or small town centered to one that is predominantly urban. In other words, the radical cultural shift that threatens the small town's ontological foundation is re-doubled in a material sense by a drain in "manpower." Given the rapid pace of this change it is not surprising that, as Goist claims, "some observers have asked if the 'quest for community' isn't really a nostalgic and escapist effort to avoid dealing forthrightly with a rapidly changing social reality?" (4). The small town as ideal place comes into existence only in the disintegration of its material counterpart as a means of coping with a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape.

Even in the shift from the "institutionalizing" second stage to the satirical "revolt" in the third stage, the notion of the small town as a particular place, both in a material and an abstract sense, maintains a certain connection to its representation. In the historical move from the second to the third stage, the small town as specific, material place is not foreign to a majority of American citizens; it is still more of a geographical location than an abstract concept. Many of those leading the "revolt from the village," most notably Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, were spinning childhood experience into representational content. Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, the setting for Lewis' *Main Street* (1920), is a facsimile of the author's own hometown of Sauk Valley, Minnesota. Likewise, Anderson's seminal work *Winesburg, Ohio* is based on his youth in several small Ohio towns, most notably Clyde. While these authors were certainly responding to a tone of nostalgia in their literary predecessors that had, as Anthony Hilfer claimed, "mythicized out of all reality" the small town, that place was for them first a real

geographical site (4). The development of Adicks' stages traces both the disintegration of the material place of the small town, as well as its emergence as an ideological space or object that can be mobilized as a multi-purpose symbol. Hilfer sums up the movement from physical place to ideological object in *The Revolt From the Village*:

the sociological cause of the myth is evident enough: the myth of the small town served as a mental escape from the complexities, insecurities, and continual changes of a society in rapid transition from a dominantly rural to a dominantly urban and industrial civilization. The myth was a symptom of immaturity; it was sentimental, escapist, and simple-minded. (5)

Hilfer here is referring to the benign, nostalgic myth of the small town, which forms an idyllic vision of what "Americans thought they were, what they sometimes pretended (to themselves as well as others) they wanted to be" (4). In the latter half of the twentieth century, the American small town would also come to occupy a darker imaginative space, where the anxieties and fears of obscene enjoyment as well as nostalgic harmony and purity come out to play. "Slasher" horror films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) stage the idyllic face of the small town alongside a more sinister, obscene underbelly of the "the country." While nightmarish side of the rural may initially seem antithetical to a more "Rockwellian" conception, as I hope to illustrate in the final chapter, these two poles are much closer and interrelated than they appear. This later development is as much a consequence of the small town's increasing foreignness to urban America as its idealism is an effect of the small town's sublimated conception of "home of the nation." Regardless of its innocence or obscenity, the myth of the small town takes on heightened significance against the shocks of modernity, which creates a melancholic nostalgia for an idealized place that only comes into existence in its (mis)perceived disappearance.

Whether you satirized or nostalgically recalled the small town was an indication of your enthusiasm for the seismic shifts of modernization. Either you endorsed the potential inherent in a quicker, urban sensibility or you celebrated the kind of idealism only possibly in the revisionist history of melancholia. Regardless of the side one came down on, the resulting representational consequence for the small town was the same: it became less a material place and more an ideological device. Here we encounter Adicks' fourth phase where historical changes force the small town to confront "its struggle to hold a place in a rapidly changing society" (54). Adicks use of the term "place" in his claim is fraught with signifying tension considering the distinction that becomes increasingly clear in the early part of the twentieth century between the small town as an actual place and the small town as a mythical, ideological "place." Without clearly distinguishing between these two related but distinct "places," what Adicks demarcates is the transformation of the small town from a material site to a symbolic one. The fourth stage announces the death and sublimation of the small town. While I do not intend to claim that small towns were disappearing as if whole communities pulled up stakes and moved to the city, urban migration transformed the small town economically, politically, and socially in an irreversible manner. Something substantial was being lost in country folks' shuffle to the city, and it generated a crisis in national identity. As the urban composition of the Country Lifers illustrates, the anxiety of the population drain was felt not only by those in rural America, but those in the city as well.

It has been fashionable to pronounce the death of the small town at different moments for different reasons throughout the middle and late twentieth century. However, if we want to pinpoint the symbolic death of the small town, in terms of its

numbers both economically and population wise, then it occurs somewhere in the period between 1890 and 1930; the small town is killed by urban migration. What emerges in the empty houses and decaying store fronts left on Main Street is the ideological and representational “struggle” to discern the “place” of small town after its death. Like the stereotypical country kid who moves to the city to find his success only to long for home,<sup>4</sup> the country functions as the kind of childhood home of America where social antagonisms and political dissonance disappear in an organic harmony and an effortless innocence. This nostalgia takes on different forms in the years following the population decline of the small town. From lamenting its loss in the years following urban migration to mobilizing its “homely” qualities for war propaganda, the small town in the last years of the Great Depression and World War II remain a lost home that serves to comfort a beleaguered American public. With the emergence of the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s the nostalgia for the small town is given new packaging that updates the old virtues with a new consumerism: the small town goes to the big city, or the edge at least, purchases all manner of shiny new (particularly domestic) gadgets, but somehow remains small. In the 1970s and into the new millennium, the small town becomes split between (or, more precisely by) its idealistic surface and its darker, obscene impulses. In particular, rural America with the rise of the methamphetamine epidemic and the popularity of slasher horror films becomes a strangely sinister place. Ultimately, the small town becomes an object of fantasy for Americans, whose different socio-political antagonisms are reflected

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<sup>4</sup> In *Hometown* Sherwood Anderson encapsulates this longing in his characterization of the metropolis as merely a collection of small towns (everything is a small town in *Hometown*), “It is the old hunger for intimacy. As yet the great majority of American city men come from the small towns. They remember vividly the intimacy of life in the towns. Many of them remain, during all the years of their life as city men, at heart small-townners” (22).



in the representative changes in the original home of the country. Hero or villain, ideal or obscene, the small town has traditionally been an ideologically versatile object, or a fantasmic stage upon which romantic and unsettling desire plays out at a seemingly safe distance.

Chapter one deals with the socio-historical impact of modernization and the Great Depression on family life in John Steinbeck and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *The Grapes of Wrath* the metaphorical loss of home that occurs in the disintegration of the small town is literalized by the Joad family's loss of home and migration from Oklahoma territory. Steinbeck's novel of transition, the move from the farming home and its way of life to the nomadic existence of his displaced migrant farmers, marks an epochal shift from home and family as a place of stability and local history to a world of perpetual transition and uncertainty. Fighting both the environmental phenomenon of the "Dust Bowl" and the emergence of calculating and unfeeling corporate farming, the Joads are forced to pursue a new home in the promise of work in verdant California. While they do find California to be as lush as they imagined, the vertically integrated farms exploit the migrants' economic misfortune, and the social environment offers no sanctuary. The "little white house" Ma Joad fantasizes about on their arduous voyage across the arid Southwest is replaced by a series of *ersatz* homes in "Hoovervilles" and migrant farm camps. Despite their hardships, the Joads, by and large, manage to survive, and carry a sense of home with them, primarily located in the figure of Ma Joad. Whereas Steinbeck seems to offer compassionate, familial love as a solution to the struggles of the migrant farmers, Ford's adaptation endorses broader political action; family is less important than "the people" who make up the nation. Steinbeck's farmers

survive through small-scale solidarity and compassion shared with other migrants, who have lost their homes just like the Joad family. Ford invokes the nation as a shared home, which has the capacity to ameliorate the pain of the migrants. In both cases, the notion of home is a complex and dynamic one that treads the line between home as a specific material place and home as a disembodied notion of some irrecoverable lost harmony.

Set in the bucolic perfection of a New England village, Orson Welles' "studio picture" *The Stranger* examines the reverberations of war-time trauma in postwar America. *The Stranger* trades on the historical significance of the New England village as a kind of original home for America. Harkening back to colonial times, the New England village is the original small town. As an original home, Welles's village finds resonance with war time propaganda, which mobilized a certain small town fantasy to motivate those on the home front and the battlefield during World War II. Whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* is a story of the loss of "home" as a result of outside forces, *The Stranger* illustrates a corruption of home that emerges from within following the return home from war. Synonymous with small-town nostalgia (hence "capraesque"), Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series deploys images and rhetoric depicting the idealized small town to which many soldiers will return to live happily ever after like George Bailey (James Stewart) in *It's a Wonderful Life*. However, the home promised in this propaganda is one that proves elusive in the postwar period, or, to put it in terms of *It's a Wonderful Life*, peaceful, picturesque Bedford Falls is more Pottersville than the idealized image produced by propaganda. What the romantic conceptions of one's "hometown" do not address are how to appropriately situate the visceral horrors of battle, and, for those welcoming home family members, how to cope with the changes that

emerge from these traumatic confrontations. Welles displaces this real life problem by playing a Nazi in hiding and not a returning G.I.. Still, this displacement and the estrangement of one's closest family, in the case of *The Stranger* a husband, illustrates the transformation of home from an ideal place waiting at the end of battle to a place corrupted by lingering echoes of war. What the returning soldier brings back with him, the traumatic stain of war, estranges both the ideal home town and himself. If home is lost in *The Grapes of Wrath* in a literal sense, then home, insofar as it is ideologically linked to the small town, is lost symbolically in *The Stranger*.

Chapter three approaches the issue of religion and its significance to the conception of small town morality. Like the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy, religion becomes a built in narrative that can be either delusive or sustaining; that is, religion can serve as an escape from the horrors of reality or what allows a subject to endure these horrors. Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), another story set during the Great Depression, deals with this double-edged sword of fantasy. Both the Preacher, Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) and surrogate parent Rachel (Lillian Gish) use Christianity for their dramatically different purposes in life. Whereas Harry's specific religious doctrine (one made exclusively between himself and God, as he claims in the film) justifies or excuses his criminal enterprises, Rachel's recourse to religion is a source of strength and endurance that she locates in a more benign form in her adopted children. *The Night of the Hunter* explores two sides of fantasy, idealistic and obscene, frequently at work in representations of the small town. What the ideal fantasy often permits is its obscene counterpart to work beneath the veil of its acceptable, romanticized exterior. Adopting a preacher persona, Powell is permitted, at least in his own mind, to perpetrate

gruesome acts of violence in the name of performing the “Lord’s work.” A surrogate father to John (Billy Chapin) and Pearl Harper (Sally Jane Bruce), Powell proves to be a menacing patriarch in the child-centered story. Unable to find refuge in the adult world in their small town, the children are disempowered by their mother’s murder and their young age. The juxtaposition of the ideal veneer and the obscene interior serves as a reflection of the emergence of suburbia during the 1950s. Designed by developers like William Levitt to be an embodiment of the ideal small town, the suburbs become a site for intersection between nostalgia for the “good old days” and more contemporary socio-economic developments. A new child-centered familial norm, new domestic appliances, and cultural, normative disciplining in television programs like *Ozzie and Harriet* exert pressure on suburban families to live up to a certain “suburban ideal.” Ultimately, like Powell’s religious veneer, this ideal surface conceals or contains all manner of unsavory behavior that threatens the perfect suburban family image. Like the suburban home that is both a copy of small town ideals and unrealistic familial “norms,” the familial situation in which John and Pearl are thrust is a bad copy of their original family, with Powell replacing their father. The home that is lost in *The Grapes of Wrath* is rediscovered in *The Night of the Hunter*, but it is a surrogate home, complicated from within by its obscene double embodied by Powell. If family is what ultimately saves the Joads in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is family that poses the gravest threat in Laughton’s film.

Chapter four examines the correlation between the small town as the mythological origin of the suburb and the generation of myth in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The small town as a nostalgic, imaginary production of memory

provides a kind of moral and aesthetic paradigm that suburban developers attempted to capture in postwar housing developments. The small town served as a kind of “ideal ego” that the suburbs and their residents consciously or unconsciously attempted to replicate. Consequently, the suburbs became a kind of repressive, “bad” copy of an unattainable small town ideal; a copy of something that never existed in the first place. Similarly, Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) is compelled to live up to a sublimated identity, “the man who shot Liberty Valance,” that is ultimately out of his reach. Despite getting the girl, getting the credit for killing the bad guy, and building a successful political career on his local celebrity, Ransom is indebted to Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) for the actual killing, or at least that is the case according to Tom – I will argue that the responsible party is indeterminate. Just as the small town exacts a debt of guilt from the suburb that can never live up to its ideal counterpart, Ransom is haunted by his seemingly unearned, ideal identity. Even if he is the man who shot Liberty Valance, Ransom envisions himself as a champion of law and order, not vigilante, frontier justice. Fantasy’s role in the constitution of reality is at the core of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, best expressed in the infamous line, “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” Ultimately, the impact of the legend of the small town is what Ford’s film illustrates; that is, the true history of the small town doesn’t matter nearly as much as the ideological force it can exert through its certain nostalgic connotations. While the western and the suburb would seem to have little in common, what *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* illustrates is that they both acknowledge the small town’s significance as a locus of American myth.

Through the dissertation, the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy, particularly as it is explored in the work of Slavoj Žižek, will provide a conceptual backbone for tracing the changing ideological positioning of the small town during the mid-twentieth century. What will be particularly useful in Žižek's work on fantasy is its duality; fantasy can function in both an ideal and obscene form to underpin reality. Fantasy works at both the individual and collective level, which will be evident in the way it plays out both at the level of character in the texts above and how it emerges within the small town communities as a narrative resolution to certain shared socio-political frustrations. Žižek addresses the ideological function of fantasy in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

The standard notion of the way fantasy works within ideology is that of a fantasy-scenario which obfuscates the true horror of a situation: instead of a full rendering of the antagonisms which traverse our society, we indulge in the notion of society as an organic Whole, kept together by forces of solidarity and co-operation. (6)

At its most fundamental level, both collectively and individually, fantasy functions as a suture where reality threatens to cease being a meaningful, cohesive order for a subject. Fantasy provides a kind of narrative frame that appropriately situates something which defies easy signification on the part of the symbolic. What was potentially harmful, because it exposed the limitations of our means of making meaning out of the world, becomes concealed beneath something that is, at least minimally, idealized. Fantasy, in the psychoanalytical sense, does not designate some wholly unreal indulgence in one's work of imagination; I do not imagine myself out of reality with fantasy. Instead, fantasy is the work of imagination that compliments the basic symbolic components of reality to sustain its rational, comprehensible order.

The recto to idealized fantasy's verso is a kind of obscene double, which is not necessarily strictly opposed to idealistic fantasy. Instead, more obscene fantasmic manifestations are distorted, unsettling forms of idealistic fantasy. This obscene double is an offshoot of the repressive function of idealization, or, as Žižek claims:

the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference (are not the images of the ultimate horrible Thing, from the gigantic deep-sea squid to the ravaging twister, phantasmic creations *par excellence*?). (TPF 7)

Another way of phrasing this distinction between ideal and obscene is to identify the two modes of fantasy as explicit and implicit. The explicit fantasy contributes to the specific ideological narrative that structures one's socio-symbolic network. We see this kind of fantasy in the language of political campaigns which is riddled by empty signifiers that simply stand in for meaning as such. Irrespective of party affiliation, the terms "hope," "democracy," and "change," ultimately mean nothing, or are so broad that they could conceivably mean virtually anything. Still, these idealized key terms confer a sense of meaning and, ultimately, persuasiveness on a political platform. Spinning meaning out of indeterminacy is the "short circuit" work of fantasy. However, fantasy cannot unveil the steps in this meaning-making process, hence the notion of a short circuit. When it comes to suturing of fantasy, we are never exactly sure why the spark of meaning fires where there is ultimately an empty signifier in place, but it does. Herein lies the problematic nature of pleasure for fantasy, and why a portion of fantasy or its process, both ideal and obscene, must be concealed for it to maintain its efficacy. Fantasy conditions the unsettling nature of enjoyment: unsettling because we can never fully understand our compulsions and would most likely be horrified if we were able to face them directly.

*Jouissance*, the Lacanian psychoanalytic term of enjoyment as “pleasure in pain,” is channeled by fantasy, but, like the Real, it refuses easy conditioning. Despite the snares, channels, and discipline set up for it by fantasy, *jouissance* continually erupts into reality threatening its (meaningful) stability. Explicit, more idealistic fantasy appropriately situates *jouissance* in order for reality to remain a meaningful realm. However, at the implicit level pleasure takes on a more obscene nature. This obscenity may manifest itself in the pleasure we take in that which is socially acceptable, or, in a more “traditional” sense, it may emerge in the pleasure we derive some act/object that is unsavory; in the latter case we might consider drug addiction, sado-masochistic sexual practice, or numerous other garden variety “perversions.” The implicit level of fantasy passes over to the explicit in the “monstrous” manifestations that are generated from the more repressive work of idealization. The monstrous is the last line of defense of the implicit level of fantasy where some hidden form of *jouissance* assumes a kind of coded form in the fantasmic beast, which is intended to scare us into retreat from our own embedded, displaced truth. Incapable of emerging directly without the collapse of the socio-symbolic order, fantasy erupts into reality in some horrifying creation that conceals what is “all too real” about it in its monstrosity.

The juxtaposition between ideal and obscene fantasy is evident in the distinction between what might be arguably the two most notable small town “developments” in the last half century: the construction of “Main Street U.S.A.” at Disneyland (Figure 1) and the emergence of rampant methamphetamine manufacturing and use in the rural United States. Nowhere is the small town’s ideological significance to a collective American identity clearer than in its romanticized manifestation in Main Street, U.S.A., in



Disneyland. This entrance to Walt Disney's first theme park, the one he had a more prominent hand in developing, was the collaborative development of numerous "imagineers," Disney's team of architects. Grounded as much in Harper Goff's experience in Fort Collins, Colorado, at the turn of the twentieth century as it was in Disney's own early childhood home of Marceline, Missouri, the architectural design of Main Street U.S.A., as Richard Francaviglia claims, "creates the impression that all was right with the world in the small town at the turn of the century; it implies that commerce (and merchants) thrive along Main Street, and that society and community are working together in harmony" (156). Patterning the 5/8<sup>ths</sup> scale<sup>5</sup> Victorian buildings after those that line so many Midwestern main streets across the country, Disney and his design team created the illusion of harmony between the forces of modernity threatening the lifestyle of the small town and traces of that lifestyle. As Francaviglia notes, "Disney chose both horse-drawn streetcar and an omnibus as the main conveyances that would take visitors who preferred not to (or were unable to) walk" (156). Horse and machine co-exist in Disney's fantasy-scape, which arrest the progress and shocks of modernity that ultimately announce the "death" of the small-town. Taking artistic liberties with time – Main Street U.S.A. was supposed to be a snapshot of small-town America between 1890-1910 – Disney, in his "imagineered" environment was able to create "small-town America as it *should* have been" (Francaviglia 156). It is worth noting that saloons and funeral parlors

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<sup>5</sup> Main Street U.S.A. was painstakingly designed and edited by Disney and his team, with the reduced scale intended to be more pedestrian-friendly. As Francaviglia notes, "There were few or no open spaces between buildings; every commercial building was more or less the same height; the buildings were approximately five-eighths the size of their prototypes, and thus seemingly more approachable or less formidable; streetlamps, trees – everything was carefully selected" (146). Adding to the artificial nature of Main Street is the fact that many of the buildings, particularly the intricate Victorian features of the building tops that would have been stone, were fabricated out of fiberglass, a relatively new material at the time. Duplication of more difficult, time-consuming construction technique were made quicker and easier with fiberglass.

are not a part of Disney's vision. Down on Main Street U.S.A. one does not require a chemical coping mechanism for the boredom of the small town and, because time is frozen, no one dies.<sup>6</sup>

Disneyland opened in 1955 and the impact that Main Street, U.S.A. has had on its visitors has transformed it into "one of the most sacrosanct places in America" (Francaviglia 154). Not only does Main Street U.S.A. encapsulate the ideological battle over and with "Main Street," insofar as it is a physical manifestation of the kind of imaginary investment of values under the name "small-town," but its purpose and geography in Disneyland reflect the function of the small town as a fantasmic object. Fantasy plays out its narrativizing function in an interstitial space between the horror of some irresolvable antagonism and the comprehensible realm of reality, or, to put it in simpler terms, fantasy is the conceptual lens through which we view reality so that it maintains meaningful consistency. The layout of Disneyland is such that when one arrives at Main Street, first entering the town square that is the hub of idealism in all small towns, he must pass beneath a set of train tracks upon which a late nineteenth century train sits. After passing through the small town "as it should have been" the

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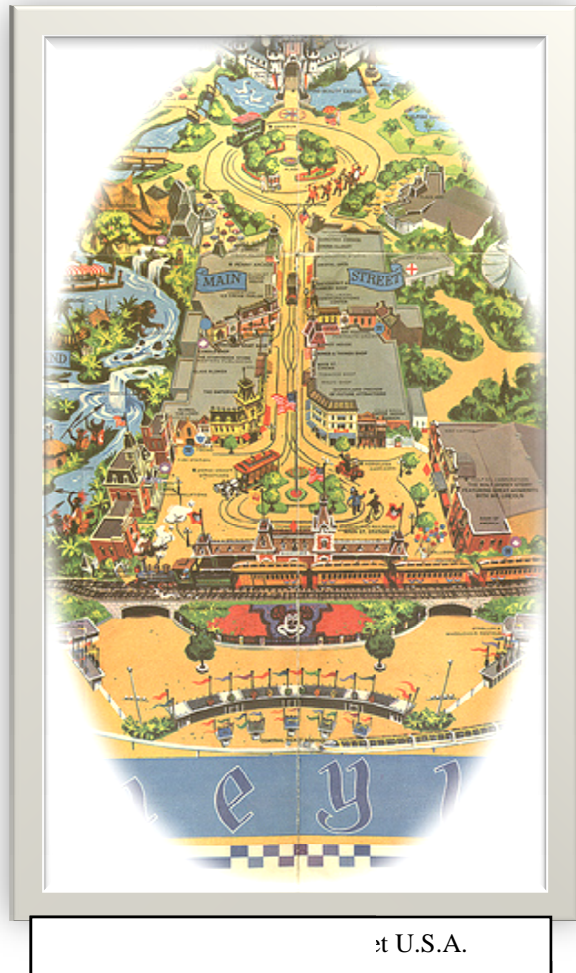
<sup>6</sup> As Francaviglia points out in the final chapter of *Main Street Revisited*, editing was not necessarily foreign to small-town engineers, particularly in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the restoration of Main Street became a historico-fantasmatic project. One such place was Medina, Ohio, which attempted to revitalize its fading downtown economy through "historic" restoration. Urged to paint their buildings colors more representative of the late nineteenth century, merchants were unwittingly compelled to deviate from historical fact for revisionary purposes. As Francaviglia explains,

They followed directions, accenting the elaborate trim with varied colors. Nevertheless, a careful look at historic photographs reveals that buildings on real Main Streets were often painted in fairly simple color schemes; white, buff, and green being common. Thus, the renovation architects may have introduced colors more typical of the elaborate bay-windowed Victorian 'painted lady' townhouse of San Francisco, or Walt Disney's versions of the small town as seen in the Disney parks, than what Main Street actually looked like ca. 1900. (171)

While an attempt was often made to restore small-town architecture on Main Street, it was often nearly as fraught with the idealism that drove Disney in his re-creation (or, more appropriately, re-imagination) of his boyhood hometown.

visitor arrives at “Sleeping Beauty’s Castle,” which belongs to a realm of pure fantasy. In its psychoanalytic conception, fantasy is not a total suspension of reality in order to be swept away upon the clouds of imagination. Fantasy works in conjunction with the meaning-making function of the symbolic to establish a comprehensible realm that loosely holds together the ontological threads of reality. While Disney’s purpose seems to be to bring modernity and the nostalgia for a lost home, lost as a consequence of modernity, into some harmony, the geographical logic of Main Street still stages the antagonism between modernity and the small town. Moving deeper into the park, visitors are compelled to leave the unsettling train behind to be bewildered and enchanted by Main Street. Ultimately, the further into the world of Disney’s Main Street one travels the closer one comes to losing oneself entirely in the a-temporal, purely imaginary castle, and, consequently, the further from the unsettling modern train (and the cars in the parking lot). Like fantasy in psychoanalysis, the small town occupies a kind of in-between space that harkens back to a place devoid of the antagonisms that threaten to destabilize our fragile hold on reality, or, as Francaviglia claims, “Main Street may appeal to a sense of collective innocence in that our youths are times of relative simplicity before we experience significant personal, economic, and sexual responsibility” (154).

The architectural logic of Disney's Main Street mirrors the transformation of the small town from material place to ideological object. A stroll down Main Street leaves behind modernity for the enchanted castle, which is inhabited by a figure that remains dormant as a result of a wicked spell. Like the inhabitant of Disney's castle, the small town enters into a prolonged slumber in the early part of the twentieth century.



However, unlike Sleeping Beauty the small town does not so much return to consciousness as it becomes a dream repository, which the conscious world occasionally channels for particular signifying purposes. To return to our initial example, the castle finds its dark counterpart in methamphetamines. While the castle represents an extreme pole of idealization having passed through the nostalgic, wholesome Main Street USA where everything is perfectly revised by nostalgia, meth is the dark fantasy of the small town – typically embodied in the violence and degradation of civilization that is the fodder for so many horror films set “out in the country.”

Where the castle leads us astray in the magical idealism of fantasy, meth, as what Reding calls a “socio-cultural cancer,” brings us too close to the fantasmic underpinnings

of the small town. Meth's draw is not necessarily that it offers an escape from the stifling values of the small town, but, instead, the addict or "tweaker" identifies all too closely with certain key features of the self-sufficient, small town. With meth small-town ideals and the biological function of fantasy overlap, as Reding claims:

The real basis of meth's attractiveness, though, is much simpler: meth makes people feel good. Even as it helps people work hard, whether that means driving a truck or vacuuming the floor, meth contributes to a feeling that all will be okay, if not exuberantly so. By the 1980s, thanks to increasingly cheap and powerful meth, no longer was the theory behind American work ethic strictly theoretical: there was a basis in one's very biochemistry, a promise realized ... all of it came without any of the side effects which hardworking Americans loathe: sloth, fatigue, laziness. (47)

Unlike Sleeping Beauty's castle, which invites us to fall asleep in the nostalgic recollection of a home that never really was, meth is the drug that facilitates the realization of fantasy for the American small-town<sup>7</sup>; when one takes meth one identifies

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<sup>7</sup> Meth's chemistry, which seems to be unique from other drugs in its effect of flushing dopamine out of neurotransmitters, reflects the psychological function of fantasy, which latches onto a certain indispensable object around which the entirety of one's life-world is organized. In other words, fantasy provides a rationale that sutures together the ruptures in reality where language fails to mean with a special object(s) that plug(s) the gap. Typically in this structure one object trumps others, but there can be multiple objects that serve a suturing function. With meth, this is not the case, as Reding's summary of Neuroscientist Tom Freese's explanation indicates:

Meth works on the limbic system of the brain, which is the brain's reward center, as well as on the prefrontal cortex, where decision making takes place. A meth user's feelings are reflected in what are called his executive actions, or what Freese calls 'his ability to choose between what we all know to be good and bad.' Freese says that what feels good is tied directly to survival. The ability to make decisions, therefore, is in some ways controlled not by what people want, but by what they need. Meth, says Freese, 'hijacks the relationship' between what is necessary and what is desired. 'The result is that when you take away meth, nothing natural – sex, a glass of water, a good meal, anything for which we are *supposed* to be rewarded feels good. The only thing that does feel good is more meth.' (49)

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the distinction between "necessary" and "desired" is not an opposition, particularly when it comes to the issue of the *objet petit a* and its narrative, fantasy. The desired object is necessary, it holds the subject's life-world together in an ontological sense. Without this object, if the space of negativity in which it stands is opened immediately to the subject, the world disintegrates into a nightmarish universe that might resemble addict "detoxing." In other words, meth by collapsing the necessary and the desired at a biochemical level embodies the conceptual function of fantasy, which short circuits the distinction between the normal order of everyday things (the essential) and the little bit of desire that may not seem essential but is that upon which the subject's world tenuously hangs. The difference between the "tweaker" and the normally oriented subject of fantasy is that the tweaker's relationship to fantasy is unmediated by the normalizing work of the social order, which he experiences through the process of chemical alteration. This kind of direct identification with fantasy at the conceptual level brings

directly with the superegoic fantasy at the heart of small-town identity. Hard work, self-sufficiency, and contentment lie at the end of the crank rainbow. Unlike other drugs that make one sleepy and lethargic, meth aligns almost seamlessly with the values of hard-working small-town America. Ultimately, Main Street U.S.A and “Methland” share the same fantasy thoroughfare, and, ironically, many of the same values. One side of the street is the scaled-down idealism of the (“Neverland”) time gone by in its Victorian splendor, which is sparkling clean and devoid of the seedier aspects of a small town main street (taverns, bars, and pool halls). On the other side of the street are boarded-up store fronts, upstairs apartments bearing the blackened façade of an exploded lab, and all the detritus of small town decay. These are not distinctly separate places, but live in the same fantasmic, ideological space that conjures the small-town to assume either modality for any number of political, social, or cultural purposes. In both, the small town continues to live and thrive, even if its life is predicated upon the perpetual announcement of its death. It is no wonder, then, that so many horror films are set in small towns. As an ideological object, the small town is either a ghost that haunts us through its perpetual, nostalgic recollection, or it is the undead zombie, who, despite limbs that are rotting off and its bizarre, taboo appetites, refuses fully and satisfactorily to die.

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about subjective destitution, which strangely has a material counterpart in the meth user, whose body physically disintegrates under the chemical alteration (boils on the skin, tooth loss, rapid weight loss, etc.).

## Chapter 1: Home in Transition

Combining his literary work with Farm Security Administration photography of the small town, Sherwood Anderson in *Hometown* attempts to reclaim the primacy of “home” that is grounded in such small burgs across the country. Anderson’s sweeping generalizations frame a number of photographs that, he claims, illustrate the small-town as an unspoiled place of harmony, capable of adapting to a rapidly changing modern world yet still retaining its comforting familiarity. While the photographs clearly document different regions in the United States, Anderson’s approach melts the small town down into a common, transcendent substance. The insistence on the small town as the country’s original Edenic garden belies Anderson’s palpable anxiety that the disintegration of this cherished place is either in process or has already taken place. Despite its idealizing prose, Anderson’s writing is fraught with a conspicuous fear that the small town is in a state of disintegration. Whereas the small town on one hand can adapt and take advantage of modern developments according to Anderson, industrialization, the socio-historic impact of modernization, and the metropolis are the implicit villain in Anderson’s text: “That day has passed now. The young man feels that Oak Hill (a small town in Ohio) is not big enough for the big life he says he feels in himself” (4). Filled with the “big ideas” that accompany modernity, greater connectivity through technology and the subjugation of the individual to the importance of the mass, the young man Anderson refers to can no longer abide the constraints of his small town. Still, Anderson argues that the small town is “home” in a way the big city can never be, “the city man remembers vividly his small town school teacher, the place where he with the other town boys built a dam in the creek to make a swimming hole ... Sometimes the

city man, remembering his old hunger, returns to the town of his youth. He walks about the streets” (20). Despite all the big ideas and the lucrative promises of modern urbanization, the small town man cannot escape the gravitational pull of his origins; there is some surplus enjoyment associated with the small town that the big city can fully offer. This surplus enjoyment is indelibly etched into the small town man’s memory and compulsively returns when he becomes disenchanted with the teeming modern city.

Unlike the modern metropolises that Anderson believes that lead young small town men and women astray with “big ideas,” the small town maintains a close connection with a specific material place. More specifically, the original “home” is grounded in its connection to the land, as Anderson claims, “the small towns are and will remain close to the land” (Anderson 142). This connection to the land is, in part, an indication of the proximity between the small town and the rural farm upon which many small towns are dependent. Rural areas, the small town and its farms, seem to occupy a certain transcendental space as the original home of America, which dates back to the origins of the country. Farming, at the dawn of the nation, was considered a superior occupation to all others, as David Danbom claims in *Born in the Country*, “Farmers were society’s heroes in the early decades of the United States. In the hands of agrarian thinkers and writers, the farmer was transformed into the purest representative of the finest people on earth,” (66). The title of Danbom’s rural history *Born in the Country*, has a two-fold significance. On the one hand, it is the story of common people whose narrative, as a result of geographically location, is often occluded by events and figures who are regarded as more historically significant. More literally, Danbom’s title locates the origins of the nation in its rural areas. Just as technological development increasingly



challenges distinctions between the rural and the urban, innovations on the farm threaten the close connection to land for farmers. By the late 1920s and early 1930s many farmers no longer worked the land by hand. Anderson claims that this shift causes, “a growing realization, in the towns, of the meaning of the land,” but economic realities of agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s make this a somewhat dubious claim (Anderson 142).

Long before the market collapse of 1929, farmers were dealing with painful economic and social changes. As Morris Dickstein claims in *Dancing in the Dark*, “after the expansion of acreage and output to meet the enormous demands created during the First World War, the farm economy had virtually collapsed during the first half of the 1920s” (93). Numerous farmers had extended themselves beyond their means expecting the economic boom of the war years to extend indefinitely. When numerous commodity prices were cut nearly in half in the 1920s, they were forced to face difficult to impossible debt payments. Then, when the depression hit, they were faced with even bleaker conditions. During the leanest years of the Great Depression the plight of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, who were the hardest hit by the economic realities of the market collapse and were adversely affected by the numerous New Deal policies for agricultural relief, became the frequent focus of collaborative works of journalism and artistic representation. From the works of writer Erskine Caldwell and photographer Margaret Bourke-White in *You Have Seen Their Faces* to James Agee and Walker Evans’ much-celebrated *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, the small-farmers who found little relief from their struggles became the object of fascination for a broad American audience. The Works Progress Administration established a collaborative effort between the United States government and artists, who were commissioned to inform the public

about the plight of tenant farmers. The lasting images of Bourke-White and Evans, both of whom worked for the Farm Security Administration as part of the WPA, of the poor, long-suffering farmers have become iconic representations of the inhuman conditions wrought by the Great Depression.

Many of the farmers documented by the FSA became the kind of migrant workers, deprived of their original family home, that John Steinbeck depicts in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *The Grapes of Wrath: A Reference Guide*, Barbara Heavlin argues that Steinbeck's novel is "an inescapable part of the American Myth, of the American Dream gone awry" (96). Although it is largely a "road story," *The Grapes of Wrath* opens in Oklahoma in the throes of the "Dust Bowl" and the Great Depression.

Alternating chapters between the specific tale of the Joad family and a more general description of the woes of migrant farmers during this period, Steinbeck depicts a country in transition. What was once a land grounded in the more organic, harmonious roots of community and the soil, is rapidly becoming an isolated world of rapacious greed and self-interest. Unsympathetic to outmoded, sentimental conceptions of community and ownership, corporate farming announces the historical shift that upends the Joads' simple rural world. Far removed from the "Homestead Act" and "Land Run" promise of the Oklahoma "sooner" generation, the tenant farmers of *The Grapes of Wrath*, who cultivate the land they once owned, face massive property foreclosures in the early chapters of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Their cherished land is then bought up on the cheap by large

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<sup>1</sup> The Homestead Act of 1862 was an attempt by the United States government to open up farming to a greater number of citizens by offering essentially "free" 160 acre plots, provided the interested individual could pay the ten dollar filing fee and could afford farming equipment and living expenses until the first harvest came (Danbom 112). The Land Run of 1889 was an extension of the Homestead Act, when large portions of Oklahoma were opened up for potential farming; these were also 160 acre tracts. However, the Joad family farm is more reminiscent of the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, which opened up 40 million acres to freed slaves following the civil war; these were distributed in 40 acre tracts often accompanied by a

farms that can employ newer technology for higher profits at lower labor costs. With these socio-economic changes, the family loses the deeply personal sense of history they share with the soil. To put it in Heavlin's terms, the American Dream of self-sustainability and financial-social success through hard work, a dream that led so many west in search of their own piece of land, becomes a cruel joke for Steinbeck's farmers. Left in the wake of large diesel tractors and whipping dust storms, the farmers are unsightly remainders of a dream that is only a possibility for a precious few.

What is lost for the Joad family in pursuit of the cruel American Dream is precisely what Anderson seems to argue so staunchly for in *Hometown*, that is, an original home that can never be fully reclaimed. Not unlike Ma Joad's conception of a "little white house" in California where "home" can be rediscovered in all its idealization, Anderson's *Hometown* establishes an idyllic home that is somehow lost in both the Great Depression and modernization. Emerging from their struggles, small town folks, according to Anderson, are realizing the significance of their home, "there is also a growing disillusionment about leaving the towns for the life of the cities" (142). The FSA's iconographic images of the depression and its de-humanizing effects are reclaimed and redefined by Anderson to take back something that has been lost in the traumatic process. If Evans and Bourke-White use the images to inform the American public about what is being lost in the Great Depression, Anderson deploys the photos to illustrate that what was perceived to be lost has only become strengthened by the process. The sense of

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"government" mule to help with cultivation (Danbom 118). The infamous phrase "40 acres and a mule" emerged from this piece of legislation, and the Joad family farm is akin to those of the Southern Homestead Act in that it is 40 acres as well. Later, the Joads will face similar discrimination to freed slaves when they will be ostracized from normal society as "Okies," an epithet that seems designed to identify and disparage a race of people as much as it is a marker of geographic origins.

“home,” in all its romantic glory, is only intensified by its seeming disintegration; it only comes into existence in its very loss. Still, the anxiety in Anderson’s efforts and his insistence remains, and the original photographs bear the traces of some trauma that refuses his easy re-signification. Unlike Anderson, Ma Joad will surrender her “little white house” in *The Grapes of Wrath* to establish a more dynamic, flexible conception of home that is grounded in her staunch belief in family and the ethics of love, which are integral components to the small towns that are forced to go out “on the road.”

### **You Can Never Go Home Again**

The world of the Joads’ is in a constant state of transition both literally and figuratively. They are forced to move from their generation’s old family home to a series of ersatz homes in “Hooverilles” and migrant farm camps in pursuit of ever more elusive work. This constant movement unmoors certain members of the family, who break off from the larger unit to disappear into the unknown. While Tom leaves with an expressed purpose, to bring social injustice to light, his brother Noah and brother-in-law Connie leave out of fatigue or fear. This displacement and disintegration of the family is a consequence of two traumatic forces. The first of these is the dust bowl. Both a man-made, insofar as the lack of crop rotation resulted in massive soil erosion, and a natural disaster, the dust bowl is pervasive in the opening chapters of Steinbeck’s novel. From the masks worn by the Caterpillar tractor operators, who move across the Oklahoma countryside exiling the numerous small farmers, to the description of the barren countryside that opens the novel, Steinbeck inscribes the traumatic effects of the dust bowl on both the Oklahoma countryside and its inhabitants. While the dust bowl causes

the farmers to borrow against their farms, the lean years of cotton-growing leading to shortfalls in their already meager incomes, the most ominous threat to community in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the disciplined, unsympathetic machine of corporate farming and its economic engine, the bank. The increasingly bureaucratic economic realities of the Great Depression represent an architectonic shift in conceptions of land ownership, and, consequently, the deep-seeded sense of rural community grounded in the soil begins to disintegrate. Whereas the unfeeling, inhuman symbolic forces driving corporate interests are incapable of accounting for human attachment to the land, ownership for the farmers goes beyond official legal statutes outlined in a contract:

‘... it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours – being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.’

‘We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man.’

‘Yes, but the bank is only made of men.’

‘No, you’re wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.’ (Steinbeck 33)

The term “monster” also emerges in Steinbeck’s numerous descriptions of the machines that plow under the migrant homesteads, “the man sitting on the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was part of the monster, a robot on the seat” (35). Just like the non-descript men who comprise the bank, the operator of the bulldozer is no longer in charge of the machine, “he couldn’t control it” (Steinbeck 35). In his essay “Monopolizing Monsters: Demise of the Family Farm and the Rise of the Corporate Farming in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*” Robert Miltner argues that the corporate monster “eats the land” of tenant farmers, and along

with eating the land is a consumption of the, “‘old days’ when, men talked and shook hands, a bond as good as one’s word, spoken in ways clearly understood by speakers and shakers. Those printed papers from the bank, on the other hand, gloved in legalese, shook no hands and were often not as good as the word offered at the time of signing” (282). The fear of writing, which is referred to frequently in the early part of the novel, is coterminous with the fear of the systematic, symbolic force of the monster, which proves monolithic to the uneducated tenant farmers. Gone are the days when a handshake and recognition of the family name held more symbolic value than the deliberately convoluted and confusing language of the law. With this epochal shift from handshake to the Letter, the comprehensible life-world of the farmers disintegrates.

With both the banker and the tractor, a mechanistic force emerges that defies the control of the human hands that are supposed to operate it. These monstrous machines transform their human operators and creators into instruments, who are, despite their better judgments and natural sympathies, merely along for the ride. Desubjectivized by his goggles and mask, the Cat operator like the banker becomes a robotic part of some seemingly unstoppable machine. Both are cogs in an elaborate symbolic machine that works beyond their control. The bankers’ and Cat operators both offer explanations and justifications for fulfilling their unenviable responsibilities, which serve to absolve themselves of culpability.<sup>2</sup> As one tractor operator claims, “Three dollars a day. I got

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<sup>2</sup> One should not take the banker’s apology at face value, that is, his claim that responsibility is solely with that of the disembodied “big Other” for which he is merely an instrument. Both his expression of the “more” of the bank – the surplus that is beyond the men who comprise the organization – and the profession that the bankers “hate” what they bank does is an indication that discharging his bureaucratic duties is a source of *jouissance* for him and his colleagues. We encounter in the banker in *The Grapes of Wrath* the “pervert of the Law,” that is, unlike the hysteric or neurotic who fears that the Other somehow steals the enjoyment sacrificed as integration into the Law, the pervert derives pleasure from the meticulous execution of his duties as defined the Law, from the very sacrifices demanded. Since he is merely an instrument of the big Other, carrying out his orders like a dutiful subject, he is relieved of responsibility for

damn sick of creeping for my dinner – and not getting it. I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day” (Steinbeck 37). Despite addressing the economic realities of the situation for both the migrants and those in charge of removing them from their land, these passages also expose what Lacanian psychoanalysis would deem the “symbolic Real.” Miltner refers implicitly to this concept in his reference to the migrant’s fear of legalese, insofar as the fear of the law designates a fear of language that supersedes the common sense wisdom and customs of the tenant farmers’ rural community. As that which refuses easy integration into the means of making meaning, the Real is a force that disrupts the comprehensible flow of reality. In his work *For They Know Not What They Do*, Slavoj Žižek describes the Real as that which forces a “perspectival shift,” which in turn distorts reality:

The Real is the appearance as appearance; it not only appears *within* appearances, it is also *nothing but* its own appearance – it is simply a certain *grimace* of reality, a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature that accounts for the absolute difference within identity. This Real is not the inaccessible Beyond of phenomena, simply their doubling, the gap between two inconsistent phenomena, a perspective shift (xxvii).

Along with the Imaginary and the Symbolic,<sup>3</sup> the Real is part of the Lacanian triumvirate (IRS) that work in conjunction to create a subject’s stable conception of a meaningful reality. As a traumatic force that both disrupts and actuates the collaborative work of the imaginary (fantasy) and the symbolic, the Real refuses the process of simple signification. Consequently, the Real undermines any attempt to bring its traumatic

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his actions, and, consequently, free to enjoy the painstaking completion of his tasks (and the surplus associated with the Other). The banker’s hatred of his duties belies his enjoyment in this passage, as Žižek claims apropos of the horrors indulged by Nazis during the Holocaust, “this shame was the unmistakable sign of the excess of *enjoyment* they got from their acts” (TPF 57).

<sup>3</sup> For each of these categories there is a correspondence or coupling with the Other, that is, there are three variations of each (e.g. Real-Real, Real-Imaginary, and Real-Symbolic). For further explanation of this segmentation see Žižek’s preface to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Do*.

ruptures into some realm of comprehensibility. Still, the Real forces the symbolic and the imaginary into action by spinning out ever new discursive cobwebs to contain its disruptive force. While it will perpetually refuse the symbolic trappings imposed upon it to diffuse its traumatic power, the Real is the primary agitation that drives the process of symbolization: the more it refuses socio-symbolic integration, the harder and more clever fantasy and the symbolic work to contain it.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* the traumatic impact of the Real is evident in the overwhelming power of symbolic organizations that the tenant farmers cannot understand; language does not clarify the farmers' situation, it confuses them and makes their world an incomprehensible place. Distance is the source of efficacy for this traumatic disruption associated with corporate farming and banking. For the farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the increasingly bureaucratized organizations, their elaborate symbolic networks that take on a life of their own, introduce a certain distance between the individual agents that carry out the actions of the disembodied entity and the entity itself, the bank or the company farm. Unlike the period prior to the Great Depression, which generated a shift in financial philosophy and practice, ownership is no longer a hard kernel, material connection to the land that is grounded in living and dying on it for the tenant farmers. Instead, for the banks, ownership is predicated on the formulaic series of letters and numbers that add up to a ruthless desire for profit, which is incapable of accounting for the human realities of loving and ultimately losing the cherished family ground. The corporate monster cannot understand the human needs of the farmers and their families; that is, it cannot incorporate farmers' living realities into an elaborate symbolic organization bent on profit. For the displaced families the experience of



working the land and the customary structure of relations between friends and colleagues are the fundamental means of understanding their situation. If the monster cannot calculate these factors, the farmers cannot understand the monster in his disembodied, symbolic forms. As Steinbeck notes on numerous occasions, the farmers literally do not know where to aim their guns to take their retribution. The monstrous qualities attributed to the bank and machinery (the inhuman material counterpart to the bureaucratic machine for which it is an instrument) speak to its impenetrability as a traumatic intrusion of some “symbolic Real,” that is, there is no clear classification for the intrusion of the inhuman, capitalist Thing. Both living in their material manifestations and undead in their elaborate symbolic framework, the corporate forces in *The Grapes of Wrath* designate the perspectival shift that emerges from a historical break associated with the Great Depression. For the blindsided farmers, these developments shake the foundation of the American dream that is so closely associated with the hard work of individuals.<sup>4</sup> If self-sufficiency and “boot straps” living is a key feature of the American Dream, then the impotent banker and Cat operator must seem antithetical to that dream for the tenant farmer. Not only has the monster eaten the tenant farmers’ livelihood, but it has stripped its subordinates of power; no one is self-sufficient if the monster cannot be tamed. Bewildered in the face of the bureaucratic monster, the farmers operate on a notion of individuality, one that would tell them where appropriately to “point the gun,” that has been subsumed by the corporate approach. These monsters erupt on the farms, seeming to emerge out of nowhere or the “no place” that the farmers cannot reach, and force a

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<sup>4</sup> Citing the responses to Steinbeck’s work by two of his contemporary fellow authors, Marshall Hartranft and Ruth Mitchell, Susan Shillinglaw makes a similar point, “Perhaps at some visceral level, what Mitchell and Hartranft found most subversive about Steinbeck’s novel is that it radically questions the American faith in the efficacy of work” (194).

drastic reconsideration of what constitutes community after it has unraveled for the disenfranchised farmers.

John Ford, in his filmic adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, emphasizes the fantastical quality of the mechanized monsters. Condensing a number of the “general experience” chapters in Steinbeck’s novel, Muley Graves (John Qualen) tells the story of losing his family farm. As Muley tells his story, a series of rapid low angle shots of the caterpillar tractors appear on the screen, with the superimposition of the rolling treads covering the frame. Both the size and the cinematographic trick in this series of shots illustrate the fantasy space occupied by the monster. The low angle shots empower the tractors, which dominate not only the land, but, insofar as it the story is told by Muley, the imaginary psychic space of the farmers and by association us the viewers. The superimposition of the tractors emphasizes this abstract, psychic domination transforming the machines from material things into a ghostly force, which overwhelms the frame in a manner similar to the farms and the farmers. Like the Real that appears to emerge from no place in reality, the tractor seems to come out of nowhere onto the family farm, levels the ramshackle house, and then moves back into the nothingness travelling on into the horizon. Referred to as an “old graveyard ghost” in both the novel and the film, Muley is closely associated with some transcendent, undead realm. Much like a ghost, Muley becomes a trace, albeit a material as opposed to ethereal one, of the history that is plowed beneath the treads of the tractors. Somewhere between the living earth he refuses to leave and the history that is no longer grounded in that earth, Muley, like Mose in *The Searchers*, is another of Ford’s great liminal characters. These figures are capable of seeing more than the “normal” world around them, and often at the expense of integrating

into that normal world. Concerned that the traumatic experience has made him crazy, Muley expresses concern that he is “touched,” or, to put it in other terms, he is stained by the encounter with the Real.

The disjunction between the symbolic form run amok in the development of corporate farming and the common sense wisdom of the tenant farmers indicates the distance between the official Law and the unwritten code of norms, customs, and traditions that underpin the Law. Unwritten rules and norms teach us how to interpret the sometimes impenetrable formations of the symbolic order. This implicit accompaniment to the Law is part of the function of fantasy; as Žižek argues, “fantasy designates precisely this unwritten framework, which tells us how we are to understand the letter of the Law ... sometimes the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit Letter of Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies but to *stick to the letter against the fantasy which sustains it*” (TPF 29). Fantasy offers an answer to the indeterminate call of the Law, that is, the slippage in language always creates the possibility for misunderstanding (the Law claims x, but what does it really want from me?).<sup>5</sup> In the place of this uncertain abyss, fantasy offers an unwritten framework, a code of norms and customs that provides

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to keep in mind here that the prohibitive “No of the Father” is the first line of defense against the unsettling abyss of the Mother’s desire. To put this another way, the “No” does not so much prohibit the original harmonious relationship of the mother child dyad, as it creates that fundamental illusion of that relationship through its prohibition. This illusion conceals the confrontation with the unanswerable question of “what does mother want from me?”:

‘father’ is, for Lacan, not the name of a traumatic intrusion, but the *solution* to the deadlock of such an intrusion, the answer to the enigma. The enigma, of course, is the enigma of the (m)other’s desire (What does she effectively want above and beyond *me*, since I am obviously not for her?). ‘Father’ is the *answer* to this enigma, the *symbolization* of this deadlock ... ‘father’ is ... a compromise solution that alleviates the unbearable anxiety of directly confronting the void of the other’s desire (Žižek *BWO* 101).

It is no wonder then, after the breakdown in patriarchal authority, that Ma Joad becomes a figure of fascination for the entire Joad clan, particularly Tom, the “chosen” son, who notes on numerous occasions her change. Once bright and vibrant, Ma Joad is simultaneously an enigma in *The Grapes of Wrath* and a source of strength; her power emanating from her proximity to drive.

answers or an interpretation in the face of the monolithic Law. However, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the intrusion of the “monster” negates the unwritten accompaniment of the Law, which is grounded in the common sense wisdom and understanding of the farmers. Herein lies the nature of the historical shift exacerbated by the dust bowl and the Great Depression, or as Ma Joad claims on numerous occasions, “They’s changes – all over” (Steinbeck 444). Not only does the heavy machinery plow the family homestead under in Steinbeck’s novel, but it also undermines the means of understanding the world that is grounded in the family life on the farm. Ownership and attachment to the land through personal history is no longer privileged or acceptable in the face of the changing Law. Whereas the old hometown bank or landlord might have been flexible with a tenant family due to communal relationships, the “monster” cannot incorporate the human element into its profit formula. Set apart by the elaborate, indecipherable symbolic formations behind which its flesh and blood architects and administrators hide, the monster cannot know the tenant farmers insofar as they cannot be symbolically integrated into the machine; they are the unsightly leftovers of historic-economical change. Previous conceptions of stability, ownership, familial authority, and community are uprooted like the Joad family. Consequently, these hitherto stable components of rural life are thrown into a state of flux or, perhaps more appropriate in terms of the novel’s content, transition. Ultimately, in the face of the unsettling negativity associated with the scarred earth where the family home once stood, the Joad family is forced to wrestle with a rapidly changing world in which their previous means of understanding are no longer sufficient.

## **‘The Family is Breaking Up’**

In his essay “The Joads and Other Rural Families in Depression Fiction” Paul McCarthy argues, “the Joads survive primarily because of a strong family identity and capable and dedicated parents who ... are always present and neither weak nor selfish” (66). While McCarthy is right to assert that family is the source of durability for the Joads in enduring their trials, he does not fully account for the complexity and dynamic quality of the Joad family identity. Certainly Ma and Pa Joad are tough, enduring parents, but “family” is a far more complex notion in *The Grapes of Wrath* than a unit grounded in blood relations. Familial relationships are in a constant state of flux throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. The dramatic change begins early on in their journey with the death of Grampa Joad, who was the patriarchal connection to the family’s history, the “titular head” as Steinbeck refers to him<sup>6</sup> (101). Grampa Joad is closely tied to the farm that grounds the family lineage in material terms. Consequently, Grampa’s death announces the symbolic death of who the Joads were before their trek west. As the first of many folks who will become an adopted Joad, the family’s former preacher, Jim Casy, gives the eulogy for Grampa when they are forced to bury him by the roadside, “An’ Grampa didn’ die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place” (Steinbeck 146). This physical death stands in as a kind of symbolic erasure of Joad history, which is metaphorically inscribed earlier as the Joads leave the family farm, “Ma tried to look back, but the body of the load cut off her view. She straightened her head

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<sup>6</sup> Grampa Joad’s character illustrates the impotence of custom in the transitional world of *The Grapes of Wrath*; as Steinbeck writes, “Grampa was still the titular head, but he no longer ruled. His position was honorary and a matter of custom. But he did have the right of first comment, no matter how silly his old mind might be” (101). Whereas custom and tradition were once profound sources of authority for the tenant farmers, they have withered, like Grampa, and become impotent in the face of a new, confusing authority. Not unlike Grampa’s mind, tradition becomes silly and childish in comparison to the corporate monster and its ruthless efficiency. The unwritten framework of customs and norms is foolish and sloppy next to the definitive formulas of the monster.

and peered straight ahead along the dirt road. And a great weariness was in her eyes” (Steinbeck 114). If we take Casy’s eulogy literally, Grampa is dying as Ma is being installed as the new head of the Joad family; that is, Ma assumes responsibility for maintaining a cohesive family unit. From the outset of the journey Ma is the one who looks forward, cut off from the material tie to the land much like the load cuts off her view from the home that was the original source of Grampa’s authority and vitality.

Unlike Grampa Joad, who is grounded materially to the land that is inextricable from his identity, Ma’s identity is not rooted in a specific place. Instead, insofar as Ma is the caretaker of the family, her job goes out on the road with the family. As other figures break off from the group, Grandma Joad dies, Noah (his Biblical name that connotes leadership becomes ironic when he leaves the family to be alone) and Connie break away, Tom is forced into hiding, and Rose of Sharon’s baby is stillborn, Ma perseveres in her abiding belief in sustaining the family unit: “it ain’t good for folks to break up” (Steinbeck 165). Along with the loss of familial history that grounds identity, there is constant addition to the family unit that is not predicated on the kinship of blood. A number of friends and strangers are integrated into the Joad clan. Casy is brought into the family at the outset of their journey. Even if the men still “hold court” huddled around the jalopy that will carry them west, Ma ultimately provides the rationale for the decision to include Casy: “One more ain’t gonna hurt; an’ a man, strong an’ healthy, ain’t never no burden,” (Steinbeck 102). Along the road, the Joads pick up Ivy and Sairy Wilson, who become part of the family when they help bury Grampa Joad, ““Sairy Wilson he’ped lay Grampa out,’ and she [Ma Joad] stopped. The relationship was plain” (Steinbeck 148). In the latter half of the novel the Wainwrights become part of the Joad

tribe both in the pending marriage of Aggie Wainwright to Al Joad and with Mrs. Wainwright's care for Rose of Sharon during and after her ill-fated delivery. Ultimately, the Joad name, emptied of its previous signifying content associated with the land, becomes a kind of ethical charge for Ma to sustain. Turning both inward to the family and outward to the Hooverville communities that become "small towns," Ma binds struggling groups together with a familial sense of sharing common burdens. Family, divorced from the connection to the farm so integral to its history, becomes a kind of practice for Ma Joad that offers stability in Joads' disjointed world.

While the fundamental values that constitute the previous unwritten framework of fantasy do not disappear during the Joad family's trek to California, their locus and flexibility changes dramatically. Family is the primary location for education in terms of the necessary code of norms, but the nature of familial composition undergoes a significant re-definition throughout the novel. Closely attached to both its history and the collective labor necessary to maintain the farm, family is an important component to rural life for numerous reasons. From early on in American history, as David Danbom claims in *Born in the Country*, "it was not simply a convenience to have a family in rural American a century and a half ago, it was a virtual necessity" (87). A wife and children represented a labor force for early farmers, where work and home were intertwined; the farm family was simultaneously a business and social unit. While the division of labor within the home was often blurred by necessity, typically wives and daughters sustained the domestic welfare of the home, as male children were necessary to help their fathers in the fields. Work often trumped education for children, who rarely left the family

business as a result. Danbom's claim holds true up to the twentieth century,<sup>7</sup> when the advent of newer machinery made farming less labor intensive. Family serves as the foundation for a broader conception of community and functions as a metonym for the small town in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Small "towns" spring up organically in the Hoovervilles and camps that the Joads move in and out of throughout the novel.<sup>8</sup> These ersatz towns are underpinned by a shared understanding of the migrants' struggles. However temporary, the small towns and extended families that form along the road are underpinned by both the recognition of norms that govern social interaction between migrants and small acts of kindness that are integral for their survival.

As the Joads move west, the source of authority, composition, and the conception of family changes with the challenges presented by the world of transition; a world where community and, ultimately, family is in a perpetual state of generation and disintegration. Carroll Britch and Cliff Lewis, in their essay "Growth of the Family in *The Grapes of Wrath*" argue that family for the Joads is the locus of an education in sympathy that is predicated on a subservience of the "I" to the "we." As they claim, "when it comes to serving the family unit each Joad, with the exception noted [Noah], displays a 'we' attitude ... Ma's *we*-ness seems always to have extended beyond the immediate family" (99). It is Ma's sense of "we-ness" that alters the very structure of

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<sup>7</sup> I can attest to this from my own family history. My grandfather, one of eight children, graduated from the eighth grade and promptly went to work on the family farm. Only after my great grandfather could afford to purchase newer machinery, did he move to a larger city and take an industrial job in the late 1940s. Women and children were an essential component to survival in rural areas as cheap laborers.

<sup>8</sup> In one of the "intercalary" chapters Steinbeck addresses this temporary familial and community organization:

In the evening a strange thing happened: twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all ... Every night a world created, complete with furniture – friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning that world torn down like a circus (193-4).



the Joad family in her argument on behalf of Casy, who hopes to travel west with the Joads to find out what is happening in California; Casy becomes a kind of labor prophet in the novel organizing peach-picking migrants into a striking union. Familial custom is offered as justification by Ma Joad for Casy's inclusion:

‘It ain’t kin we? It’s will we?’ she said firmly ... ‘An’ as far as ‘will’ – it’s a long time our folks been here and east before, an’ I never heerd tell of no Joads or Hazletts, neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked. They’s been mean Joads, but never that mean.’ ... Pa turned back, and his spirit was raw from the whipping. (Steinbeck 102)

Pa Joad, faced with the harsh economic realities of travelling across country with twelve of his blood kin, is shamed into accepting Casy out of respect for time-honored customs that are integral to the family identity. Here we see how family is the locus for normalizing discipline, insofar as Pa's potentially objectionable behavior is brought into line by Ma's appeal to the ethics of family. As Ma Joad defines it, family is predicated on an extension of certain values offered by the blood-related group to the stranger in need, who becomes part of an extended conception of family struggling against a common problem. After Ma's argument on his behalf, Casy is included in the group of men who are charged with the planning of the long voyage across the southwest. Once he is established as an adopted Joad, Casy becomes a part of the patriarchal authority that is traditionally charged with thinking through the family's important decisions, "We think long as you're goin' with us, you ought to be over with us, helpin' to figger' things out" (Steinbeck 103). Later along route 66 after the Wilsons become part of the extended family, the same type of group-decision-making responsibility is extended to them as well. When the Wilsons' car breaks down, the Joads do not leave their "clan" behind, but, instead, work in conjunction with the Wilsons to solve the problem and continue the

trek west. It is only when Sairy dies along the way that the Joads split from the Wilsons. This split is a result of respecting Ivy's wishes to halt his trip west, since he is unable to continue without his wife. Dynamic and flexible, family becomes more a cluster of shared experiences and a mode of being than it is a fixed unit predicated on common genetics and attachment to a particular plot of land. Unlike family for Joe Davis, the cat operator who only looks out for his own folks and in so doing shoves other people off the land, family for the Joads is an ethical mode of being that recognizes their struggle in others. That recognition calls upon the Joads, particularly Ma, to extend support to those enduring the same plight.

The patriarchal authority that Casy is invited to join at the beginning of the Joads' exodus is one that is in a state of disintegration almost as soon as he is brought into its circle. As Heavlin has noted in her discussion of Ma Joad,<sup>9</sup> Casy and Ma Joad begin the re-negotiation of gender roles in the family as they prepare for the trip west. Unlike the tenant farmers who are too busy trying to survive to think, Casy is a cerebral figure perpetually contemplating the changes occurring around him. Failing to recognize the distribution of labor along gender lines, Casy begins to engage in the "women's work" of salting down pork for the trip. Initially Ma objects to Casy's transgression of custom, but acquiesces after Casy replies, "It's all work," the preacher replied. "They's too much of

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<sup>9</sup> My reading in this section is indebted to Heavlin's argument in *The Grapes of Wrath: A Reference Guide*, "the character of Ma Joad is historically important because she participates in the breakdown of the gender roles that typically separate men and women" (97). It is important to note that while there certainly was a distribution of labor along gender lines on family farms, from early on in American farming life women did contribute significantly to family income and the difficult work of farming. Opposed to many of their urbanite counterparts, 19<sup>th</sup> century rural women supplemented the family income with their work. As Danbom notes, apropos of Margaret Gebby, "In 1888, her butter and egg receipts composed more than 20 percent of the Gebby family income. Clearly, the urban cultural hegemony was not so powerful as to turn the Margaret Gebbys of the world into rural imitations of contemporary middle-class city women living in conformity to the ideal of domesticity" (151). Given Danbom's historical account, the popular notion of a dominant patriarchy on the family farm, as opposed to big city progressivism, is a limited account of the situation.

it to split up to men's and women's work" (Steinbeck 107). Against the traumatic intrusion that has thrown their life into upheaval, previous classifications, in this case gender labor, are no longer applicable. Consequently, in order to fashion a new way of existing in the world, the family is forced to adopt new roles that allow them to adapt more effectively to their troubling situation. While Casy opens the way for a shift in patriarchal authority, Ma Joad enacts that transition of power from the patriarchal to the matriarchal figure. This tidal shift occurs about halfway through the novel when the Joads are faced with the possibility of splitting into two different travelling parties, a consequence of the Wilsons' malfunctioning vehicle. After the male heads have decided to split into separate groups, one to stay behind and fix the Wilsons' vehicle and another, larger group to go on without the others, Ma Joad flatly refuses to go on without the family unit intact. Not only offering a resounding "No" to the male decision, Ma Joad violently threatens them, "Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily, 'I ain't a-gonna go,' she said" (Steinbeck 168). Here the Lacanian play on the "Name of the Father," the "No of the Father" constitutive of the prohibiting Law, becomes the "No of the Ma," transplanting Pa Joad as the bearer of authority in the Joad clan. A force that is consistently cited in the novel as dormant, the masculine violence designed as a threat to keep an unsettling feminine uncertainty in check is rendered impotent by Ma Joad. Unable to provide adequately for the family, Pa Joad loses any claim to patriarchal authority. At this perilous point in their journey (and history), the Joads need care, community, and endurance to sustain the family. Consequently, the mantle abandoned by Pa is taken up by Ma Joad, who assumes control of the family. Whereas on the

homestead it had been the father who enjoyed the sovereign right of the “No” to protect his family, Ma takes over this place evacuated by the loss of the land and its sustenance to preserve the familial unit, as she claims; “What we got lef’ in the worl’? Nothin’ but us. Nothin’ but the folks” (Steinbeck 169).

The shift from the prohibitive “no of the father” that divides [the original no that separates mother from child] to the “no of the ma” that is cohesive is a necessary response to the Joads’ historical circumstances. Without a definitive way of making meaning in this world in transition, a new mode of being must emerge, or, in simpler terms, a new way of organizing and sustaining life for the family. In the latter half of the *The Grapes of Wrath* Pa Joad frequently reflects on the shift in power within the family, claiming that it “seems like our life’s over an’ done” (Steinbeck 423). For Pa, this death is one that is closely tied to his memory of home, which he realizes he will never see again. Ma, taking up her ethical charge of sustaining the family, counters Pa’s fatalism by explaining the peculiar adaptability of women to socio-historical transition:

“It ain’t, Pa. An’ that’s one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks – baby born an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk – gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. We ain’t gonna die out. People is goin’ on – changin’ a little, maybe, but goin’ right on ... Ever’thing we do – seems to me is aimed right at goin’ on.” (Steinbeck 423)

Ma’s explanation here offers a common-sense distinction between the realm of the symbolic, closely associated with the paternal function, and that of fantasy, whose job it is to suture together the symbolic order into some continuous comprehensible narrative. The temporal “jerks” that she mentions are definitive historical segmentations. The masculine mode of history breaks up one’s life into classifications and periods that are somehow distinct and separate from each other like a volume of historical texts

documenting different epochs. Organizing, categorizing, and distinguishing is the work of the symbolic, which subjects the world to the discipline of an accounting. With each “jerk,” interstitial, transitional spaces emerge that the symbolic is incapable of integrating into its comprehensible framework. Masculine history, in Ma Joad’s estimation, can document after the fact but it cannot narrate its moments of change. Consequently, each of these jerks produces separate narratives refusing to be woven into an overarching master narrative/story. In the intervening periods some o(O)ther force must emerge to weave the jerks together into a more cohesive, meaningful order. As Ma Joad argues in her homespun way, the feminine ability to adapt to the traumatic intrusions that shift the socio-historical movements of life allows her to see continuity where the masculine perspective is unsettled by rupture or death (the end of some symbolic chain). This ability to “go on,” to persist in the face of the horrific Real, is the enduring quality of fantasy as a support to reality, which persistently offers a safe-guard to the subject by holding the fraying edges of reality together. Here, fantasy should be divorced from its negative connotations, as some hallucinatory function that diverts one’s attention from a terrifying truth by providing an alternative, illusory realm into which one can escape.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Initially, Ma is bolstered by the fantasy of a new family home in California. As she explains, “but I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An’ fruit ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder – that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work – maybe we can get one of them little white houses” (Steinbeck 91). Two things, in particular, stand out in this passage. The first is Ma’s “maybe” that separates “nice” and “California” in her statement. Doubt is already undermining the fantasy that tenuously holds the family together as they set out on their journey; the stain of their traumatic experience in Oklahoma is already marked on the place where they will land. The second notable feature is the “humble” quality of Ma’s fantasy. A small house and oranges are enough to sustain the thought of leaving home and the long exodus to California that is fraught with potential for disaster. One of the key features of fantasy in its support of reality is that it is *not* overly-idealized, but designates a “minimum of idealization” that places the Real at a distance (Žižek *TPF* 66). In other words, fantasy functions much like the “maybe” in Ma’s statement, intervening to separate reality (how nice it’s gonna be) from the Real (the unknown in California). Deprived of this distance reality turns into a nightmarish landscape, or, to put it terms of Steinbeck’s novel, it is traversing the distance between Oklahoma and California that turns the nice white house into the ramshackle dwellings of Hooverilles and migrant farm camps.

Ma Joad's minimal shred of fantasy, that of preserving familial life at all costs, is what allows her to approach the ethical realm of drive. Like woman's relationship to change, drive refuses the "jerks" of moving from one object to another associated with the more hallucinatory games of (masculine) desire. Ma Joad's definition of continuity, the "goin' right on," represents a convergence of fantasy and drive. In the case of the feminine relationship to history, fantasy is stripped of all possible diversions of reality associated with desire, the little interruptions that sustain one's engagement with his/her life world to experience a kind of narrative flow like drive's endless loop. The collapse of previous ways of being open the empty space around which drive, with its persistent flow, circulates. The minimal amount of distance constituted by fantasy, the family as the object, allows her to sustain the "death" that crushes Pa Joad<sup>11</sup>. To return to Anderson's conception of the small town in *Hometown*, Ma does not need the kind of specific place that Anderson does to accomplish the stable, life-affirming experience of home; Anderson's belief in this "place" is a fundamental misperception of the illusion that trumps any geographical specificity. What Ma realizes that Anderson seemingly does not is that the home falsely located in the small town is not a specific place, but a sustaining

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<sup>11</sup> Family is not unlike the "mote of dust" remainder following symbolic suicide that Žižek refers to in *The Fragile Absolute*: "Here, the subject finds itself totally deprived of his symbolic identity, thrown into 'the night of the world' in which, it's only correlative is the minimum of an excremental leftover, a piece of trash, a mote of dust in the eye, an *almost-nothing* that sustains the pure Place-Frame-Void, so that here, finally, 'nothing but the place takes place'" (30). The "almost-nothing" in this passage resonates with Ma's Joad's argument for sticking together as a family; that is, the family has nothing but "the folks" left after they leave Oklahoma. In the Joad's symbolic suicide, we encounter the significance of the land and home to familial identity for farmers. The symbolic erasure associated with symbolic suicide, the severing of all signifying links that anchor a subject's identity, is not wholly grounded in the loss of the family farm. Instead, the symbolic erasure is predicated on the loss of the family's history as it is embodied by the farm and the material traces Ma will burn (in John Ford's film version) before they leave. Leaving home designates a kind of symbolic death – the emptying of the Joad identity that is plowed under by the robotic monsters. All that remains is the degraded version of the family (minus some key members), which sustains the "place" or the void around which drive circulates. This little piece left over, which continues to disintegrate as the novel nears closure, compels Ma Joad forward.

mode of being. Even if it is ultimately an illusion, the small town for Anderson, who is trapped in the funhouse of desire, remains an object anchored somewhere (somewhere we can never fully reside like Main Street U.S.A.). For Ma Joad, home is what she carries with her in the flow of drive: as she claims, “Woman got all her life in her arms” (Steinbeck 423).

### **Familial Love as the Ethical Charge of Drive**

The distinction between phallic desire and feminine love is useful in explaining the ethics of drive that compels Ma Joad in the latter half of Steinbeck’s novel. These “gendered” distinctions are modes of being, and not to be taken as the biological divisions that Ma Joad argues for in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *On Belief*, Žižek distinguishes between desire’s perpetual dissatisfaction with its object and love’s unflagging acceptance, “desire is always caught in the logic of ‘this is not that,’ it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love FULLY ACCEPTS that ‘this IS that’ – that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I unconditionally love” (90). Desire is always predicated on some feature or obstacle that precludes the object from fitting into the designated space carved out for it within the symbolic order. Desire is a means of classification, with a meticulous fantasmatic-symbolic component that delineates the boundaries of what the object should be (i.e., the “sought-for” satisfaction). Since no object can live up to the “dignity” conferred upon it by sublimation, desire by its very nature is “jerky” in the sense that Ma Joad attributes to masculine history. The desiring subject moves from object to object in jerks when the thing proves to be insufficient.

Love, on the other hand, does not attempt to compress the object into some pre-existent fantasy space. Unlike desire, love does not discard the object because it fails to live up to its place, but, instead, accepts the object for all its shortcomings and flaws. Desire desires on account of something, either filtering out undesirable traits or setting them up as obstacles to desire's full realization – if only she wouldn't laugh *that* way, or if only he wouldn't chew with his mouth open. Love loves in spite of flaws, and, through its own strange transformational process, love locates in those very flaws the beloved person worthy of this powerful attachment.

This distinction is evident in *The Grapes of Wrath* in the disjunction between the romantic love between Connie and Rose of Sharon, and the familial love Ma Joad provides for her clan. In both cases, these relationships are sustained early on by the dream of the "little white house" they will find in California, which will be the new home where they can start a new life. Once the Joads arrive in California and are disabused of the romantic notions they extrapolate from the "yellow handbills" promising plentiful work and high wages, Connie knows that he will never be able to deliver on the "sought-for" satisfaction that Rose of Sharon demands: "She said fiercely, 'We got to have a house 'fore the baby comes. We ain't gonna have this baby in no tent'" (Steinbeck 252). Facing the collapse of his dream of providing a home for his new family through correspondence classes, Connie runs away from the Joads leaving his pregnant wife behind. Ma is forced to confront the implausibility of her fantasy when they arrive in California. While the Joads will later locate the kind of garden paradise they sought when they left Oklahoma, their initial introduction to California portends the uneasiness that they will find in that paradise. Facing the California desert, Tom claims, "this here's



a murder country ... Ma got her heart set on a white house. Get to thinkin' they ain't no such country" (Steinbeck 204). Even if the Joads eventually find the garden, they are undesirable plants, or weeds, that are not permitted to take root in it; the arid desert dries up the last hope of some idealistic dream of what California might be for the family. No longer able to cling to the last fragment of delusionary fantasy, Ma has only familial love remaining to sustain her and her clan against the unexpectedly harsh migrant farmer life in California. Ultimately, Ma's love is not predicated on a "sought-for" satisfaction like that of Connie and Rose of Sharon, but is grounded in a blanket "despite of." Despite Tom's incarceration, despite Pa's loss of authority, despite Rose of Sharon's persistent worrying, and despite their inability to work enough to procure her little white house, Ma loves her kin.

The shift from patriarchal to matriarchal authority in *The Grapes of Wrath* is grounded in the movement from the jerky structure of desire to the more fluid, connective function of love. In her essay "From Heroine to Supporting Player: The Diminution of Ma Joad," Mimi Gladstein argues that Ma does not grow into the role of the head of the family, but, instead, "Ma has been the de facto head of the family all along. Her power does not grow; only the overt expression of it does" (128). While Gladstein argues that Ma was already the head of the family and that she only becomes more vocal as the novel proceeds, she underestimates the perspectival shift that allows Ma to become more outspoken in her position of authority. Throughout the novel the potency of men is placed under scrutiny by their economic circumstances, which is precisely the reason Ma cites as her own emergence as the head of the family:

"You get your stick, Pa," she said. "Times when they's food an' a place to set, then maybe you can use your stick an' keep your skin whole. But you ain't a-

doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a workin'. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffley their nose an' creep-mouse aroun'." (Steinbeck 352)

The inability of men to live up to their role as providers for the family, as Ma Joad argues, leaves the opening for women to assume the mantle that had been taken from the men. It is the unhinging of the previous normal order of things that opens up the way for a reconsideration of authority. While Gladstein is correct in asserting that Ma's power is always-already there, it is the historical shift that introduces a rift in phallic control that allows for it to be explicitly superceded by feminine love. To put this in terms of the split between desire and love, desire is ultimately phallic in its approach, insofar as it seeks to discipline and dominate the object by subjecting it to certain symbolic formations; desire seeks to fit the object into the particular mold carved out for it. Love, on the other hand, seems to belong to the realm of feminine *jouissance*, the "not-whole" in the symbolic sense that goes beyond the domination of phallic *jouissance*. As Jacques Lacan claims, "one can situate oneself on the side of the not-whole. There are men who are just as good as women. It happens. And who feel just fine about it. Despite – I won't say their phallus – despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics" (*OL* 76). Casy would fall along the lines of the men that Lacan refers to here, men who are no longer encumbered by the "phallus." Casy's entire being in *The Grapes of Wrath* is predicated on "finding out something," rather than subjecting the world to the knowable realm of the symbolic order. He recognizes the epochal shift brought on by the Great Depression, and rather than impose old forms of knowledge on a new situation, he enters into a mode of perpetual inquiry that is not based on control. The former preacher seeks

to understand not to know. Consequently, Casy's endless ruminations on what he can't know for certain but continues to contemplate would speak to his move towards a "mystical" feminine *jouissance*. Casy's persistent "I don't know" is a recognition of the "not-whole" that is constitutive of the symbolic order; there is always some (T)hing that refuses full integration into the socio-symbolic network. Ma's refusal or inability to live in "jerks" like Pa speaks to the flow of the feminine *jouissance*, the *jouissance* that cannot be totalized, and, consequently, escapes the signifying constraints that limit the otherwise phallic world. This continuity is that of love, insofar as the *jouissance* that accompanies love is one that escapes the trappings and frustrations associated with desire. Unlike desire, love can navigate the in-between spaces, the ruptures in reality, insofar as it belongs to the realm of the "not-whole" that accepts the flaws in its object. Consequently, love approaches its reality with enduring compassion. The *jouissance* that is beyond is the kind that finds enjoyment in the flaws, insufficiencies, and shortcomings of the objects/persons, insofar as it is not subjecting them to the discipline of categorization. In a historical moment where men were largely rendered impotent by the loss of work, this mode of enjoyment, grounded in its disavowal of phallic control, becomes a key component to survival.

Throughout the latter half of the novel Ma Joad's love and compassion become the source of stability for the "small towns" or little communities in which the Joads establish their temporary roots. While both Tom and Jim Casy, who is frequently referred to in the novel by himself and the narrator as a Christ-like figure, stand in for a more transcendental notion of community, Ma takes up the work of community building at a more practical level by holding together both the smallest unit of community, the

family, and extending the integral values of family to those whom they encounter along the road. From the meager bit of stew she gives to the starving children in the first Hooverville in California to holding away seven dollars which she gives to Tom so that he can escape the police after he has killed a strike buster, Ma is consistently selfless in her actions. Compassion, as Ma recognizes, is indispensable to the work of survival taken up collectively by those in her predicament. More so than any other character, Ma recognizes the solidarity wrought from compassion; as she replies to the poor clerk at the migrant labor camp who gives her a dime for the sugar she can't afford, "'Learnin it all the time, ever' day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need – go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help – the only ones'" (Steinbeck 376). Here, the compassion that the corporate monster cannot incorporate into its bureaucratic processes emerges in those who have nothing to give to each other but sympathetic understanding. While there is a great deal of narrative weight in the novel afforded to the anger of men, which is a sign that they have yet to "break," it is love, ultimately, that is the source survival for the displaced tenant farmers. The dynamic relationship between love and anger in *The Grapes of Wrath* is staged in the struggle between Ma's love and Tom's frustration as they encounter a gang of vigilantes after leaving the first Hooverville. At his boiling point, Tom is convinced by Ma to "keep clear" of his anger and potential retribution for the sake of the family, "The fambly's breakin' up. You got to keep clear" (Steinbeck 279). As Tom reaches for a jack handle to exorcise his anger, Ma "powerfully" grips his arm, staving off the ultimately impotent gesture of attacking the mob (Steinbeck 279). Tom knows very well that he is outnumbered and at a competitive disadvantage in weaponry; only his pride that pushes him towards violence. In this instance, Ma's

“powerful” love holds him back, forcing him, in spite of his pride, to turn the other cheek for the sake of holding the family together. Anger may serve to stiffen the men’s resolve to survive, but, ultimately, it is an impotent force in comparison to love, which binds the family together against the forces bent on tearing them apart.

Rather than weakening their resolve, the “beating” the poor take at the hands of the corporate monster creates their strength and compassion; as Ma Joad explains, ““Maybe that makes us tough. Rich fella come up an’ die an’ their kids ain’t no good, an’ they die out. But, Tom, we keep a-comin’” (Steinbeck 280). Nowhere is this powerful compassion more evident than in the ending of Steinbeck’s novel. Only a shell of the original family remains. Granma and Granpa Joad die in the trek across country. Noah, Tom’s younger brother, leaves the family to stay by the Colorado River. Connie runs away to avoid dealing with his wife, and, most likely, his child’s disappointment. Casy, who organizes a migrant farmer union at a peach farm, is killed by a strike breaker, which brings on Tom’s uncontrollable rage inciting him to kill that strike breaker. Rose of Sharon’s baby is stillborn, and Al remains with the Wainwright family when the Joads set off to find shelter from the torrential rains. Having left the shelter of a flooded boxcar camp, the diminished Joad family seeks shelter from the winter rains in a nearby barn. There they encounter a young boy and his starving father, who is on the verge of death. Like Ma Joad, who persistently sacrifices for the sake of the family, the father has deprived himself so that his son may eat the last morsel of food available. Sick and psychologically reeling from the death of her baby, Rose of Sharon is offered a dirty comforter by the young boy to warm her against the harsh weather conditions and her illness. In the face of the starving man both Pa Joad and Uncle John “helplessly” stare,

much as they are rendered impotent by their socio-historical circumstances. At this point Ma Joad shares an understanding gaze with Rose of Sharon. As Steinbeck writes:

Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping. She said "Yes." Ma smiled. "I knowed you would. I knowed!" (454)

Rose of Sharon then "gently" cradles the starving man's head as he staves off starvation by being breast fed by the compassionate stranger. The shared look between Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad is one grounded in the understanding of survival, continuity, as Ma Joad earlier explains to Pa, through love. A condensation of the problems wrought by their historical circumstances, the starving man is the embodiment of withering patriarchal authority amongst the migrant farmers.

Pa and Uncle John are incapable of offering any manner of assistance in the face of this problem; they have nearly reached the state of disintegration of the starving stranger. Pa and Uncle John's impotence is doubly inscribed in this scene, insofar as they are simultaneously observing their potential future and a symbol of their withered authority within their world in transition. The most intimate form of familial bonding, the mother-child dyad created through breastfeeding, is the only means of survival, and, consequently, can only be provided by maternal love. Like Casy and the Wilsons before him, the stranger is brought into the Joad family. In her selfless gesture, Rose of Sharon takes up Ma Joad's ethics of family, insofar as familial love is the last line of defense against the horrific repercussions of the symbolic Real that resonate throughout Great Depression America. The "mysterious smile" that crosses Rose of Sharon's lips at the end of the novel is a recognition of what Ma exclaims to "know." This smile is an

understanding of the continuity, the force of drive, that is constitutive of the salvific female love/experience in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

### **From Ma to the Ghost of Tom Joad**

Deviating significantly from Steinbeck's novel, John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* locates the force of drive more in the figure of Tom (Henry Fonda), who largely takes Ma's (Jane Darwell) place as the protagonist. Opposed to Steinbeck's strong assertive Ma Joad, Ford's Ma lacks the same authoritative presence; as Gladstein argues, "Ford's Ma is sweet, good, and reassuring, but there is little evidence that she understands their situation, nor is she assertive about her beliefs. She does not *act* to effect her values" (133). As Gladstein indicates, the significance and effectiveness of feminine love is greatly diminished in the film, sacrificed to a more traditional patriarchal authority and will. This distinction is most evident in the dramatically different ending to the film, which excises Rose of Sharon's merciful act of charity. While Ford keeps Tom's famous speech from the novel about his omnipresence with regard to social injustice, "I'll be ever'where – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there," the narrative import placed on this speech is far greater in the film than in the novel (Steinbeck 419). Whereas the novel grounds survival in the capacity for compassion and love – the kind of love demonstrated by Rose of Sharon --, the film privileges Tom's idealism, which is derived from Casy's (John Carradine) move from philosophical contemplation into political action on behalf of the migrant farmers. Where gender roles and authority are challenged in the novel, placing Ma Joad as the steward of the family, Tom Joad in the film re-establishes the primacy of patriarchal

action. If Rose of Sharon, the first daughter, is the practical savior in the novel, emphasizing compassionate acts as the source of survival in harsh times, Tom, as the chosen son, becomes a kind of messianic figure in Ford's film. Rose of Sharon is the practical, "charity worker" on the ground helping others. Tom's promise is nebulous, insofar as he is "out there" somewhere supposedly working on behalf of those who are being neglected.<sup>12</sup> Ma's speech regarding survival, which is ripped from the middle of Steinbeck's novel and placed at the end of Ford's film, seems to take on a different tone. In the middle of the novel, this reflection emerges purely from her own thoughts and ruminations on the Joad's struggles. However, at the end of the film these words seem to belong less to Ma herself, but, instead, to her deep belief in Tom, who has taken the weight of "the people" that Ma refers to upon his shoulders. Ultimately, the move away from Ma Joad as the heroine of the novel to Tom Joad as the hero in Ford's film, seems to shift the focus away from compassionate love of the family to a stronger push towards broader political activism.

While Steinbeck's writing is undoubtedly intended to spark political debate, its strength resides more in the moving depictions of endurance in the collective work of the small communities the Joads fall into. These communities, comprised of simple folks struggling against seemingly impossible circumstances, are less concerned with large scale politics than with survival, which is made possible by the kind of ethical work in

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<sup>12</sup> Tom's messianic association will also pop up later in popular culture within the politicized music of Bruce Springsteen, whose song "The Ghost of Tom Joad" further elevates Tom into a transcendental spirit, "I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light/ with the ghost of Tom Joad" (Internet). Springsteen's song locates a common theme with homelessness in the modern city with the nomadic life of the migrant farmers. Joad's spirit is alive in Springsteen's lyrics in the social injustice perpetrated on the homeless, and by the end of the song the speaker conjures that spirit into existence. Rage Against the Machine, whose songs frequently deal with the injustices of late Capitalism, have covered Springsteen's original, transforming the original ballad into a heavily distorted anthem reflecting Tom's growing anger in the novel.



which Ma Joad is perpetually engaged. Steinbeck's alternating chapters, one narrative line dealing specifically with the Joad family and the other being a more general outline of the social impact of the dust bowl and the Great Depression, at the very least creates a parallel between the large scale socio-political landscape and the particular experience within that realm. Ford's film primarily attempts to collapse these two similar but distinct spheres in Steinbeck's novel, as is most evident in the condensation of the early "general" chapters into the particular story of Muley Graves. Gone in Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* are the stories of the Wilsons, the Wainwrights, and, most importantly, Rose of Sharon's stillborn child. While losing the poignant final scene of the novel is a significant cut, it is not difficult to see how an audience in the early 1940s would have found the final image unsettling; the scene would have never made it past the Hays production code. Each of these cuts from the novel excise a portion of the story that is integral to the familial theme pervading *The Grapes of Wrath*. Family is the locus for the small and large acts of love that sustain a conceptual sense of "home," even if the material home is long gone, and community that is threatened at the beginning of the novel. While some lip service is paid to this idea in the film's dialogue, Ford shifts the ideological center of the story from this dynamic core, grounded in the figure of Ma Joad, to a more expansive political message, grounded in Tom.

Nowhere is this shift more evident than in the narrative organization of the film, which rearranges the latter half of the novel. In Steinbeck's story the family's stay at the government camp at Weedpatch, a socialist utopia cut off from the harsh Californian socio-economic atmosphere, is situated before the latter two migrant camps in which the Joads briefly live. At the first migrant camp, a peach farm, the Joads unwittingly become

“scabs” breaking the strike organized by Casy; this is where Tom kills a strikebreaker who murders Casy. The second camp, a cotton farm, is the penultimate setting in the book, and where two of the more significant family losses occur: Tom is forced to leave to spare the family from incrimination and Rose of Sharon’s baby is stillborn. In the film “Wheat Patch” is their final stop, following Tom’s killing of a strikebreaker at the peach farm. The change in the camp’s name announces the more overt political orientation of the film. The transformation of the potentially negative connotation of “Weedpatch” becomes a place of positive growth in “Wheat Patch.” While Steinbeck certainly does not paint a negative picture of the camp, the use of the term “weed” would seem to speak to a certain cultural prejudice directed towards the migrants. In the view of average, gainfully employed Californians, the migrant occupants of the camp were “weeds” that blighted the otherwise green, fertile California landscape: they were “Okies,” regardless of their origins, and were unwelcome. The distinction between “weed,” a persistent plant that is defined, albeit as a nuisance, by its adaptability and toughness, and “wheat,” which is a source of nourishment, indicates the different purposes for the camp in both texts. Steinbeck makes of the camp a temporary haven that allows for the tough Joad family to gather itself for the even more difficult experiences in the camps ahead. Ford transforms the camp into *the solution* that restores hope for Joads: for this reason it is the final stop for the Joads. If for Steinbeck the Joads are “weeds” that, even though they are “uprooted” refuse to die, then for Ford they are the occasion to offer a socialist solution, the nourishment of “wheat,” to the struggling folk. Ford’s depiction of the Joad family is less about their toughness and resilience and more about illustrating the plight of migrants, who need a “hand up.”

In both versions of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the government camp is an oasis where humanity has not disintegrated into poisonous suspicion and prejudice. In other words, the government camp, much like the original small town or rural area, becomes an ersatz home. Weed/Wheat Patch's tight confines, general lack of privacy, and spirit of community mirror the small rural towns that many of the migrants left for California. As Ma Joad exclaims, "Praise God, we come home to our own people" (Steinbeck 307). The collective established by the migrants who organize and manage the maintenance of the camp is an illustration that "things can be better," that the "Okies" are not sub-human by nature, as the California natives tend to believe. In Steinbeck's novel, the hope instilled by life in the camp is short-lived, as the most troubling struggles for the Joad family occur after they have left Weedpatch in search of work. Unlike at the camp where the burden is shared, the family must draw the strength and persistence for survival in their reliance upon each other and in the compassionate love that emanates from the familial core. However, in Ford's film, Wheat Patch is their last stop,<sup>13</sup> and the socialist utopia they discover there, wrought from New Deal politics (the camp manager (Grant Mitchell) looks conspicuously like FDR) is offered as a solution to their situation. Facing his imminent incarceration, Tom, at Wheat Patch and not the cotton farm in the novel, is elevated into a socio-political messiah. Given the sympathetic depiction of the migrants, Steinbeck was no doubt a supporter of such government relief programs like Wheat

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<sup>13</sup> The film ends with the Joads on the way to the cotton farm, refreshed from the experience at Wheat Patch. If one has not read the novel, then the ending is one that is largely uplifting and positive, which is evident in Ma's renewed spirits and her smiling acceptance of their circumstances. However, if one has read the novel, then the ending either rings somewhat hollow as to pat a conclusion to the struggles the Joads have faced; a dark cloud hangs over the relatively happy ending, insofar as we know that Rose of Sharon still faces her most traumatic experience in the story. The "patch" in the camp's compound name functions in Ford's film as a kind of fantasmic, ideological patch that occludes simultaneously the most disturbing (the stillbirth) and the most uplifting portions of the novel (Rose of Sharon's act of charity) Removing this "patch" would challenge the primacy of the governmental solution seemingly tacitly endorsed by Ford.

Patch, yet it is not the solution or the source of the Joads' survival in his *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ford's more overt political approach finds its "home" in the government camp that restores the family and emboldens their spirit as they leave to find work on the cotton farm – a cotton farm being the home they originally left.

The sense of "home" as it is re-discovered in Wheat Patch is reinforced by the music as Tom leaves the camp under the veil of darkness. In the early scenes set in Oklahoma, "Red River Valley" can be heard in the soundtrack on numerous occasions. A particularly slow, melancholy version plays as the Joads are driving away from the family farm. The same tune can be heard after Tom takes his leave from Wheat Patch, simultaneously connecting the camp with the original home in Oklahoma and its loss as he is forced to leave. The crime that compels him to separate from his family is the same as in the novel, but in the film it takes place at the peach camp prior to arriving at Wheat Patch. Rather than simply conjuring the notion of the Joad family's original home, "Red River Valley" establishes a tripartite connection between home in Sallisaw, home at Wheat Patch, and Tom as a kind of spiritual home for the migrant farmers. Insofar as Tom leaves the family to be "everywhere" where there is social injustice, he carries with him the sense of "home" that he has learned in Wheat Patch. By carrying that spirit with him, Tom is the potential healer of the social ruptures that are plaguing Depression-era America. This unification finds resonance in Ma's final words in Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which are uttered as she leaves the camp, "we are the people." Whereas Steinbeck painstakingly separates his migrant farmers from the society that perpetually disavows them, Ford explores a more expansive political scope that is condensed in Ma Joad's final speech. Like Tom's omnipresence in the face of social injustice, Ma's final words appeal

not only to those engaged in the same struggle as the migrant farmers, but to a larger collective in her veiled reference to the Bill of Rights.<sup>14</sup>

### **Forever Lost On the Way Home**

The two versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* express a pervasive anxiety regarding the loss of home, be it the small scale loss of one's family home or a larger national conception of home; precisely the kind of home associated with the ideological small town in a broader socio-political sense. Both narratives depict attempts by the Joads to reclaim that conception of a stable place. In her drive to preserve the family, Ma Joad expresses her concern about the loss of their home and the loss of origins that are a consequence of losing both the place and its history. In one of the more intimate scenes in Ford's film, we watch as Ma Joad burns the documented history of the Joad family including postcards, pictures, and press-clippings of Tom's trial for manslaughter. The melancholy "Red River Valley," the theme song of home in *The Grapes of Wrath*, plays in the soundtrack as a pained Ma Joad tosses objects into the fire stopping only to look into a mirror holding a cherished pair of earrings up to her ears. At first smiling, her expression quickly changes to one decidedly darker in mood. The music comes to a stop as she turns away from the mirror to resume her burning before Tom calls her out of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ford invokes the collective in the face of social injustice through cinematography as well. As the Joads enter the Hooverville in California, the camera takes on a first person point-of-view with the viewer assuming the vantage point of the Joad family on their jalopy. Aligned with the Joads, we see the pathetic faces of the neglected migrants who stare into the camera with hollow eyes as the jalopy moves through the camp. Here the identification is two-fold. On the one hand, we are placed in the same situation as the Joads, aligned with their struggle and their bemusement in the harsh face of their social conditions. On the other hand, it forces us into the uncomfortable position of being first hand witnesses to the results of socio-political neglect of those in desperate need of help. In other words, Ford effectively collapses the distance that separates "us" from "them" by forcing us into the same position as the Joads; that is, with the use of subjective camera Ford makes us *them* and eradicates any safe distance we can establish, either through prejudice or false sympathy, from the plight of them.

home for the last time. Music provides the key to a moment of psychological realization for Ma Joad; that is, in this moment, the transformation in the mirror from positive recollection to painful recognition, Ma realizes that home is effectively lost for her. As this psychological transformation takes place, the music fades away like the traces of the past she tosses into the fire. Ma's act of burning the family history is a kind of symbolic suicide, insofar as Ma deliberately severs her connection to a history that would be too painful to take along with the family to California. Regarding this symbolic death as a kind "emotional necessity," Frank Eugene Cruz rightly argues that, "Ma's actions are less a matter of choice than of emotional necessity. This scene of disassociation from the past does not make the Joads 'unfeeling;' instead, this process of *disremembering* is a necessary negation for a character who wishes to avoid the social death that transforms Muley into 'an ol' graveyard ghos'" (65). Uncoupled from the history that is too psychologically burdensome to carry with her, Ma's conception of home goes "out on the road." In a state of constant transition, the family takes up residence somewhere between an unknown future place and the void left in the ashes smoldering in their forsaken home.

This "in-between" quality of home, a cluster of memories and ideas as well as the unbreakable, hard materialism of the place, is characteristic of the liminal quality of the small town/rural area. The small town can be a specific place, a conception in a broader ideological context, or both all at once. Cruz argues in his essay "'In Between Past and Future Town': Home and the Unhomely in *The Grapes of Wrath*" that the liminality of Steinbeck's novel proves to be the source its endurance as a literary classic. Both of its time, insofar as the Great Depression created the unhomely (and un-homing) experience of transition for so many people, and relevant to modern day conceptions of hybridity, the

novel as Cruz claims, “highlights the subtleties of an in-between experience. It is the representation of this experience which continues to resonate with readers and accounts (at least in part) for the novel’s persistent presence, relevance, and place in our popular cultural imagination” (55). The in-between quality associated with *The Grapes of Wrath* can be both liberating and anxiety-inducing. In its potential for the proliferation of creative new identities and ways of being, the uncoupling of traditional, normative frameworks, allows for new means of understanding one’s life-world like Ma’s feminine understanding of history, which opposes a more patriarchal conception. Still, this disintegration of custom generates no small degree of anxiety, insofar as it designates a loss of some authentic origins that can never be fully reclaimed – even if the “authenticity” of those origins is only retroactively created by their loss, the sense of anxiety is no less palpable. Ironically, these two seemingly opposed conceptions are mutually interdependent. The original small town or home, as a purely fantasmic conception, is both “home” and the ultimately absent place that is the source of plentitude associated with the liminal. Sherwood Anderson’s idealistic conception of “home” in *Hometown*, which is located precisely in the small-town, is coupled with the kind of hybridity that Cruz locates in *The Grapes of Wrath*, “Then the Italians, Greeks, men of all Southwest Europe. Mexicans came up into the Southwest, the Asiatics into the Pacific coast country. The sons and daughters of all these learning to speak English, helping us in the making of a new language, the American language” (9). For Anderson, the small town/rural area is simultaneously the place of origin and a dynamic place of diversity, capable of incorporating the radically new, heterogeneous influence into an always-already existing sense of home; language becomes the collective project of a diverse

group that does not disrupt the conception of America. Like the object of desire, the small town can be plugged into a narrative in order to suture it together to form a (mis)conception of unity. Consequently, the small town is simultaneously an original, Edenic place where the social ruptures that threaten the fabric of reality are absent, and a place of plenitude associated with the “in-betweenness” Cruz attributes to *The Grapes of Wrath*. No wonder then that Anderson largely avoids commentary on the distinct regional differences of the small town photographs that accompany *Hometown*.

Anderson’s “small town” has been excised from any socio-cultural particularities that would anchor it in some material reality. If regional particularities do come up in his novel, then they are always in servitude of some idyllic description of the place that establishes harmony between disparate identities and cultures. While we may be different, according to Anderson, in certain trivial ways that ultimately add up to naught, in the final account, the small town makes us all a shining, happy norm. For Anderson, the small town is a floating signifier that can mean anything (and mean everything when necessary) because it is a fantastical concept that can be strategically deployed to cure all socio-political ills.

*The Grapes of Wrath* illustrates the illusory quality of this original home, and gives body to the anxiety caused by its loss. The opposite side of such an object of desire is not some meaningful plenitude, but the radical negativity that simultaneously undermines meaning and generates the processes of symbolization intended to conceal this negativity. Home, as the original Eden that Anderson envisions in *Hometown*, is always-already lost insofar as it never really existed in the first place. Incidentally, this “never having existed in the first place” is precisely what generates the false memory of it



as some harmonious whole.<sup>15</sup> Ford's use of the melancholy "Red River Valley" to connote home embeds the "always-lost" quality associated with the original place:

From this valley they say you are going/ We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile/  
For they say you are taking the sunshine/ That has brightened our pathways awhile

I've been thinking a long time, my darling/ Of the sweet words you never would say/  
Now, alas, must my fond hopes all vanish/ For they say you are going away

Do you think of the valley you're leaving/ O how lonely and how dreary it will be/  
And do you think of the kind hearts you're breaking/ And the pain you are causing to me

They will bury me where you have wandered/Near the hills where the daffodils grow/  
When you're gone from the Red River Valley/ For I can't live without you I know. (Guthrie)

The speaker, in a gesture of pure melancholia, treats his lover as though she were already gone before she has left the Red River Valley, from where "they say you are going." Just as home offers the promise of something it can never fully deliver, the lover withholds "the sweet words" that would bind the couple into some harmonious whole, stripping from the place of their existence the delayed "sought-for" satisfaction. Deprived of the supplement of enjoyment provided by the lover, the speaker can no longer survive in his life-world, or, in other words, the co-ordinates that delineate his reality fall apart without the object that underpins it. Without the lost lover the "Red River Valley" is deprived of the nourishing "sunshine" that emerges from her being. What is lost here is not simply

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<sup>15</sup> My reading here is indebted to Žižek's definitions of melancholy and mourning from *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*. Mourning accomplishes the symbolic act of a "second killing of the (lost) object," or, in other words, of being able to subject the loss of some cherished object/person to the process of meaningful symbolization integrating it into the subject's narrative framework. However, melancholic attachment refuses such a gesture by sustaining a passionate connection to the lost object, which, "obfuscates the fact that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is *nothing but* the positivization of a void/lack, a purely anamorphic entity which does not exist 'in itself'" (Žižek *DSSST* 143).

the beloved object/person, but the very sense of home that is unsustainable without the *jouissance* interjected by that object/person. Ford's use of "Red River Valley" as a signifier of home is a clever, ironic one. It illustrates that home is always-already lost, insofar as it is conceived of as a place of original harmony. Much as the lover can never have his beloved, home can never be fully occupied with all its fantasmatic furnishings. The only way to possess home as some original ideal is to treat it as already lost through a melancholy attachment, thus laying claim to the original plenitude that never really existed.

Opposed to this melancholic gesture that sustains the ideal in its suspended attachment, mourning signifies loss by symbolically closing the door on that to which we can no longer claim to be attached. Ma Joad accomplishes the work of mourning in *The Grapes of Wrath* by burning the family history. Ma's burning kills the traces of home, enabling her to start life anew on the road; as she claims in Ford's film (dialogue that does not appear in Steinbeck's novel), "We're going to California ain't we? Alright then, let's go to California ... Never had to lose everything I had in life" (*Grapes*).<sup>16</sup> Ma acknowledges the loss of home and the crippling melancholia of clinging to the lost place/object, and, in order to start fresh, she erases the traces that continue to create the lost space in her mind. If the Great Depression signifies a kind of death of home, this death embodied in the plight of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, brought on by

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here that Ma's burning doesn't take place in her family home, but that of Uncle John (Frank Darien). While the material traces of home are important for the family, the mementos that she burns indicate that the psychological conception of home is far stronger. Memories, embodied in Ma's post-cards and press-clippings, outstrip the actual place of home, and they are too painful to carry with the family on the trip to California. Ultimately, the memory of home will haunt Pa Joad later in *The Grapes of Wrath*; it is the thing that he cannot escape from in the latter half of the novel.

socio-historical circumstances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the work of mourning over the next two decades is a slow and incomplete process.

## Chapter 2: A Stranger in the House

Both Ford and Steinbeck in their different versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* identify the significance of collective effort for survival against traumatic historical change. This solidarity is taken up on a broader national level during the Second World War. Still reeling from years of financial struggle and socio-political dissension that followed the market collapse, the strained American society found a common cause in the mobilization for war. Despite the overwhelming popularity of the war, particularly after Pearl Harbor, mobilization did not necessarily rise up in an organic manner from the people who would participate on the frontlines and the home front. Following the horrors of the “war to end all wars” popular public opinion remained primary isolationist when it came to international affairs, even as war broke out in Europe in 1939. Part of the government propaganda campaign, Frank Capra’s documentary series *Why We Fight* traces public sentiment regarding war through a clever depiction of numerous Gallup polls. While the motion picture industry was already moving towards promoting war in the late 1930s and early 1940s with a number of pro-military fictional films,<sup>1</sup> the attack

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<sup>1</sup> The motion picture industry was accused by some of promoting war long before America officially entered, and, incidentally, against the largely isolationist sentiment of the movie-going public. In their work *The Hollywood War Machine* Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard cite a senate hearing regarding Hollywood’s “propagandistic” movement as a counter-argument to the post-war representation and public perception of World War II as the always-already “Good War”:

In September 1941 the debate over military intervention flared up in the U.S. Senate, provoked by trends in Hollywood toward antifascism and armed engagement. Democratic senators D. Worth Clark (Idaho) and Gerald P. Nye (North Dakota), favoring “isolationism,” convened hearings to investigate the political influence of “Motion Picture Screen and Radio Propaganda” ... During the hearings Nye charged that Hollywood films were becoming overtly pro-war, “what I consider to be the most vicious propaganda that has ever been unleashed upon a civilized people.” (67)

Nye had compiled a list of twenty films from the late 1930s that he had found to be particularly objectionable in their overt display of propaganda (Boggs and Pollard 68). As Sheri Biesen has also cited in her introduction to *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of film noir*, radio and comic books like Orson Welles’s radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* and Marvel’s *Captain America* also expressed certain anxieties in the buildup towards the second World War.

on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 thrust America into the war that the public had been hesitant to embrace. The close relationship between Hollywood and the American government helped sell the war with both overt documentary propaganda and an influx of pro-America fictional war films. Both documentary and fictional films promoted the key themes of war on the front lines and the home front necessary for victory. What was termed the “people’s war” was a careful construction of the Office of War Information (OWI), a government agency designed to manage the representation of the war through numerous media outlets, radio and film being of chief concern. From a vigorous poster campaign<sup>2</sup> to the review of film scripts dealing with war by the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), the OWI created an ubiquitous flow of propaganda that emphasized the sacrifice of selfish interests for the sake of the nation. As John Bodnar claims in his essay “Saving Private Ryan and Postwar Memory in America,”

Government leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt took pains to make democratic promises in pronouncements like ‘The Four Freedoms.’ And the Office of War Information (OWI) told Hollywood producers to make films that not only helped win the conflict but reminded audiences it was “a people’s war,” which would bring about a future with more social justice and individual freedom. The democracy for which ‘the people’ fought, in fact, was a cultural blend of several key ideas: tolerance, individualism, anti-totalitarianism, and economic justice. The representation of open-mindedness was aimed particularly at reducing ethnic tensions at home. (806-7)

The collaborative spirit advocated by the OWI on posters and in propaganda films like Capra’s series *Why We Fight*, mobilized people who had hitherto been marginalized due to race, gender, and ethnicity. However complicated and uncertain the future might be in

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<sup>2</sup> Posters were an integral part of getting the important war messages out to the public. From “Rosie the Riveter” urging women to take up what had hitherto been “men’s” work in the factories to posters promoting “hushed lips” on the home front to protect those abroad, the OWI employed a number of talented artists that were charged with artistically rendering the “ethics” of the war effort at home. James Rodger Alexander takes an in-depth look at the impact of this medium in his work “The Art of Making War: The Political Poster in Global Conflict”.

the face of battle, the “Four Freedoms” offered a promise that the “people’s war” was a great equalizer.<sup>3</sup>

Still, the “people’s war” collective was predicated on the complicated conception of “duration.” To some the OWI propaganda had to sell the “temporariness” of mobilization, while for others (or, more specifically for the Others) the war was the first step in significant and enduring socio-cultural change. Consequently, the makers of propaganda had to tread the line between selling a vision of equality on the home front as a potential future and simultaneously the belief that when the war was over life would return to normal for soldiers on the frontline. Consequently, the mobilization for the war effort introduced a kind a temporal suspension of the normal order of things prior to the war, which leveled certain class, cultural, racial, and gender distinctions that hitherto stratified American society. On the home front everyone was needed and had a place designated for each of them within the war plan. This plan included women, who joined the labor force in staggering numbers to replace the “manpower” deployed in Europe or the Pacific. If the soldiers worried that “home” would not be the same when they returned, then those at home who enjoyed new independence and self-sufficiency hoped that “home” *could* never be the same. In his book *Power and Paranoia* Dana Polan examines the numerous narrative strategies for framing American participation in the war both on the home front and the frontlines. Identifying the nostalgic deployment of the past as a promise for the postwar period, Polan identifies the small-town as a particularly

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Capra’s seventh installment of the *Why We Fight* series, “War Comes to America,” offers an idealized portrait of American equality, which glosses over gender and ethnic discrimination to argue for the foundational principles “of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Erasing class, social, and political discrimination, *Why We Fight* indexes the people who collaborated to “build the nation,” including, “of the negro harvesting cotton in the hot summer sun ... of the Irish, the Slav, and the Chinese working side by side.” At the end of this montage the narrator concludes, “yes, the sweat of the *men* of all nations built America” (my exphasis), creating a false sense of equality that is intended to mobilize those who have hitherto been marginalized.

useful fantasmic, narratological device for the OWI. Citing an information booklet entitled “Small Town, U.S.A.” depicting Alexandria, Indiana, produced by the OWI, Polan argues that what makes the small town particularly useful as an ideological device is that

small-town American offers the possibility of a system of interchangeable bits; that is, in the wartime narrative, where any element is to be formally equated with some other element, small-town America functions formally as a vast source of semantic elements, a seemingly endless wealth of semantic bits: hamburger tastes, roadsters, family pets, ‘the girl he left behind,’ and so on. (48)

These little signifying elements, iconic components of the small-town life, carry with them a certain signifying weight. Consequently, the wealth of “semantic bits” mined from the generic small town lend a kind of meaningful authenticity to the discursive framework in which they are located (including the overarching war narrative). Much like Sherwood Anderson’s *Hometown*, the OWI booklet that Polan mentions lacks any definitive narrative trajectory. Instead, it provides a few “snapshots” both visually and figuratively of everyday life in the small town. While the explicit purpose of the invocation of the small town would seem to be to insure the soldiers on the frontline that the old hometown will still be there in all its nostalgic glory when the war is over, the OWI booklet does contain the egalitarian message pervasive in other war propaganda: “few houses stand out among others as indicating either poverty or wealth” (in Polan 49). Nostalgic recollection erases the socio-cultural reasons for political dissension and social stratification. In other words, as an ideological device the small town collapses the past and future into an idealistic a-historical place, which mirrors the temporal suspension of the normal order brought about by the duration of the war. If one suspends or sacrifices everyday life for the sake of war, then the small town as idealized place is a

perpetually suspended place where a romanticized, inclusive normality never changes. Consequently, the home that the soldier envisions returning to can be both the place of great equality and the “home” he left because it does not belong to a place anchored in the processes of historical change, but, instead, it is the imaginary “home,” which is a source of harmonized plenitude. Unfortunately for those who gained certain socio-political traction in the “duration” of the war, it is not that original hometown that can offer political progress. Instead, it is the very “duration” that suspends the normal order of things that brings about a newfound equality. Unlike the idealized notion of the small town, the “duration” has an expiration date.

Working in close conjunction with the United States government during the war, Hollywood helped manage the plurality of narratives deployed for winning the ideological battle with both the soldier and civilian corps. From Frank Capra’s propaganda to James Stewart, Hollywood enlisted in the war effort both on the battlefield and at home in the theaters. War films of numerous genres offered a series of “myths” to frame the horrors and sacrifices required for the collective war effort. Emphasizing solidarity, the “people’s war” ideology spread the burden across many shoulders to make these shared hardships more tolerable. Rejecting the criticism that blunt, immediate confrontation with the carnage of the war was the only “truthful” means of representation, Frank Wetta and Martin Novelli argue that “despite its commercialism and easy patriotism, Hollywood provided the American people with a usable myth” (265). While Novelli and Wetta use the singular term “myth” in this passage, they also correctly point out that there was no one myth or story sufficient to fully encompass “the war experience,” “there is more than one way to tell a story and more than one truth to



tell” (265). Consequently, the Hollywood war machine was, in Wetta and Novelli’s estimation, a more complex narrative system than simply a sole propaganda machine revising the details war to keep a singular, gruesome truth from an ignorant public: a critique leveled by many film critics, including WWII veteran Paul Fussell, after the war. Even if the film production code presented certain limitations to the kind of graphic realism called for by frontline veterans like Fussell, Wetta and Novelli argue that the gentrifying frame of the code and the myth of war perpetuated by Hollywood permits an approach to the horrors of war without overwhelming a viewer with traumatic shock. Myth, in the case of war representation, becomes “usable” insofar as it can approach truth, in this case, without traumatizing a subject through direct confrontation with the horrors of war. Arguing for a more direct confrontation with the gory consequences of the war in his work *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War*, Fussell claims that revisionist tendencies have elided the authentic experience of the war on the frontlines of World War II in order to promote it as “the great war”(Wetta and Novelli 265). As a veteran, Fussell’s response is one that is grounded in the traumatic experience of conflict, as Wetta and Novelli note, his conception and criticism of war representation is colored by his unforgettable traumatic experience on the frontlines.

These critics differ over how to represent the complex and multivalent truth of war, or, in other words, how to integrate symbolically the disturbing kernel that perpetually refuses symbolic integration. Despite differing dramatically in their assessment of Hollywood’s success, they all illustrate the fundamental slipperiness of that truth (as the Real). All three writers locate that “truth” in Hollywood’s war films, even if Fussell defines the Real by its omission. As Žižek claims, the Real emerges as an effect

of the process of symbolization, “the Real is not the pre-reflexive reality of our immediate immersion into our life-world, but, precisely, that which gets lost, that which the subject has to renounce, in order to become immersed into its life-world – and, consequently, that which returns in the guise of spectral apparitions” (*FTKN* xvii). To put Žižek’s definition in simpler terms, there is no Real prior to our assumption of some symbolic identity within a social network. The Real emerges as a side effect of the process of renunciation or, more appropriately, contraction necessary to assume our symbolic mandate. As a result of the inability of my assumed identity to encompass my experience of self fully, certain remainders emerge that cannot be accounted for by the symbolic coordinates in which I locate my subjectivity. The Real emerges as a consequence of the insufficiency of the symbolic to subject the totality of lived experience to its meaning-making function; the Real is another name for a fundamental, perpetual glitch in our socio-symbolic network. In subjecting the world to an accounting in language, certain experiences escape the boundaries of meaning. These pockets of inexplicability, which intersect with my original gesture of subjectivization, erupt within reality in traumatic encounters like war that refuse simple symbolic integration.

Far from sending the symbolic order into a state of paralysis, the traumatic rupture is fuel for symbolic production. In order to combat the potentially devastating effects of the Real upon reality -- the complete dissolution of one’s comprehensible perspective binding the constituent pieces of reality together -- the symbolic fights back in the face of trauma. As Žižek claims, “for humans...the traumatic encounter is a universal condition, the intrusion which sets in motion the process of ‘becoming human.’ Man is not simply overwhelmed by the impact of the traumatic encounter – as Hegel put it, but is able to

‘tarry with the negative,’ to counteract its destabilizing impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs” (OB 47). Trauma generates the work of the symbolic insofar as it introduces something incomprehensible that the symbolic must perpetually attempt to contain within some elaborate narrative construction. Left un-sutured to fester, the rupture of trauma threatens to contaminate the socio-symbolic network with its negativity. Consequently, the symbolic, in collaboration with the myth-making work of fantasy, emerges to compose an imperfect barrier around that rupture. While the collaborative work of the fantasy and the symbolic cannot fully contain the force of trauma/Real, it can keep that force at bay through the perpetual “spinning” of symbolization: ever new symbolic “dodges” are designed to avoid the full impact of trauma. Although the Real can never be brought fully into symbolic parameters of reality, a glimpse of it is evident in the distortions of those parameters where trauma has introduced some rupture. As Žižek claims, “*the Real itself is nothing but a grimace of reality*: something which is nothing but a distorted perspective on reality, something which only shines through such a distortion” (FTKN xxvii). Here we can begin to see how Fussell and Wetta/Novelli are really two sides of the same coin. Fussell’s experience is defined by his confrontation with the visceral horrors of fighting on the front lines, and, consequently, this traumatic experience punches a hole in his identity. As he readily admits, he is never quite the same after the war. Fussell’s refusal to settle for the myth-making war films of Hollywood creates a kind of “grimace” or “stain” that persists despite the myths meant to contain it. Fussell’s war experience bears witness to the singular force of the Real. For Wetta and Novelli, the plurality of war narratives attest to the impact of the Real of war on symbolic organization in a broader sense. As

the authors rightly claim, there are numerous war experiences and stories that emerge out of World War II, insofar as the traumatic intrusion of war onto the normal order of things forces a radical reformulation of one's social order. If Fussell's insistence on the "grimace" within the representation of war perpetually returns to the site of rupture, then the churning out of myth to combat that wound testifies to some unsettling truth for which we must account; the myth must situate that grimace in a way that does not unhinge the meaningful order of reality. While the myth may not tell the whole story, it demarcates the place of some traumatic split, which is both unsettling and fascinating.

What trauma and myth (or fantasy) share is an experience of "a-temporality" or a time that refuses to be brought fully into written history despite the endless "tarrying." Both traumatic experience and the work of fantasy create a kind of perpetual loop forcing an endless return to the site of trauma's rupture. Citing the strange temporal prison of trauma, Fussell claims, "The Second World War ... has pursued me all my life and has helped determine my attitudes and behavior. The point is, wars are not easily forgotten" (qtd. in Wetta and Novelli 262). Trauma, as Žižek claims in *On Belief*, "designates a shocking encounter, which, precisely, DISTURBS this immersion into one's life-world, a violent intrusion of something which doesn't fit in" (47). Disrupting the otherwise normal, meaningful flow of a subject's reality, trauma is an experience that refuses fully comprehensible symbolic integration. Insofar as it proves resistant to symbolization, trauma returns in the traces that emerge within the co-ordinates of a subject's socio-symbolic network. Trauma becomes evident in the glitches in the meaning-making system of the symbolic. Belonging neither wholly to the moment of traumatic experience that refuses full recollection nor to the moment of its re-emergence, the experience of

trauma takes place outside of the normal flow of measurable time. Consequently, trauma follows its own eternal loop, which may overlap or touch the normal temporal order, but remains independent of that order. In its relationship with trauma, fantasy is doubly bound to a kind of “a-temporality.” On the one hand, fantasy emerges at the site of trauma’s rupture to suture together reality with some comprehensible narrative. When the symbolic cannot situate a traumatic event or experience within some comprehensible frame, fantasy provides a distracting, meaningful narrative. As a perpetual rupture caught in the repetitive loop outside of linear time, trauma bears a resemblance to the psychoanalytic concept of drive with its “eternal return of the same” pattern. Independent of the subject’s conscious desires and his pathological well-being, drive is bent on following its own circular course. It is the job of fantasy to re-channel and harness the energy of drive into some narrative that confuses the circular repetition by fixating upon some object of desire<sup>4</sup>. While its job is ultimately one of deception, albeit the very deception that confers meaning and order upon reality, fantasy is the gateway between the a-temporal realm of trauma/drive and the temporal underpinnings of the normal order of things.

While traumatic experience occurs somewhere within historical time, that encounter establishes a kind of temporal confusion. Upsetting the normal, linear experience of time, the rupture opens the possibility for the subject to misinterpret loss, the actual material loss of something in the traumatic experience, as a fundamental

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am drawing upon the relationship between fantasy, desire, and drive that Žižek explores in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

Desire emerges when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition, in the vicious cycle in which *jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the law of desire (Lacan’s definition of castration) – and fantasy is the narrative of this primordial loss, since it stages the process of renunciation, the emergence of the Law. (32)

absence or what psychoanalysis calls “lack.” While the experience of absence may be triggered by actual historical events, the perceived absent “thing” belongs to a “trans-historical” realm. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra explores the careful distinction between loss and absence:

absence at a “foundational” level cannot simply be derived from particular historical losses, however much it may be suggested or its recognition prompted by their magnitude and the intensity of one’s response to them. When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. (46)

Loss, unlike absence, is predicated upon an actual material connection, or, in other words, one can really lose something, be it a loved one, a cherished object, or even a place to which one may never again return. Absence, on the other hand, is aimed at the fundamental lack intrinsic to being, or, as LaCapra claims, “one may recognize that one can never lose what one never had” (50). In the true experience of absence, the subject recognizes absence as something that was never actually possessed, and, consequently, what is regarded by the subject as her “metaphysical grounds” and the “absence of the absolute” (LaCapra 50).

This experience of absence becomes problematic for LaCapra in the short-circuiting between absence and loss caused by some traumatic rupture. In its temporal confusion, trauma conflates the historicity of loss and the trans-historical nature of absence, or, as LaCapra claims, “in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (47). The short circuit in temporal flow that comes from first the traumatic rupture and then the playback loop of

its flashback, creates confusion between the traumatic loss that is grounded in a particular historical moment and the experience of absence that emerges in the inability to situate trauma's rupture symbolically. Something resists this process of narrativization, a surplus that belongs to a realm that is seemingly beyond signification, and, consequently, is a conduit between the historical ground of loss and the "absolute" constitutive of absence. Consequently, loss becomes translated into absence through some fantasmatic narrative that sutures together the symbolic and temporal disjunction by explaining that the loss, which opens a hole in the socio-symbolic network, goes beyond simply the lost thing. For LaCapra, this misconception of absence as loss expresses itself in "misplaced nostalgia" or "utopian politics," which bears a stark resemblance to the double narrative of war propaganda cited by Polan. Both nostalgia and the utopian politics aim at the "absence as plenitude." The misconception of absence becomes attached to the fundamental fantasy of plenitude/symbolic harmony -- what LaCapra calls "absence as the absolute." Only in its (mis)perceived loss in the traumatic impact, can the fundamental absolute be possessed as something that had actually existed someplace and somewhere, rather than merely as some elusive, transcendental element. Trauma, in its temporal confusion, and the intervention of myth/fantasy allow for the illusion of possession of the t(T)hing which can never be fully possessed. Absence, as the source of the utopic Thing, finds resonance in traumatic loss that, in its rupture, opens the way for myth to conflate absence and loss. Only in treating as lost the thing that we never had to begin with (the utopic Thing, the absolute), do we capture a sliver of possession.

Both Žižek and LaCapra's conceptions of trauma, loss, and absence shed some light on the mobilization of the small town by the OWI in war propaganda, insofar as the

small-town as some original “Home” becomes an important, influential piece of that propaganda. The period between America’s official declaration of war in late 1941 to its final “V” day in 1945 was fraught with traumatic disruptions of everyday life and disturbing losses. From the loss of loved ones in combat to the material sacrifices called upon by rationing for the war effort, the reality of living during the war period was defined by a certain amount of voluntary and involuntary deprivation. War propaganda translated this deprivation into sacrifice for a greater good, which mobilized the war effort both at home and on the battlefield. To borrow LaCapra’s terms, war propaganda deftly translated loss in its numerous forms into absence through a process of idealization. What is lost in the process of the war, the “home” as it was when the soldiers left, becomes simultaneously a place of “utopian politics” and the nostalgic Home that never actually existed in the first place. While it is one narrative strategy among many in the construction of war propaganda, the small-town story becomes particularly important as a symbol of the romanticized home to which the soldiers will eventually return. As an idealistic symbol, the small town is defined by its seeming “a-historical” character. Historical change and social progress may alter the world around the small town, but it stubbornly remains the same. The small town stands in for a resistance to the corrupting forces of progress, which bring about the loss of the “good old days.” Be it the perfect suburbs of the 1950s or the quaint New England village at the dawn of the nation, the various representations of this idealistic place at different historical moments reveal certain social antagonisms of their time. Moreover, these different representations indicate that there is no one “Small Town” outside of history; each variation, despite how it is distilled and abstracted into the ideological small town, speaks



to its specific historical moment and geographical location. Still, the numerous modalities of the small town all share the common theme of “home.” Like trauma that belongs to the moment of temporal rupture, each variation of home belongs to a nostalgic past to which one must inevitably return (like trauma). Loss of “home” for the soldiers creates the experience of an absence of “home,” home as it never was or could be. To put this transformation of loss into absence in more precise terms, war propaganda strips the real hometown of the soldier of its anchoring in reality to present it as the idealized place of some past harmony. As the Joads would certainly testify to, the small town prior to the war was not a place of social harmony. This nostalgic harkening back runs counter to the forward looking propaganda mobilizing the war effort on the home front. Unlike those on the front lines who need home to be the same (or a version of “sameness” that is better than the old same) when they return, those on the home front who have hitherto been marginalized require a vision of home grounded in an egalitarian socio-economic future. When the “duration” runs out at the end of the war, the home that was sold on the battle fields collides with that sold to those on the home front, with the integration being neither utopian nor nostalgic. Ultimately the myth-making, be it nostalgic or utopian, during the war cannot account for the reverberations of trauma when the soldiers return. Even if “home” is ideal as it was represented to be in *Why We Fight*, such as is initially in Orson Welles’s film *The Stranger*, those returning to that home are no longer the same as they were before. Home in the small town may be familiar and the soldier’s face recognizable, but the experience of war that escapes the myth in propaganda and pro-war films estranges that familiarity in ways that cannot be easily accounted for by idealized narratives perpetuated in the duration.

## Somewhere Over the Clock Tower

Receiving mixed reviews upon its release in 1946<sup>5</sup> and largely disregarded by scholars ever since,<sup>6</sup> Orson Welles's *film noir* potboiler about the secret Nazi architect of the Holocaust Franz Kindler (Orson Welles), *The Stranger*, explores the postwar traces of wartime trauma within the confines of the idealistic small town of Harper, Connecticut. Kindler, who has taken great pains to erase the traces of his involvement in the Nazi party, escapes Europe to the small New England village. In Harper, he assumes the identity of Charles Rankin,<sup>7</sup> a history teacher at the local boys' prep school. Adopting the "perfect camouflage" of marrying a Supreme Court Justice's daughter and settling

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the reviews seemed to be already, internally mixed, like James Agee's review, which offers a series of back-handed compliments to Welles and his film:

So far as I can make out, Welles never was and never will be a genius, but he is just as gifted as he ever was. In this film he is not using the most adventurous, not to say florid, of his gifts, but neither is he indulging in any of his weaknesses. There is nothing about the picture that even appears to be "important" or "new," but there is nothing pretentious or arty either, and although I have occasionally seen atmospheres used in films in far grander poetic context, I don't think I have seen them more pleasantly and expertly appreciated (195).

While Agee's review is overall a positive one, it is balanced by his attempts to demystify the myth of Welles's "artistic genius," which was both a blessing and a curse throughout the filmmaker's life.

<sup>6</sup> Of the numerous scholarly books on Welles, *The Stranger* consistently is given short shrift by film scholars. Robert Garis in *The Films of Orson Welles* offers a couple of paragraphs on the film, and claims, "*The Stranger* has been generally condescended to, mostly because it deserves to be" (96). James Naremore in *The Magic World of Orson Welles* refers to the film as a "silly picture," and largely regards it as a poor rip-off of Hitchcock's far superior *Shadow of a Doubt* (148). One of the few exceptions, Clinton Heylin in *Despite the System*, while acknowledging the film's flaws and the numerous compromises Welles was forced to make, regards the film as one of Welles's more underrated attempts (190).

<sup>7</sup> Rankin is an edited version of his true name, Franz Kindler. As Heylin notes, the transformation of the name from Franz Kindler to Rankin was intended to be shown, but was ultimately not shot, "the photographer proceeds to take a paper with Franz Kindler's name on it and draw a series of diagonal lines through the letters F, Z, D, L, E, R until it spells Rankin" (178). The creation of the false identity, the fantasmatic construction of Rankin, is simultaneously a process of omission and inclusion, or, to put it another way, a process of re-framing what is already there. Trauma refuses simple integration into some meaningful symbolic realm; it cannot simply be explained away by the work of fantasy. Instead, trauma leaves a kind of mark on the symbolic constitution of reality in the way we organize the comprehensible coordinates of our life-world. In the case of Kindler's transformation, traces of his original name remain embedded in the fantasy construction of Rankin, functioning as a marker or stain of the traumatic past that he cannot fully erase.

down in a small town, Kindler cloaks himself in precisely the kind of ideal image of postwar America sold by wartime propaganda to bolster troop morale. Hidden safely away in the bucolic perfection of Harper, Kindler finds the home promised to those on the frontlines during the war. Without an incriminating German accent, Kindler perfectly speaks the language of the idealized small town; as he tells his former colleague Konrad Meinike (Konstantin Shayne), “who would suspect the notorious Franz Kindler in the sacred precincts of the Harper school, surrounded by the sons of America’s first families” (*The Stranger*). For Kindler this fantasy veil will allow him to blend into the crowd until the time will once again emerge for the great “historical necessity” of the Nazi project. In other words, Kindler recognizes the narrative conventions that Polan identifies in *Power and Paranoia* integral to the small town discourse/representation and is able to adopt them in order to conceal a horrific, obscene fantasy that has supposedly been eradicated by the war effort.

Not unlike Kindler who must become conventional to blend in, Welles intended with *The Stranger* to prove he could be conventional, efficient, and profitable in making a film. Dismissing the *The Stranger* as an inferior Welles film in *The Films of Orson Welles*, Robert Garis paraphrases the director’s thoughts on his most “studio-friendly” venture, “Welles, perhaps taking his cue from Goetz (producer for International Pictures William Goetz), spoke of it repeatedly as his one solid, reasonable, sane, ordinary, conventional film, the proof that he could deliver the everyday virtues of moviemaking as well as the brilliant feats of virtuosity for which he was better known” (96). Welles’s more detailed shooting script, as Clinton Heylin notes in *Despite the System*, details the more elaborate, artistic vision Welles had for *The Stranger*. This vision was subjected to

a thorough editing by the “supercutter” Ernest Nims, who was known for trimming “artistic fat” for the sake of narrative tightness (Heylin 175). Welles’s framing of the project as an example of his ability to be a workman-like director for the studio is a more positive spin that he later undercut, claiming, “I didn’t do [*The Stranger*] with a completely cynical attitude... Quite the contrary, I tried to do it as well as I could. But it’s the one of my films of which I am least the author” (qtd. in Heylin 174). The source of critical disdain for *The Stranger* seems to emerge from the conventionality of the film. Both Heylin and Garris frame their reading of *The Stranger* more in terms of what it might have been, than as an examination of the film that was produced. James Naremore in his work on Welles *The Magic World of Orson Welles* sums up *The Stranger* as, “an occasionally silly but nonetheless entertaining picture” (148). While *The Stranger* may lack some of the artistic and aesthetic flair of Welles’s more critically well-received pictures, the generic and narrative conventions of the film resonate with the generic tropes and narrative conventions of both war propaganda and those of the small town. Even if it was against his wishes, Welles makes a conventional film that reflects the small town setting of Harper, Connecticut. If Welles’s normally baroque filmmaking style is constrained for the sake of story, the conventions of the horror genre and the recognizable “tone and mood”<sup>8</sup> of *film noir* form the backbone of *The Stranger*’s narrative.

Welles’s conventional approach, particularly in terms of the generic narrative formula of the horror film, allows for the expression of certain nascent anxieties in the supposedly optimistic postwar period. As R. Barton Palmer claims, “the politics of *The Stranger*, as its title suggests, involve purification: the identification of evil in the body

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<sup>8</sup> These are the terms that Paul Schrader uses in his influential essay “Notes on Film Noir” to set apart *film noir* from film genres, which are defined by certain conventions (100).

politic, its subsequent destruction, and the restoration of the generic, the un-strange” (8). *The Stranger* illustrates postwar anxieties about the struggles resuming a normal, everyday life. Most notable among these anxieties is the concern regarding the returning soldier, who brings the residue of battle experience home with him. Within the soldier’s war experience lies the strange temporal loop of trauma that threatens to follow him home. While *The Stranger* is set in and concerned with the immediate postwar period, the resumption of life as normal in the postwar period is confounded by the residue of wartime trauma. Returning to the home sold by wartime propaganda proves doubly difficult. On the hand, the idealized home as it was depicted in propaganda never really existed in the first place. Even if it were possible to find this ideal place, the holes punched in time by trauma make it impossible for the returning soldier to sink back into a linear, temporal flow after battle ends. By projecting the estranging effects of trauma onto the “evil,” foreign Other, who initially resembles “us” but can be identified as Other and purged, *The Stranger* provides a safe place to work through the anxieties plaguing postwar America. Although he is identified as the monstrous architect of the “final solution,” Kindler/Rankin finds himself at the intersection of numerous postwar fears. An American husband, a secret Nazi, a new pillar of Harper and the most nefarious of war criminals, Kindler assumes a number identities that make him simultaneously familiar and estranged, loved and hated; as a Nazi, he represents a trace or stain of the war that Harper seems to have somehow avoided.

If *The Stranger* is indeed Welles most conventional film, then it reflects the all-too-conventional setting of Harper, Connecticut. While more recent history has grounded the authentic roots of America in the typical Midwestern small-town, the New England

small-town has been throughout the history of the nation synonymous with the birth of America. As Richard Lingeman notes in *Small Town America*, “the New England town with its town meeting hall, saltbox houses, green common, and white churches with jutting spires is stored like a faded postcard in the attic of American memory ... These towns were the cradles of democracy, the myths has it, the incubators of our prematurely born liberties, home of the men who fired the first shots in the War for Independence” (15). Lingeman’s description of the typical New England town here bears a surprising resemblance to the opening shot of Harper, and speaks volumes about the generic quality of *The Stranger’s* setting. What is most striking about his description is the reference to the “faded postcard,” which is a key component to American memory. Our first glimpse of Harper in the film is of a postcard photograph of the quaint New England town; a postcard that may well have resembled those sent to soldiers fighting on the frontlines as a remembrance of home and an expression of love from one’s family or sweetheart. After being “miraculously” released from prison in Europe so that he can lead American G-man Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson) to Franz Kindler, Nazi Konrad Meinike is given a postcard of Harper by an identity forger in South America providing an address for the elusive Kindler. The “noirish” seedy, urban underworld of South America, with its shadows being a secret haven for Nazis, is suddenly illuminated by the brightness of the postcard depicting Harper’s town square complete with a towering white church illuminated by the bright sun. A quick fade to black envelops the postcard in the darkness that pervades the South American underworld, while a fade into the illuminated town square brings Meinike and Wilson’s bus to the ideal little town on the postcard. As if he were checking off requisite icons on Lingeman’s list, Welles uses a

crane shot of the Harper town square that moves down and tracks in from its focus on the church tower and clock to capture the bus as it moves past the “salt box houses” around the town’s “common green.” Two key cinematographic choices stand out in this brief sequence depicting Harper’s homeliness, and, simultaneously, that which in Harper that is “unhomely.” Opposed to cutting and repositioning the camera, the continuity of the crane shot that tracks the arrival of the bus into the town square and moves down and toward the bus station establishes a kind of hospitality associated with the small town. In one long take, the camera moves to capture the entire town square in order to meet the bus at the station as if it were welcoming new visitors, or, perhaps, welcoming home returning citizens. This sense of hospitality is reinforced by the fact that the bus stops in front of the social hub of town, Potter’s general store where everyone knows everyone else and is welcomed accordingly. However, this hospitality indicative of the original “home” opens the way for the mass murderer Franz Kindler into its confines. The splice between the postcard in South America of Harper and the establishing shot of Harper is significant in juxtaposing small town hospitality and the threat posed by some urban underbelly. Unlike the crane shot that creates a hospitable, welcoming continuity within Harper, the fade to black between the postcard image of the town and its actual, physical appearance creates a sense of rupture. Whereas a dissolve from the postcard to the opening shot would have created a continuous graphic match, the intervening fade casts a shadow over the town that seems to spread out from the seedy underworld that Meineke locates in South America. Like the darkness that spreads over the postcard image, Kindler brings the shadow world to an unwitting Harper. It is no wonder then that we see Meineke flip the postcard over, concealing the opposite side, the address of Franz Kindler

beneath the idealized image of Harper. Like the opposite side of the postcard, Kindler conceals himself beneath Harper's idealized façade in the identity of Charles Rankin.

Lingeman's vision of the small town is dated to the early 1700s, after colonists had settled in the rough colonial wilderness and started to establish small farming communities. Nevertheless, the postcard image he imagines and the opening depictions of Harper remain remarkably similar, with only the bus carrying the "little man" Meinike identifying Harper as a more modern version of the classic small town. What makes the small town useful as a narrative device for both war propaganda and Welles's postwar film, is the seemingly timeless quality that it possesses. To borrow LaCapra's term, the small town as it is depicted in Welles's film is a transhistorical cluster of iconic images and stereotypical values that "construct" an ideal home unspoiled by the historical progress around it. This transhistorical quality is rendered quite literally in the film *vis-à-vis* Harper's clock tower, which will be a key component in exposing Kindler as a Nazi. Just as the town is seemingly suspended in an idealized space outside of time, the clock in the church tower has long ago ceased to run. Harper is a place grounded in its nostalgia for the past, which is evident in the identity that Wilson adopts as an "antiques dealer." Much as Kindler "reads" his surroundings by becoming Rankin, Wilson notices a sign in Mr. Potter's (Billy House) store that announces an antiques show, and returns Harper's own message by assuming an identity the town can easily incorporate, as Potter replies, "Antique dealer? They all come to Harper" (*The Stranger*). The "Early American" antiques show and the Paul Revere silver Wilson will examine at Judge Longstreet's (Philip Merivale) home, freezes Harper at its most ideal moment, the birth of liberty in the United States. Incidentally, Harper, as that birthplace of the country,



perfectly reflects the reasons “why we fought,” insofar as it is the original home of liberty and democracy. As the narrator in Capra’s documentary series claims, “the Idea grew... the idea that all men are created equal, that all men are entitled to the blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (*Why We Fight*). Frozen at its most ideal moment, Harper is the womb of the Idea, as the narrator defines it.

While Kindler presumably selects Harper for the a-historical, idealized qualities that provide a cloak for him, he conceives of himself as a figure of historical necessity. On two separate occasions in the film Kindler predicts another world war that will emerge from “the German.” He unwittingly exposes his identity to Wilson in the second instance. During a dinner with his new wife’s family and Wilson, Kindler is cajoled into giving his views on Germany. Whereas other “tongues” have articulated the “will to freedom,” the German is by nature waiting for war; as Kindler/Rankin explains, “mankind is waiting for the messiah, but for the German the messiah is not the prince of peace. He’s another Barbarosa, another Hitler” (*The Stranger*). Before Kindler dispatches with Meineke, he implicitly gives credence to the paranoiac belief that the Nazis have gone underground after their surrender to regroup for another effort. For Kindler, another war is the inevitable consequence of the German’s rise to supremacy. Consequently, Harper is not only the ideal place to hide because it offers the cloak of idealism – no one would expect a Nazi in Harper! – but also because it offers a respite from historical progress. In other words, the historical necessity of the grand Nazi plot can recover “outside of time” in Harper only to re-emerge when the cogs in the clock kick back into gear and the hands of time begin to move forward again rather than spinning forward and backward haphazardly like those of Harper’s clock. To put it in

terms of tinkering, an obsession of Franz Kindler's in *The Stranger*, the Nazi's loss of the Second World War temporarily breaks the clock of historical necessity. Consequently, the movement must go underground to fix that clock and jumpstart the teleological progression towards supremacy. It is Kindler that adopts the task of fixing Harper's clock, which his new bride Mary (Loretta Young) jokingly regrets, "shows you the kind of wife I am, I hope he fails. I like Harper just the way it is, even with a clock that doesn't run" (*The Stranger*). Harper's clock condenses the troubled conception of history following the war. More specifically, the clock serves to illustrate trauma's role in conflating the temporal distinction between the war and postwar period (more on this later). Ultimately, Kindler will fix the clock, but the re-entrance to history that comes with its temporal measuring is an ambivalent development for the citizens of Harper: "Mr. Rankin, I wish you would have left that clock alone, Harper was a nice quiet place until it started banging" (*The Stranger*).

Harper is precisely the nostalgic place created by the translation of loss into absence that LaCapra identifies in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, or, in other words, it is the perfect home promised soldiers by the OWI that was (misperceived to be) lost when they were shipped to Japan or Europe. If a film like William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) sought to illustrate that home was not the nostalgic place one left but a place fraught with its own social, psychological and cultural adjustments required by both the returning soldiers and their loved ones,<sup>9</sup> *The Stranger* takes the

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<sup>9</sup> Numerous critics have written about Wyler's film as a depiction of soldier's readjusting to life in the small town. However, Boone City in Wyler's film is modeled after Des Moines, IA. In his article "*The Best Years of Our Lives* and the Cincinnati Story" James Deutsch cites MacKinlay Kantor's, the novel's author, boyhood experience in Iowa as the source for the film's setting, "Flying over Boone City, they see the 'dome of their state capitol: gold leaf,' which corresponds to 'the golden dome' of the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines ... Boone City's population, according to the novel, was 'just about/ One hundred eighty thousand souls.' Not coincidentally, the population of Des Moines in 1940 was 183,973" (218).

idealistic fantasy of “Small-town U.S.A.” seriously. Consequently, the film depicts the small town as the longed-for, original home. The problem within Harper emerges with the intrusion of an absolutely evil foreign Other, or, at least on the surface, he appears to be foreign. Lacking any reference to the war or its aftermath, other than what outside forces like Meinike and Wilson bring in, Harper is unspoiled by the conflicts overseas. Cut off from the social impact of historical events, Harper is what it appears to be on the surface, the same place it has been since time immemorial. *The Stranger*, then, offers a collision between the idealistic fantasy that helped sustain America for the duration of the war and the most horrific, traumatic traces of that war, which emerge seemingly out of nowhere in the small town. Not only is Harper home in all its nostalgic, small-town perfection, but it is also the haven for a villain that matches the intensity of its purity in his corruption. As an embodiment of war time trauma, insofar as he is the architect of the Holocaust, Kindler brings the war to a place that was hitherto unspoiled; he is a trace of the horrific acts of the war. For Harper, the Nazi will serve as a traumatic intrusion bringing the war home in a very unsettling manner. While not necessarily plagued by PTSD himself, Kindler, as Rankin the husband and seemingly regular American guy, embodies the estrangement that the experiences of war can have on an individual; here the split between before and after is dramatically reversed and literalized. If the traumatic impact of war splits some returning soldiers, like Fussell, into two separate before and after identities, then that split is made literal by the distinction between Kindler and Rankin. As R. Barton Palmer suggests, the film conflates the locus of anxiety from “over there” with home: “the film’s international theme assumes an America

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While a population of nearly two hundred thousand does not make a teeming metropolis, it is hardly the quaint small town of Harper.

(appropriately indexed by smalltown community life) united in upholding traditional, official values, particularly freedom and human dignity. *The Stranger's* domestic agenda however assumes a darker view of contemporary America, a view which must be “put right” by a process of purification” (8). Palmer argues that *The Stranger* articulates a number of domestic anxieties through the figure of Kindler, who is, “not only a Nazi in hiding, but (especially played by Welles) an American husband desperate to preserve the dark secrets of his past and inner self” (8). If the propaganda battle in the postwar period shifts focus from mobilization for war on the home-front and the frontlines to winning the “hearts and minds” abroad,<sup>10</sup> then the war, as Palmer indicates, has come home in the “estranged” love ones, who must re-adjust to life at home after the war.

### **When Franzie Comes Marching Home Again**

Like the small-town that condenses a certain idealistic conception of home, Kindler's secret identity as an absolute, inhumanly evil Other allows for a number of historical anxieties to be condensed and “purified” in his ultimate demise. As Palmer argues, Kindler, the monstrous perpetrator of some unspeakable violence, belongs as much to the genre of the horror film as he does to the harsh, hard-boiled world of *film noir*: “in *The Stranger* the very threat of the monstrous is its paradoxical invisible visibility, the fact that it is an element of the everyday world which must be defamiliarized in order to be contained” (9). Kindler's monstrosity lies hidden beneath the carefully constructed normal exterior that he has cultivated, even fooling the shrewd

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<sup>10</sup> Wilson brings up this topic in his initial meeting with Kindler at the Longstreet's home. When Germany becomes dinner conversation, Wilson asks Kindler's opinion of the “reforms” taking place abroad. Kindler's response about the “unreformability” of the German, who has never expressed a taste for “liberty” and “equality,” illustrates the textual material of these reforms.

Wilson initially. The detective only becomes suspicious when Rankin, during his explanation about the German, responds to his brother-in-law's invocation of Marx's profession of a will to freedom with the caveat "Marx wasn't a German. Marx was a Jew" (*The Stranger*). The casting of Welles as Kindler is particularly significant in terms of the monster's invisibility, insofar as Welles's lack of a German accent emphasizes the American portion of his fictional character's dual identity. While we are never led to doubt that Rankin is indeed Kindler, the fluid, natural American inflection of Welles identifies Rankin as an "American Husband," even if he is also a Nazi. Like numerous other wives in the postwar period, Mary is forced to "re-discover" Rankin as Kindler, who bears an immediate connection to both foreign culture and the traumatic impact of war. If Mary comes to realize over the course of the film that she has married a "stranger," then she was certainly not alone in the years immediately following World War II. Concerns about the strain of great physical distance on fidelity led to a rash of hasty marriages during the war, which did little to abate the anxiety about sexuality on the home-front.<sup>11</sup> As Polan notes, "the unity of the couple is assailed not merely by the fact of physical separation but as much by emotional separation – jealousy but also alienation (thus, the war encourages sudden marriages, the consequences of which will be the formation of a couple whose members don't really know each other – in the postwar period, this will lead to a rise in the divorce rate)" (124). Partners could be strangers to

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<sup>11</sup> Sexuality was problematic both overseas and at home during the war. Deployed soldiers feared that their respective girlfriends and wives were being sexually tempted at home, while they were helpless to do anything about it. With his broad appeal and wild popularity, Frank Sinatra condensed these fears in one person. As Dana Polan notes, "Sinatra is represented as a man who makes women scream and cry even at a distance and can turn them into high-spirited bobby-soxers. For Soldiers away from home, Sinatra will become a sign of temptation for the home-front women, a condensation of all the fragility of the male's imagining of his home life" (124). On the other hand, the military was forced to acknowledge potential problems with sexuality abroad, "the very need to alert soldiers to sexual illnesses also means that soldiers' knowledge will have to be sexualized and that their sexual energy must be admitted in and into the economy of war" (Polan 127).

each other both before the war, marrying in haste to cling to a last fleeting romance before shipping out, and after as the soldier traumatized by his war experience could be an entirely different person upon his return. Both of these scenarios play out in Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* in the relationship between Fred Derry (Dana Andrews) and his wife Marie (Virginia Mayo). Still haunted by his runs in a bomber over Europe, Fred has recurring nightmares that compel him to relieve his traumatic experience. Marie's overt sexuality and her occupation at a nightclub identify her as the kind of unfaithful woman who caused many soldiers anxiety during the war. Incapable of dealing with the changes in Fred, whom she barely knew before he was shipped to Europe, the "fun-loving" Marie is unsympathetic to his post traumatic stress disorder. Imploring him to "just forget about it," Marie desires the fleeting relationship they shared during the courting stage before Fred left for Europe. Not only is Fred a stranger in the sense that Marie did not know him all that well to begin with, but his traumatic experience has also altered his personality to the point that he is not the same person he once was prior to shipping out.

Along with the changes in the returning soldier himself, the residue of wartime mobilization on the home front created an altered social landscape to which he returned. If Johnny was not the same as when he came marching home, then home was likewise not the same place as before. With men away on the frontlines, women enjoyed a newfound autonomy. As Sheri Biesen notes, "the absence of millions of men serving in the armed forces shifted demographics as women dominated the domestic market" (125). Not only were women needed to fill the gap in the labor force left by America's fighting men, but they were also needed as consumers with newfound, independent income. Even

Hollywood production changed during the war to account for this shift in demographics, creating a dual marketing philosophy for the home front and the front lines. As Biesen notes, “War films, for instance, were directed toward male combat troops overseas, while enjoying enormous popularity at home; female-oriented genres like domestic melodramas were aimed at women in the home front” (126). Even the image of femininity was altered by the war effort on the home front, “advertising directed at women took a significantly different approach during World War II. With war related rationing, Fleischmann’s Yeast featured a military uniformed woman on a motorcycle with the bold caption: ‘This is no time to be FRAIL!’ and ‘The dainty days are done for the duration’” (Biesen 126). From taking up work in factories to changing fashion and grooming habits to reflect the strong, sacrificing home front soldier, women were empowered by the war effort in hitherto unthinkable ways – even if it was supposed to be only “for the duration.” While Mary Longstreet in *The Stranger* does not appear to be the kind of woman who took up work in the factory, at different points in the film she does exhibit an independence in thought that runs counter to that of her new husband. Mary is afforded a certain significant agency in the narrative insofar as she holds the key to unmasking Charles Rankin as Franz Kindler: she is the last person to see Meineke alive before Rankin strangles him. However, Mary’s independence and agency within her relationship undergo a process of disintegration as she learns more about Rankin’s murderous alter ego. The first moment of tension between Rankin and Mary occurs in relationship to Mary’s dog, Red, who discovers the burial site of Meinike and threatens to expose Rankin. Just as he attempts to get a “tight hold” on Mary, Rankin locks Red in the basement after the dog has located the burial site. When Mary hears Red whimpering

she objects to this treatment, to which Rankin replies, “if he is to live with us, he is to be trained. At night he will sleep in the cellar, and during the day he will be on a leash” (*The Stranger*). Expressing a sense of independent ownership, Mary initially refuses Rankin’s disciplinary measures, “Charles, I don’t believe in dogs being treated like prisoners. Red’s my dog” (*The Stranger*). Staging and lighting indicate the power struggle at work in this scene. Rankin stands over Mary, who lies on the bed staring up at the formidable presence looming over her. Alternating camera angles framing Rankin from below and Mary from above, indicate the position of dominance that Rankin assumes. This dominance is not one characterized by the kind of patriarchal benevolence of pre-war America, however dubious and disenfranchising that force could be for women. Rankin’s dominance is made menacing by both the shadowy lighting as well as his initial entrance into the bedroom when he stares down at the vulnerable, sleeping Mary in an almost threatening manner; he resembles the generic horror movie villain preparing to prey on a helpless sleeping victim. Compelled to trust that he “knows best,” Mary is disempowered and surrenders to Rankin, and, ultimately, she is infantilized as he tucks her into bed and kisses her forehead. With the camera remaining focused on Mary, Rankin moves toward the end of the bed. Mary momentarily remains bathed in light, but is consumed by shadows when her husband blocks its source.<sup>12</sup> Just as it cuts the light off from Mary’s face, the shadow of Rankin emerges here to stifle her threatening independence. Consequently, he transforms her from a loving partner to an obedient

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<sup>12</sup> In the opening moments of this scene Mary is awakened from a nightmare by Rankin. In the dream that Mary recounts for her husband, the “little man” is being followed through the town square, and, as Mary explains, “whenever he moved he threw a shadow, but when he moved away, the shadow stayed there and spread out just like a carpet” (*The Stranger*). Much like Rankin’s shadow consumes her, the “little man’s” shadow consumes Harper, and will spread out to encompass the town, until the specter or Kindler is eliminated.



child. Like Red in the basement whose whimpering is turned up in the soundtrack as the shadow spreads over her, Mary is pinned down by the constricting force of Rankin's darkness.

Not only is Mary forced to surrender some of her independence to a domineering husband, she is also forced to confront the traumatic repercussions of her husband's war experience much like other women whose loved ones returned home scarred from battle. While Rankin does not necessarily show signs of post traumatic stress disorder, his split identity belies a troubled past that he desperately hopes to conceal. Formally, the film's narrative reflects the loop of trauma, in which some trace or remembrance forces a victim (in this case a perpetrator) to relive the unsettling experience against his wishes. It is important here to emphasize that Kindler is not traumatized. His explanation of the German as one that is by nature war-like and incapable of experiencing guilt would seem to make an experience of wartime trauma impossible for Kindler. It would seem from Kindler's description that what would be traumatizing about war for someone like Fussell, would be the German's natural state; a state in which he would thrive. Kindler is a kind of stain of traumatic experience, who brings the war back to hitherto uncontaminated Harper. Trauma, insofar as it refuses simple and complete symbolic integration, erupts against the subject's volition, and, consequently, it resists attempts to contain it via the process of meaningful signification. Many returning soldiers had hoped to leave behind the horrific experience of the war to resume their normal lives; to take up life back "home" in places like Harper. To return to the earlier quotation from Paul Fussell, "wars are not easily forgotten. They tend to linger socially and psychologically." As much as a soldier may have wanted to accomplish a kind of split between the subject

who fought and endured the horrors of the war and the subject who lived a normal life at home, the traumatic impact of war refused this easy separation. Even if Kindler is not traumatized by his war experience, his symbolic split between Kindler and Rankin that compartmentalizes the horrors of war bears a formal similarity to trauma's impact on a subject and his socio-symbolic network. Like the fantasmic narrative that is spun out to conceal some unsettling truth that subject would rather not relive, the construction of Rankin conceals the disturbing Kindler. Consequently, the closer Harper comes to uncovering Kindler, the stain of war, the more disruptive it is for the peace of the small town. Although Mary's husband is not a returning soldier, he still poses some of the same problems facing couples in the postwar period. After the body of the "little man" is discovered, Rankin is compelled to alter the fictional web he has used to conceal the truth from Mary. While he admits the truth that he has killed both Red, who threatened to expose the body, and the "little man," who threatens Rankin's reputation, the truth remains packaged in the overarching lie that the little man is an embezzler from Rankin's past. Still, Rankin does confess to the murder of the "little man," and, in so doing, he identifies his hands as instruments of both tenderness and murder, "these hands, the same hands that have held you close to me" (*The Stranger*). If *The Stranger* does, as Palmer suggests, express certain anxieties about "unsolved domestic problems" in postwar America, then the romantic relationship between Mary and Rankin/Kindler is the vehicle for that expression. Mary, who will confront the horrible, unfiltered truth shortly after this scene, must balance the conception of Rankin as the loving, normal husband, who is a history teacher and amateur clock repairman, with that of a killer. Much as war offers an understandable rationale for killing, Rankin's explanation displaces the real guilt of

the crime onto some enemy other, whose death becomes justifiable, even if it is illegal in the context of the film. Rankin explains to Mary that the little man is extorting him for the accidental death of the little man's sister, and when the little man threatens Mary's family, Rankin had no choice but to eliminate the threat. Still, the stain of the event estranges Rankin, much as the war does for the returning veteran, prompting Mary to recoil from Rankin's embrace after his explanation "as though it were the touch of death" (*The Stranger*). Following the revelation of the beloved other's grisly, violent actions, Mary, like other wives in postwar America, could not recognize her own partner.

### **We're Not in Harper Anymore**

Both Harper and Rankin's lies work as repressive mechanisms of fantasy to conceal the obscene, traumatic truth of Rankin's true identity. As the original "home," Harper functions as a reference to the promised harmony in wartime propaganda; that is, Harper is the idealized nostalgic place that only exists in a transhistorical, fictional realm. For Kindler, Harper functions as an index of American small town iconography, and Rankin is his construction of the respectable small-town man. As a history teacher, Rankin's symbolic mandate is grounded an interest in the past. Insofar as there is no reference to the war, its aftermath, or a world outside of Harper by its citizens, the small Connecticut town appears to be cut off from the corruption of historical events taking place beyond its comforting confines. Like numerous other small towns, Harper belongs to a perpetual past, frozen at the moment of its greatest historical significance; in the latter half of the twentieth century that metaphorical freeze becomes evident in the decay of main street storefronts. It is only when the foreigner, who unlike Rankin is clearly

defined by his accent, arrives in the small town that the idealistic world of Harper and Rankin begin to disintegrate. Unlike Kindler, Meinike cannot conceal the trace or stain of history that will ultimately spread out (or more appropriately bleed through) to cover the idealistic façade of Harper and Rankin. Rankin attempts to suture the fraying edges of his perfect cover together by concealing the truth of the “little man” in the fiction he creates for Mary, that is, the story of the young woman who has accidentally drowned on a rowing trip with Rankin and the brother (the “little man”) who blackmails Rankin for his silence. When ruptures begin to open in Rankin’s initial story, he is compelled to reveal partial truths by “re-framing” his fictional account. In other words, when the little man’s body is discovered, he must confess that he has killed him and not paid him off for his silence. In each case, Rankin places himself in the position of protector, concealing some uncomfortable truth from Mary for the sake of maintaining their relationship or her family’s reputation. As Wilson will indicate at the end of the film, Rankin’s repressive, fantasmatic frames “box him in” narrowing down his space until he is only momentarily safe in the clock tower.

If trauma enacts a kind of puncturing of reality, with its fantasmic underpinnings being rendered at least momentarily inoperative, then the traumatic core of *The Stranger* punctures both the fiction of Rankin’s assumed identity and that of the narrative. This traumatic rupture of both fictional frames violently reinserts Harper into the “contaminating” forces of history that it has hitherto disavowed. While Meinike brings the trace of Kindler’s traumatic past to Harper, Wilson brings an authentic historical trace of that past with the actual documentary footage of a Nazi concentration camp that he screens for Mary. A key moment in *The Stranger*, the unsettling footage of an actual

camp was, as Biesen notes, “the first time many American audiences saw these brutal real-life atrocities outside of newsreels” (203). Amid Welles’s most conventional potboiler are the shocking images of the real camps after the Nazis had fled. The shocking jolt, the Real force of these images momentarily dissolves the narrative that frames them. While Welles had a much grander and imminently more Wellesian conception of the film,<sup>13</sup> the very conventional quality of the narrative matched by the conventionality of Harper maximizes the impact of this authentic trace of history. Unable to turn away from the horror, Mary is confronted with a disturbing truth about her husband. Here, documentary truth overlaps with narrative truth, punching a hole in the fictional constructions of Charles Rankin. The shock of this encounter for Mary reaches its culmination halfway through the screening, when Wilson reveals the name of the man responsible for organizing and planning the “final solution.” As Wilson is explaining the different images that Mary witnesses on the screen, her face is dimly lit by the flickering images and then is totally concealed in shadow. When Wilson reaches the point in his story when he must utter the name of the architect, he bumps the projector closer to Mary, immediately casting a bright light over the shadows. Mary recoils from the light, much as the immediate experience of trauma causes one to recoil psychologically from something that cannot be immediately symbolically integrated. In the bright light of the projector the shadow cast by Rankin in the earlier scene is abruptly lifted. The scene, thus, brings into the light the atrocities that her husband has desperately attempted to

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<sup>13</sup> Heylin’s analysis of *The Stranger* includes a thorough investigation of the shooting script that Welles had carefully designed before filming. While Heylin offers a more sympathetic reading of the film than many other critics, the inclusion of the excised material, some of which was never shot and some of which was part of the twenty minutes cut from Welles’s directorial edit, speaks volumes about the artistic concessions the director was forced to make. One of the more unfortunate cuts was an extended dream sequence that would reveal the identity of Kindler to Mary, which would have furthered the significance of the subconscious in the film (Heylin 185).

keep hidden. For the first time, Mary hears the name Franz Kindler. Up until this point Mary had remained shaded by the fiction that Rankin had deftly woven for her, but faced with the material traces of his other identity playing out in front of her, she is jolted into the light by the horrors of Franz Kindler. Mary, who had been cloaked in the shadow of Rankin's lies and Harper's domestic confines, is suddenly thrust into the light of history. The confrontation with this documentary evidence proves immediately overwhelming for her; only later, following the delayed impact of traumatic realization that functions on a kind of "playback loop," will Mary be able to confront what she has seen.

As a mechanism predicated on a process of delay, the film projector works very much in formal congruity with the experience of trauma. Like the experience that cannot be "viewed" immediately at the moment of traumatic impact, the cinematic image is inscribed on celluloid by letting the "traumatic rupture" of light in through a camera's lens, only to be developed and projected, or re-lived, at a later date.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the event may be inscribed in the "unconscious" of the camera on the reel of film, but it can only be re-lived after some delayed period of "development" to be projected by the "conscious" of the projector on another occasion. To make a feature film, the series of images must be edited together into a narrative form to make some sense of the registered events. Absent this editing, the images are independent fragments like the fragmented memory of some traumatic experience, lacking some comprehensible context. Consequently, the projector sets into motion an excised piece of history, a fragment that has been lifted for a specific reason and archived. At the same moment Mary is

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that the reliving of the event is framed in a particular way, and only renders a partial experience of the story, much like trauma. One can never undergo a full, precise re-living of trauma, insofar as memory is an imperfect device. Only pieces of the traumatic experience come back, that is, fragments emerge from memory like the different shots in a given sequence, which may vary in length, scale and resolution.

undergoing the traumatic encounter with the truth of her husband's identity –this encounter will undergo a certain “incubation” period before she is willing to acknowledge the truth, Rankin/Kindler is successfully fixing the frozen town clock. These two mechanisms, the projector and the clock, intersect to thrust Mary and the town of Harper into a historical context from which it has previously remained safe. It would seem that the traumatic rupture introduced by the projector forces the clock into motion or, in other words, it jump starts the linear flow of history in Harper. It is no coincidence that Rankin is essentially the generative source of both mechanisms, as the film's secondary topic and the repairman of the clock. If Harper is precisely the “sleepy” New England town promised to soldiers fighting on the front lines, the starting of the clock forces that idealistic home to confront the socio-cultural changes wrought from the traumatic experiences of war. Roused from its “a-historical” slumber, Harper is thrust back into a measure of time. As Kindler claims perched in the tower above Harper, “Look, the chimes have awakened Harper” (*The Stranger*). The shot here foreshadows the end of the film when Kindler will fall to his death, with the crowd below transformed from a congratulatory group of citizens to an angry mob of Harperites and the state police. The angry mob at the end of the film seeks to reclaim the idealism lost in the process of history. Not unlike the light from the projector that shocks Mary, the chimes jolt Harper from its slumber, and, while its citizens do not yet fully know the meaning of this disruption, a certain process has been set into motion that will lead back to the clock tower as it spins back to a halt with Kindler's death.

If the projector and the clock chimes shock Harper back into its historical moment, they also jump start the *noir* elements of the film, consequently, anchoring *The*

*Stranger* in the postwar boom of *noir* films. More representative of “tone and mood” rather than a set of generic conventions, *film noir* reflected postwar America’s disillusionment with the kind of idealism and optimism of war-time propaganda. As Paul Schrader claims:

As soon as the war was over, however, American films became markedly more sardonic – and there was a boom in the crime film. For fifteen years the pressures against America’s amelioristic cinema had been building up, and, given the freedom, audiences and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things. The disillusionment that many soldiers, small businessman, and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film. (101)

While, as Schrader asserts, *film noir* may not be recognized as a genre, the emphasis on “urban” settings and “crime” narratives are particularly important components of the stylistic mode of *noir*. The seedy urban settings, shady characters, and rain soaked streets bathed in streetlight are almost as integral to the “tone and mood” of a *film noir* as a horse and six-shooter are to the Western. While the brightly lit town square and friendly neighbors filing in and out of Potter’s store in Harper would hardly be at home in the hard-boiled nighttime world of the private investigator, *The Stranger* does display some of the hallmarks of *film noir*. Palmer maintains, “one of the fundamental elements of *noir* film is that its narrative works toward the defamiliarization of the ordinary, toward the exposure of an “underside” whose very presence contradicts the “normal” values of American society” (9). However, if the typical *noir* film is defined by a certain “hopelessness,” by an unavoidable, disturbing collapse of one’s life-world, then *The Stranger*’s adoption of a *noir* tone purges certain contemporary anxieties from the idealized small-town.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Palmer argues that the horror film conventions of *The Stranger* emerge to condition the pervasive tone of fatalism indicative of *film noir*: “The containment of *noir* pessimism is achieved in a more interesting



Following Mary's screening of the documentary footage of the camps, the film defamiliarizes the small town, transforming it into an increasingly noir-esque world. More closely associated with the urban underworld, the contamination explored in noir films is embodied in the foreign intruder Franz Kindler. The discovery of Meinike's body in the woods behind the Harper School for Boys is the initial step into the *noir* universe for Harper. At first, this discovery is treated as a kind of generic "murder mystery" that could very well serve as the backbone for a film noir plot. Harper's citizens are excited by the discovery and, as a result, caught up in this generic plot. As one citizen tells Wilson, a stranger to Harper as well, "you're our number one suspect" (*The Stranger*). Quiet, bright, and hospitable earlier in the film, Harper becomes increasingly dark, threatening, and unhinged from the usual, slow pace of small-town life. Mary, who bears the psychological burden of knowing the killer's true identity, undergoes the most dramatic transformation. Like Harper Mary is sweet and innocent in the opening scenes of the film. However, Mary cracks under the weight of anxiety as the traumatic experience of the documentary works its way from, as Wilson claims, her "subconscious" to her conscious mind. If traumatic initial impact of the documentary causes her initially to recoil psychologically, then the truth embedded in those horrific images bubbles to the surface. Mary does not so much deny the truth about her husband,

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fashion, largely by juxtaposing *noir* patterns with ones derived from the horror film" (9). The term "containment" is a significant one for Palmer here, insofar as the horror film is typically predicated on the containment and eradication of some unspeakable horror or evil. Unlike the typical *noir* ending that is often pre-figured by a flashback narrative and voice-over narration, the corrupting force in a horror film is typically put to rest at the conclusion of the film, and the normal, harmonious order of life resumes – even if it is only momentarily, before the monster opens his eyes or moves his hand. If the *noir* universe is irretrievably corrupt, the horror universe often can identify the source of its corruption and eradicate it. While this source of corruption may be indicative of inherent corruption in the socio-symbolic order from which it emerges, the monster condenses this corruption and functions as a scapegoat or sacrificial "black sheep" that takes certain social antagonisms and anxieties with him to the grave.

as she is incapable of processing the horror of the truth. Here, Wilson is correct in claiming that the information has to “mature” in her subconscious before it can registered in the conscious realm of reality; traumatic recollection is a process that works independent of the subject’s volition. Rankin actuates the final dramatic shift in Mary, by confessing that he had devised a plot to kill her in the church tower, making it appear as though it were an accident. Mary requires this perspectival change for her to acknowledge that her husband, Charles Rankin, is actually the mass murderer, Franz Kindler. To put it in Palmer’s terms, the estrangement of the norm reveals the obscene underbelly. Mary’s transformation metaphorically flips the postcard at the beginning of the film back over to conceal the idyllic Harper in the dark world of Kindler, the ideal verso uncovers the obscene recto that locates the source of obscenity in Franz Kindler. Reflecting this transformation in identity on the part of her husband, Mary becomes a kind of *femme fatale*<sup>16</sup> in the film’s final scene, brandishing a gun and expressing her desire to kill Kindler even if it costs her own life. Cut off from the fantasy of Rankin and the idealism of Harper, Mary, in the strange *noir* version of Harper, expresses the fatalism of hard-boiled heroes when Kindler explains to her that she is going to die: “I don’t mind, as long as I take you with me” (*The Stranger*).

The defamiliarization of Harper that plays out in its noir turn in the film’s second half, culminates in Kindler’s deadly fall from the clock tower. Following its own circular pattern, intersecting with reality when something stimulates memory, trauma continually returns to the site of its initial rupture as the place of some encounter which resists symbolic integration. What changes in terms of the difference between the initial

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<sup>16</sup> Sheri Biesen makes a similar point in her analysis of the film, “When Mary realizes Kindler planned to murder her, she overcomes her denial and boldly shifts to a stronger lethal femme resolute on killing him” (206).

encounter and the return is the distance created by time. This distance allows for a reconsideration of what was hitherto too unsettling to confront. While the traumatic encounter can never be fully, meaningfully situated within reality, the distance of time allows for an attempt on the part of the symbolic and fantasy to frame that initial rupture in a way that begins to suture its wound. It is no coincidence that the site of Harper's traumatic reinsertion into some semblance of temporal flow – a confrontation with historical events it has seemingly disavowed —, is also the site of the closure of the temporal loop of trauma: the clock tower. The forward turning hands of the repaired clock insert Harper into a *noir* realm where certain social anxieties can be momentarily articulated, projected onto an “*homme fatale*” and eliminated during the particular duration of the temporal loop. From Mary's transformation into a *femme fatale* to the chiaroscuro lighting, the final scene in *The Stranger* is the most representative of the key elements of *film noir*, as though the film has been building pressure, like Mary's growing anxiety, toward the final moment that bursts. As Wilson explains to Kindler that his increasingly shrinking world has confined him to the clock tower, the mounting anxiety is reflected in the scene by the persistent, “time-bomb” ticking of the clock in the background. The ticking continues steadily until Mary causes the final, explosive rupture by inadvertently severing a pulley within the inner-workings of the clock with a shot from her pistol. While Kindler attempts to dodge his wife's bullets, the clock spins out of control until the angel statue (it chases or is chased by a demon) that is part of the clock stabs him with its sword. Jolted forward into history by the direct confrontation with the traumatic truth that has hitherto been forsaken or invisible, the clock hands spin rapidly forward as Kindler falls to his death. Repetition emphasizes the perspectival shift that

has taken place from the earlier scene in which Harper is “awakened” and the final scene that forces a direct confrontation with Kindler as the evil Other. The doubling and duration, reflected in the clock, proves to be Kindler’s ultimate demise. While he is able to dodge the demon that circles the clock tower, the increasing velocity of the broken clock mechanism does not afford him the time necessary to dodge the angel bearing the sword; the angel skewers Kindler precipitating his fall. Like the temporal delay of trauma, the initial impact is “dodged,” insofar as it is not experienced in its immediacy, but returns later to disrupt the subject’s immersion in his life-world, or, in Kindler’s case, to destroy him. One key shot illustrates this transformation in perspective that results from the temporal delay of trauma; it also shows how repetition in the final scene represents trauma’s incubation period. After Kindler has been shot and is teetering on the edge of the tower in front of the clock, he looks down at the gathering mob of Harperites. This high angle shot capturing the crowd below is a mirror image of the shot immediately after Rankin has fixed the clock. In the initial shot, the townspeople come to greet Rankin and congratulate him. However, in the second shot, the townspeople are no longer incredulous. As Wilson claims, “they’ve come after you ... you can’t fool them anymore” (*The Stranger*). Not only has Mary’s perspective shifted, Harper’s has as well. The initial impromptu parade for Rankin becomes the angry mob demanding the Kindler’s head.

Ultimately, the Rankin/Kindler split between ideal veneer and repressed, darker urges illustrates an unsettling truth for Harper itself, particularly in the postwar period. The disjunction between the parade and the mob illustrates the difficulties some returning soldiers had in reintegrating into the social order at home. Rankin’s “parade” intersects

with the romanticized return following victory, the end of the suspended time of “for the duration,” and, in this case, the clock takes on further significance; it is the end of suspended time. However, the angry mob that emerges after a certain incubation period is an indication of the social order’s unfamiliarity with the returning soldier. Like Fred Derry’s boss in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the home front, after the initial celebration, was not always as hospitable or welcoming as may have been promised in war time propaganda. While this reading puts us in the uncomfortable position of reading Kindler as a surrogate for returning American troops, the difficulties in re-integrating after the parade, the real-life experience of PTSD made “strangers” out of some troops. The inability to leave behind or situate one’s war experience, like Paul Fusell’s lifelong burden, creates a kind of stranger within, one that is most certainly unwelcome to the soldier and the community to which he returns. Embodying this unwelcome stranger in the figure of Kindler locates the source of trauma in the indisputable evil of the Nazi, and, consequently, his death symbolically purges that stranger. This cathartic purging is an attempt to symbolize the last war left to fight: the one within back at home. It is no wonder then that when Kindler is finally dispatched Wilson claims that it is “V-day in Harper” (*The Stranger*). Once again Harper is safe, and once again the clock is fittingly broken.

### **Urban Nightmares, Suburban Dreams**

While *The Stranger* does express some of the frustrations and disillusionment with postwar life, it concentrates them in the figure of Kindler and eliminates them with his death much as the horror film does with the monstrous Other. In this respect, the film

is far more optimistic (or conformist) in its worldview than a more traditional film noir. As Palmer suggests, “*The Stranger* ... works through a series of recognitions to expose an evil that ultimately self destructs, thus restoring the undivided moral goodness of the community” (7). If the typically more urban *film noir* explored, as Paul Schrader claims, “a predetermined fate, and an all-enveloping hopelessness,” then, perhaps, *The Stranger’s* small-town setting requires more optimism (104). While the city certainly was home to many Americans in the post-war period, there was a great suburban migration that corresponded to an anti-urban sentiment. Seeking a home that reflected the ideal “Small Town, U.S.A.” in the OWI pamphlet with the conveniences and culture of the city, many postwar Americans moved to the suburbs. As Irving Allen claims in *New Towns and the Suburban Dream*:

It (anti-urbanism) is, rather, a singular and negative valuation of the degree of loosened social control, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and pluralism in city life compared to what is believed to exist in small towns. There is a tendency to react against city life and a preference, realized by many, for a simple, homogenous, small community, typified by the *ersatz* small towns of suburbia. (6)

Harper is the kind of idealistic model small town upon which suburbia patterns itself, and which cannot endure the kind of foreign corruption of Franz Kindler. Opposed to the postwar disillusionment that Schrader cites as the source of *film noir’s* fatalism, *The Stranger* can only momentarily indulge in the kind of anxieties that are better off located in the morally and ideologically ambiguous realm of the metropolis. Instead, the film, despite acknowledging and exploring the strain of readjusting in the small-town after the war, is ultimately characterized by a kind of “postwar optimism.” As Palmer argues, “holding together this uneasy mixture of political ideas is the ideological cement of postwar optimism, the desire to win the peace (i.e., restore America’s faith in herself)

now that the war against external enemies has been brought to a successful conclusion” (8). Unlike the urban *film noir*, the ending of *The Stranger* does not leave the world in a fatalistic tangle of uncertainty. Wilson’s claim that Kindler’s death is tantamount to “V-day in Harper” draws upon the hope and potentiality of those celebrations of victory that announced the end of the war.

In *Blackout*, Biesen argues that war actually paved the way for noir, “the drive for patriotic films actually paved the way for an increasing tolerance of violence and heralded a new type of Hollywood film” (8). It might seem strange that Biesen would identify the call for patriotic, propagandistic films during the war as the wellspring of the fatalistic *films noir* of the postwar period, but these two modalities of fantastic representation, one ideal and one obscene, seem to intersect in the suburb. On the one side, the suburb is built in the image of the safe, comforting surroundings of the domestic small-town home; that is, the little place that was promised to soldiers where life could resume in all its nostalgic perfection. On the other side, the suburb is situated in close proximity to the obscene, dark realm of the urban world where certain anxieties as well as desires (particularly sexual desires) can play out separated from the safety of this promised, original home. Not quite the city, with all its moral pitfalls and vulgar temptations, and not quite the country, the suburb is a simulacrum of the small town that situates itself near the dark heart of the city. Like Harper, which is able to eliminate the unsettling foreign threat in its midst, the suburb puts a minimal amount of distance between the fatalism of the noir center and itself. Postwar optimism, “V-day in Harper,” can sustain postwar disillusionment because it has moved out of the metropolis, and left the threat behind, or so it would seem.

### Chapter 3: A Change of Scenery

In the years immediately following the “war to end all wars,” a certain scorn for the small-town rose up in American literary and intellectual circles. Perhaps the most famous example of this “revolt from the village,”<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Lewis’ Pulitzer prize-winning *Main Street* subjected the small-town to a ridiculing critique hitherto unthinkable. Richard Davies cites Lewis’ novel in *Main Street Blues* as a reflection of the postwar modernist intellectual atmosphere. No longer ideal or even quaint, the small town was ripe for an unsympathetic depiction, “finally, someone had dared to challenge the long-standing myths about the supposed morally superior way of life that existed in America’s farming communities” (Davies 6). Lewis’ *Gopher Prairie*, Minnesota, modeled after his boyhood home of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, represents the “stock”<sup>2</sup> small town as a place populated by philistines and petty gossips who are content to be mired in the insularity and mediocrity of their tiny, farming community. However, this period of “de-mystification” of the small town did not last. The emergence of the metropolis shifted intellectual and cultural interest from the country to the city. The small town emerges again in war propaganda in both its nostalgic recollection and as a model for an ideal

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<sup>1</sup> This was a phrase used by Carl Van Doren to describe the literary movement, particularly with Sinclair Lewis and the Chicago Renaissance that emerged in the 1920s and was heavily critical of the small town (Lingeman 367).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis’ brief and abstract prologue expresses a seemingly universal quality characteristic of the Small Town, U.S.A.:

This is America – a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves. The town is, in our tale, called “Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.” But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills. Main street is the climax of civilization. (1)



future. As Davies argues, “the harsh critiques of the small town that became fashionable during the 1920s gave way after the Second World War to a gentle nostalgia” (7). While Davies fails to address the wellspring of this postwar nostalgia, in part a production of the OWI’s wartime propaganda, the critique of the small-town as somehow other than idealistic all but disappears both during and following World War II. If the traumatic impact of the first “modern” war, with all its mechanical innovations and devastating carnage, leads people away from the country to the modern city, then the aftermath of the second war leads them back to their forsaken, greener pastures, at least in an ideological sense.

Reflected in the great suburban migration after World War II, the small town becomes a kind of ideal model for the postwar period in America. While the suburb was not necessarily new in the postwar period, affordable loans and housing particularly for veterans,<sup>3</sup> coupled with a deep-seeded, historical anti-urbanism, intensified the exodus from the city’s urban confines to its greener suburban fringes. The paradigm for these suburbs was the rural small town; as Irving Allen claims, “the ideal model of suburbia has always been that of the small town ... the dream is of a small town, even a rural flavor of community” (10). At the more agrarian outreaches of the city, the suburb becomes a variation on the long “sought-for” return to the rural home. However, the new “rural” home is connected to the city both in proximity and cultural influence in a way previous farming communities never were, while still offering a kind of privacy and

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<sup>3</sup> As Duany et. al. claim in *Suburban Nation*, of the numerous factors that contributed to suburban development and “urban sprawl:

the most significant of these were the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration loan programs which, in the years following the Second World War, provided for over eleven million new homes. These mortgages, which typically cost less per month than rent, were directed at new single-family suburban construction (8).

independence not immediately evident in the metropolis.<sup>4</sup> Always lost at some elusive moment in history, the rural fantasy of home expressed in the suburbs was, as Jeffrey Hadden and Josef Barton claim, “a dream more than a little false, the rural ideal recovered the link between pastoral and family life whose loss Americans had begun to mourn in the 1830s” (50). In its war propaganda, the OWI tapped small-town or rural nostalgia lingering in different forms and modalities for over a hundred years. Even if the majority of Americans had been living in the cities since the early twentieth century, many, particularly after World War II, still longed for a home in the country. As Stephanie Coontz notes in *The Way We Never Were*, the war designated a shift in the location of the ideal home from a prewar conception of utopia, grounded in the “urban elegance” of the “high-rise penthouse apartment” to the postwar utopia in the suburbs, that is, “a more modest vision of utopia: a single-family house and a car” (25).

Both new, insofar as it is a modern development of the unique financial and historical-political circumstances following World War II, and old, insofar as it harkens back or quotes America as a “garden” nation, the suburb is fraught with the problematic workings of nostalgic fantasy. Closely associated with the “uncomplicated” era of the 1950s, the suburb is the iconic location for the “traditional American family.” However historically inaccurate this notion of “traditional” may be, it is often the suburban families

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Hadden and Josef Barton argue that the suburbs are essentially a solution to two competing fantasies that represent different modalities of the “American dream”:

the movement outward of the middle class was not simply an escape from the city; it was more importantly an attempt to find a pleasing context in which to enjoy the newly discovered pleasures of family life. These pleasurable haunts of family life were continually disturbed, however, by another myth, that of the self-made, mobile American. A creature of nature and custom, so the parable went, found the rural world restrictive and left at the first chance for the city. But while he found success and approval, he was haunted by dreams of peace and wholeness which must, he imagined, have been realized somewhere in the past of the village. So the self-made American returned to the countryside in the suburb, where he could find solace in the delights of family and in the rhythms of nature. (50)

of 1950s television such as Ozzie and Harriet Nelson's that religious and conservative political figures cite when lamenting contemporary attacks on the family institution. Primarily white, middle class, and suburban, cultural representations of the family during the 1950s such as the Nelsons in *Ozzie and Harriet* or the Cleavers in *Leave it to Beaver*, established a repressive cultural homogeneity that exerted pressure on those who lived in the "burbs." Along with certain aesthetic norms both within and around the home, representations of the suburbs from magazines to television reinforced the distribution of labor according to gender. No longer encouraged to be "Rosie the Riveter," the suburban housewife, blessed with innumerable domestic gadgets, was encouraged by *McCall's* and *Better Homes and Gardens* to be "Susie Homemaker." While the suburban family of the 1950s was often represented as ideal at the time, it was certainly not traditional, at least not traditional for families of the 1950s. The notion that suburban was traditional is, much like the perfect small town of days gone by, a product of nostalgia.<sup>5</sup>

Breaking with extended family ties and placing emphasis on the nuclear family as the sight of one's ultimate "worth" and fulfillment, the family in the 1950s, as Stephanie Coontz claims, "was a qualitatively new phenomenon" (25). De-mobilized and discouraged from labor after the war, women were encouraged to channel their energy into domestic labor at an unprecedented level: "Nineteenth-century middle-class women had cheerfully left housework to servants, yet 1950s women of all classes created makework in their homes and felt guilty when did not do everything for themselves"

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<sup>5</sup> Coontz's introduction to *The Way We Never Were* traces the different modes and developments that the American family undergoes in the brief history of the country. While the 1950s family mobilized certain aspects of familial life from earlier historical periods, particularly the Victorians penchant for domesticity, its "sublimation" as the "traditional family" belies the fact that family has been dynamic institution, subject to historical shifts and changes. There is no one "traditional" family.

(Coontz 27). Despite the numerous time-saving appliances developed and sold in large numbers in the postwar periods, women spent more time on housework and child-rearing than before the war. While not primarily confined to the home, men were also disciplined by the normative structure of the family. Men were coerced for professional reasons into marriage and fatherhood, since a, “lack of a suitable wife could mean the loss of a job or promotion for a middle-class man” (Coontz 32). Grounded in the privacy of the single family, suburban “ranch home,” the 1950s family aspired, and consequently felt a great deal of anxiety, to live up to domestic perfection; as Elaine Tyler May claims, “it [the 1950s family] was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life” (qtd. in Coontz 27). While this may seem to be more or less the standard definition of family life today, the 1950s family was, as Coontz maintains, “a historical fluke, based on a unique and temporary conjuncture of economic, social, and political factors” (28).

If this 1950s suburban family is the nostalgic traditional model with which we may compare to a more contemporary mode (to which it can never fully live up), then these families already felt the same pressure to live up to their own ideal. Television and magazine representations of the homogenized perfect family exerted a repressive, normalizing influence on 1950s families. Added to this cultural pressure, were Cold War fears of communism that created rampant anxiety about deviations from strict conformity: if Susie Homemaker does not love the fact that her dishwasher allows for more time with company, then she must be a “commie.” In other words, the cultural atmosphere was one psychologically charged by numerous repressive influences coming

to bear at the newly all-important site of the nuclear family.<sup>6</sup> Against the pressures of these repressive cultural, social, and political forces, some people, as Coontz notes, “saw the family, in the words of one husband, as the one ‘group that in spite of many disagreements internally always will face its external enemies together’” (33). If some escaped the social pressures to marry and have children for professional or personal reasons by starting a family, others did not find the family to be a safe haven. Quite the contrary, satisfying appearances necessitated the concealment of numerous kinds of social ills that lurked beneath the ideal, suburban veneer. Citing domestic violence and sexual abuse statistics,<sup>7</sup> Coontz argues that, “beneath the polished facades of many ‘ideal’ families, suburban as well as urban, was violence, terror, or simply grinding misery that only occasionally came to light” (35). Nowhere was this demystification of the ideal, suburban family more evident than in the figure of the perfect housewife, who “subordinated her own dreams and aspirations” in order to create the realm of domestic perfection upon which the nostalgic fantasy of the family is predicated (Coontz 36). Forced back into the home, much against their wishes, and bombarded by coercive popular culture messages of domestic discipline, women felt increasingly trapped in the suburban home that was supposed to be a little piece of heaven; as Coontz notes, “almost every major news journal was using the word *trapped* to describe the feelings of the

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<sup>6</sup> The family, particularly the concerned mother, was considered to be an important component in the fight against communism, as Coontz claims:

Cold war anxieties merged with concerns about the expanded sexuality of family life and the commercial world to create what one authority calls the domestic version of George F. Kennan’s containment policy toward the Soviet Union: A “normal” family and vigilant mother became the “front line” of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition. (33)

<sup>7</sup> Despite numerous reported cases of spousal and child abuse, “the major journal of American family sociology did not carry a single article on family violence between 1939 and 1969. Wife battering was not even considered a ‘real’ crime by most people” (Coontz 35).

American housewife” (37). In order to maintain the image of domestic perfection and thwart political suspicion during the Cold War, children learned to keep political opinions, marital conflicts, and physical/sexual abuse from leaving the confines of the idyllic ranch home. From the simple misery of unhappy marriages of convenience to alcohol and drug abuse on the part of disillusioned housewives, the “traditional” family of the 1950s seemed already to feel the repressive weight of idealism in its time that would be bestowed upon it by nostalgic recollection later.

Like the 1950s “traditional” suburban family, suburbia’s ideal model, the small town, is a nostalgic, mythic creation equally indebted to the revisionist tendencies of memory as it is to any material place or historical moment. The suburban family’s pressure to live up to a culturally constructed image of perfection is tied inextricably to the fantasmic re-creation of the small-town in the suburb; that is, as this new mode of family was being established in the postwar period, it was tied to the nostalgic idealism associated with the original, lost “hometown.” If the suburban family is often regarded as the “traditional” family, then its association with the fundamental American fantasy of the small town, as it manifests in the suburbs, is an integral part of that misperception. Both the “traditional” suburban family and the suburb are mythic creations. The latter mobilizes nostalgia in its embodiment, and the former which establishes an impossible ideal, only embodied in sitcoms. These sitcoms and other idealistic representations of the burbs, like the small town, will become a source of nostalgia many years later. Charles Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter* released in the throes of suburbanization in 1955,<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Night of the Hunter* was released one year before the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 would intensify suburban migration by making commuting easier. Some 41,000 miles of roadway, 90 percent of it paid for by the federal government, were called for in the act, connecting the suburban edges of the city to its business and cultural centers (Duany et. al. 8).

offers a look back at the paradigmatic small-town during a not so idealistic time. Based on the best-selling novel by Davis Grubb, the film is set in Cresap's Landing, Ohio, a tiny Ohio River Valley town enduring the harsh economic realities of the Great Depression. Responding to the increased importance placed upon parenting and children in the 1950s, the film focuses on two children, Pearl (Sally Jane Bruce) and John Harper (Billy Chapin), who endure the dissolution of their family brought about by the actions of their two "unfit" patriarchs. Ben (Peter Graves), the children's biological father, collapses beneath the pressure of being the family's "breadwinner." His inability to provide the material comforts he believes his family deserves as a consequence of the depression drives Ben to commit robbery and murder. Ben's cellmate in prison, "Preacher" Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) arrives in Cresap's Landing after Ben's death to become the children's stepfather. Attempting to discover the location of Ben's stolen loot from John and Pearl, Powell, as both preacher and criminal, appears to be like one of the malevolent patriarchs hiding behind the idealistic veneer of the suburbs. If that so-called traditional family conceals all manner of evils (alcoholism, sexual abuse, domestic violence) beneath the facade of the domestic perfection displayed on *Ozzie and Harriet*, then Harry Powell conceals his beneath his "collar," which affords him social currency and unimpeachable integrity within Cresap's Landing. While the film is temporally displaced from its particular historical moment, insofar as it is set some twenty years earlier than its theatrical release, the child-centered narrative and the overall focus on familial relations anchors Laughton's film in its contemporary social milieu. This spatial (the original small town and not the suburb) and temporal displacement, articulates certain social and psychological ills plaguing the repressed suburban family. Insofar as the action in *The*

*Night of the Hunter* takes place “out there” in the country, the unsettling depiction of familial relations can express certain unspoken truths about the suburban experience without hitting too close to home.

### **A Son of Two Fathers**

Two distinctly different fathers emerge in Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter* bringing with them terrifying and destructive consequences for the two children in the film. As Lacanian pun on the paternal function, the “No-of-the Father,” implies, it is their prohibitions and demands that prove to be disturbing for John and Pearl. Unlike Ma Joad, who is a stabilizing force of love in *The Grapes of Wrath* that shelters the family against the consequences of the Great Depression, the two patriarchs in *The Night of the Hunter* initiate a dissolution of the family unit. Contrary to Steinbeck’s account of the Okies, the cause of familial disintegration in Laughton’s film is not so much the transitory lifestyle brought on by the depression, but the fear of that life for orphans. The fear of this nomadic existence drives Ben Harper to commit robbery and murder; as he claims, he is “tired of seeing children roaming the woodlands without food, children roamin’ the highways in this year of depression” (*Night of the Hunter*). Harper kills two men in Cresap’s Landing while committing a bank robbery to save his children such a fate. Hiding the ten thousand dollars of stolen money in Pearl’s doll and demanding both children to swear to keep the location a secret, Ben is convicted and hanged for his crimes. His cellmate in Moundsville Penitentiary is Harry Powell, who, despite his persistent inquiries, is incapable of extracting Ben’s secret before his execution. When Powell is released from prison, he moves to Cresap’s Landing, marries Ben’s Widow,



Willa (Shelley Winters), and proceeds vigorously and unsuccessfully to interrogate John about the location of the money. Powell's discipline, his demand for obedience from John, directly countermand's Ben's; that is, Powell's obedience demands that John do what was expressly forbidden by Ben. Despite Ben's intentions, both children end up parentless and nomadic running from the maniacal preacher, and, consequently, searching for the home they are deprived of by Ben's crimes and Powell's intrusion. Ultimately, the children find a surrogate home with Rachel Cooper (Lilian Gish), who, like Ma Joad, is a powerful maternal force that saves John and Pearl from their corrupted step-father.

Both figures of interdiction for little John, Powell and Ben, represent two distinctly different modes of the paternal function. In *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec, citing Freud's account of the "primal father" from *Totem and Taboo*, examines two different paternal modalities that set Powell and Ben in direct opposition. On the one hand, there is the primal father, who "kept all the power and enjoyment to himself" (Copjec 155). The primal father represents excess, or a direct relationship with the surpluses of *jouissance*. His interdictions create barriers between the world outside threatening his excessive enjoyment and his coveted pleasures. Despotic and selfish, the primal father poses a threat to his community insofar as his *jouissance* is disturbing or traumatic. Unlike his "children," the primal father enjoys unmediated access to *jouissance*, which prohibits any stable, meaningful social order. In Freud's account, the primal father's son steps in and slays him, and, consequently, introduces a more secure and benign law. Unlike the Primal father's unmediated relationship to enjoyment, the ideal father promises to establish the necessary distance between the subject and

*jouissance* for the harmonious functioning of the socio-symbolic network. The ideal father, thus, subjects the irrationality of *jouissance* to the meaningful order of law filtering its unsettling impact with discipline. As Copjec claims, “this eviction of excess pleasure forms the son as an ideal father, ‘mild and provident’ in Tocqueville’s words, ‘kinder and gentler’ in Peggy Noonan’s” (156). As a steward of the law, “the Name-of-the-Father” in Lacanian terms, the ideal father is a subject of knowledge, insofar as he offers the meaningful realm of the symbolic in place of the traumatic rupture of *jouissance* indicative of the primal father. Consequently, the ideal father, a “subject supposed to know,” is, as Copjec notes, “often imagined under the traits of the educator” (156). If the primal father is the one who demands pleasure, the ideal father is the one who prohibits or perpetually defers pleasure; his interdictions create a safe distance between traumatic *jouissance* and his “children.”

Given his violent nature and crimes, Harry Powell in *The Night of the Hunter* would seem to be a primal father. From his animalistic scream on the river bank halfway through the film as John and Pearl float away from his grasp to the wounded screeching he makes when Rachel Cooper shoots him near the end of the film, Preacher Powell exhibits the “animality” of the primal father on different occasions in *The Night of the Hunter*. However, Powell’s paternal function is much more complicated than Copjec’s simple binary. Surprisingly, Ben Harper, the children’s real father in the film, is closer to Copjec’s primal father than Powell. Insofar as his robbery is committed so that John and Pearl can enjoy his criminal spoils, Harper’s interdictions at the beginning of *The Night of the Hunter* are rooted in the imperative to enjoy. The oath that Ben compels John and Pearl take is grounded in the belief that *jouissance*, or in this particular case the ten

thousand dollars their father has stolen, will be theirs when they have reached adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Operating outside of the law, Ben compels enjoyment from his offspring, albeit an enjoyment that is to be deferred until the children reach an appropriate age. Unlike the lawful, meaningful realm of the ideal father, the primal father's realm is one of traumatic uncertainty. Consequently, Ben Harper's lone interdiction proves to be traumatic for both Pearl and John, particularly for John, who demonstrates an awareness of which the younger Pearl is incapable. It is the excess of pleasure, the ill-gotten money placed in the child's doll (an icon of childish enjoyment), that derails the Harper family. Beginning with Ben's incarceration and execution, the Harper family endures ridicule and suspicion from the townspeople of Cresap's Landing, only to be "rescued" from suspicion by the "legitimacy" of Preacher Harry Powell. Rather than focusing the adult world in Willa's experience of the Harper family's trials,<sup>10</sup> *The Night of the Hunter* primarily focuses on the Harper children's experience. More specifically, the film explores John's relationship to his suddenly hostile small town, which is only made more alienating by the acceptance of Powell into the community. Following the imperative of his father to keep the stolen

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<sup>9</sup> What is particularly interesting about Ben's gift is that it falls along the lines of deferred *jouissance* associated with prohibition. While the Law explicitly prohibits direct access to some forbidden pleasure, at the implicit level it ensures the very existence of the prohibited pleasure. Insofar as the Law creates a distance from the prohibited thing, it establishes that forbidden object/act as accessible; all one must do is cross the line or traverse the gap between the prohibition and the interdicted *jouissance*. Ben knows very well, as do the children, they cannot spend any of the money in tiny Cresap's Landing. To spend a dime of it would raise suspicion, since, in a small town, everyone knows everyone else's business including a rough sketch of their financial situation. The gift of the money is akin to the promise of deferred pleasure, that sometime down the road the money can be spent. In other words, at some point we can break the law, and have what has hitherto been forbidden.

<sup>10</sup> Given the complicated representation of sexuality in the film, insofar as sexual pleasure poses particular problems for Willa and Powell, it is worth noting that the primal father is the sexually potent one. Opposed to his "impotent" ideal counterpart, the primal father is capable of enjoying. Unlike his cellmate, Ben Harper is identified as Willa's sexually vital partner, whose renounced sexuality becomes a source of her destructive religious fanaticism. Distracting her from her protective maternal function, Willa's sexual energy is turned inward by the ideal father Powell's prohibition, transforming an excess of pleasure into an excess of deprivation.

money a secret, John is forced into a state of hyperawareness and skepticism. Unable to trust either the stranger Powell or his friends, family, and neighbors, John is robbed of his innocence by burden of skepticism.

Despite his nefarious intentions, Powell belongs more on the side of the ideal father than Ben Harper. While Powell's religious identification is complicated by his seemingly hypocritical criminal activity, we should not mistake our conception of hypocrisy as an indication of Powell's insincerity. As absurd though his response to Ben's question of his denomination, "the religion the Almighty and me worked out betwixt ourselves," may seem, Powell's faith and his belief in himself as an instrument of God's will is not a masquerade (*Night*). Even if he does exploit his faith or self-interested purposes, Powell appears to be deadly sincere in his own belief. Consequently, Powell in, an albeit twisted manner, is closer to the pedagogical ideal father Copjec conceives of in her binary opposition, insofar as he is a bearer of knowledge and a figure of interdiction that demands the sacrifice of *jouissance*. Powell's intentions for Ben's money – "with that ill-gotten money I could build a tabernacle to make that Wheeling Island tabernacle look like a chickenhouse" – reinforces this move away from *jouissance* to the pedagogical function of the ideal father (*Night*). Locating widows from whom to steal and then murder, Powell's entire criminal enterprise enables him to, "go forth and preach your [God's] word" (*Night*). Transforming some devious, unsettling pleasure into a socially acceptable activity, Powell's work resembles the popular conception of Freudian sublimation.<sup>11</sup> Like the ill-gotten money that will be transformed into a church,

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<sup>11</sup> This is the popular conception of Freudian sublimation, which he explicates in "On Narcissism." For Freud, sublimation is a process predicated on deflection. As he claims, "sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon the deflection from sexuality" (152). Freud's

Powell redirects his own sexual energy into the “Lord’s work.” What Powell proposes for the stolen loot is a kind of “spiritual laundering,” channeling the “cursed, bloody gold” through an intermediary, the church, so that it is no longer tainted by the stain of *jouissance*.

Unlike Ben Harper who is removed from his social order because he poses a threat to it, Powell emerges as the ideal father to suture symbolically together the fractured Harper family. If Ben’s crimes ostracize his family, then Powell or rather his “occupation” restores their legitimacy in Cresap’s Landing. To recast Copjec’s binary in terms of the small town, what Powell understands and what Ben loses sight of in his crimes is the power of appearances in the small-town. With all the fantasmic-symbolic machinations at his disposal, the ideal father is a master of establishing the illusion of stability, and, consequently, holding the threat of *jouissance* at the appropriate arm’s length. Powell’s ability to establish the appearance of integrity and social legitimacy would no doubt have resonated with the 1950s suburban family. Both Powell and the suburban family understand all too well that appearances are never just superficial. Quite the contrary, appearances are integral to both the composition of a symbolic network and the ability of a subject(s) to successfully integrate and move within that network. Be it the clerical, white collar or the perfectly manicured suburban lawn, appearances are integral to social legitimacy, and their maintenance, especially within tightly knit communities hyper aware of every neighbor’s actions, is integral to survival. This focus on appearances and the superego compulsion to maintaining them plagued

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conception of sublimation then designates a re-direction of sexual energy into some other activity, such as Powell’s redistribution of sexual energy into his criminal transgressions. Freud’s essay offers a much more diverse and complex understanding of sublimation, which later psychoanalytic critics, like Alenka Zupančič in *The Shortest Shadow*, will develop in greater detail.

families in the 1950s; as Coontz notes, “for many children, however, growing up in the 1950s family was not so much a matter of being protected from the harsh realities of the outside world as preventing the outside world from learning the harsh realities of family life” (34). Not unlike the mores of the abstract, idyllic small-town upon which the suburb modeled itself, appearances carry the weight of truth in small communities. While an appearance may be patently false, as it is in the case of Harry Powell posing as a benevolent preacher, loving father and husband, its truth is subjected to a scrutinizing communal review. One’s standing and social mobility in a community such as Cresap’s Landing is predicated on sustaining an appropriate appearance, that is, in one’s ability to adopt the approved norms and customs underpinning the social fabric. Consequently, it becomes imperative to satisfy “prying eyes” by concealing unsavory behaviors behind closed doors. In both Cresap’s Landing and the 1950s suburb, family must sell the fantasmic image of happiness to the observing community.

Maintaining the all-important appearance or reputation in the small-town is predicated upon keeping the excesses of *jouissance* appropriately contained. As an “ideal father” figure, albeit one that has fabricated his own horrifically twisted religion, Powell aligns himself with the collaborative process of fantasy and the symbolic order that redistributes enjoyment according to religious doctrine. In its unfettered form, *jouissance* proves to be too traumatic for the maintenance of a direct connection, and, ultimately, by the end of the film the stain of *jouissance*, Ben Harper’s bloody gold, is a burden that John can no longer carry.<sup>12</sup> It is also Ben Harper’s stolen loot that isolates and ostracizes

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<sup>12</sup> Pearl’s doll, Miss Jenny, is a particularly important symbol for *The Night of the Hunter*, and is an excellent example of the *objet petit a*. Selected for its representation of innocence by Ben Harper, the doll becomes a symbol of the corrupted innocence of the children, stuffed full of the ill-gotten money that is young John’s adult burden. In other words, the doll is both a symbol of youthful innocence and its loss; the

the Harper children in the opening shots of Cresap's Landing. Belonging to a community requires a sacrifice of enjoyment as the price of admission; unmediated *jouissance* is surrendered to the unwritten code of norms and official laws of the community. This sacrifice is filtered through the Law that underpins the community, and fantasy's relationship to the symbolic provides a narrative translation of sacrifice into theft. In other words, fantasy couches the sacrifice as a theft by some Other, who indulges in the renounced *jouissance*. My price of admission is appropriated by some Other, who is allowed to enjoy what I have to give up to be a member of the social order; this is what psychoanalysis calls the "theft of enjoyment." Harry Powell becomes an agent of "justice" in *The Night of the Hunter* compelled by the illusion of this "theft of enjoyment." Powell's reason for being is to reclaim the stolen price of admission for belonging to a community, or, more precisely, Powell charges himself with the duty of punishing those who challenge the authority of Law by refusing to have their *jouissance* mediated by it.

The preacher's obsession with the Other is evident throughout the film in his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from female sexuality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our introduction to the preacher when Powell attends a burlesque show.

As Powell makes his way to the next small town looking for a new widow to exploit, he

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psychological weight of it is so heavy that the blissfully unaware Pearl, not John, must carry it. This dualistic nature, both the innocence and its loss is at the very core of the *objet petit a*, insofar as the object is both one of desire and a symptom of some greater trauma that leaves behind a certain stain. The "small a" is a key feature, that is, "a" designates the minute feature on account of which the object is desirable. This surplus feature – the something more that the object has over any other common object – accounts for desire. For John and Pearl, the money becomes the "small a" on account of which the doll becomes the centrifugal force of the film, identifying both the rupture that tears the Harper family apart and sustains John's resolve. Only with the traumatic repetition of the father's apprehension, Powell's arrest, does the object shift from the *objet petit a* as the elevated gift to the "desublimated" object that has become a gift of shit; this transformation is a purely perspectival movement from object to the symptom of some trauma. The object does not change, only our perception of it.

engages in a one-way dialogue with “the Lord.” Rationalizing his murders, Powell claims, “Not that You mind the killings. Your book is full of killings. But there are things You do hate, Lord. Perfume-smelling things, lacy things, things with curly hair” (*Night*). After this monologue, the camera cuts to a shot of a burlesque dancer, framed voyeuristically by lighting that suggests a keyhole through which the audience is compelled to watch. Powell is seated in a seedy theater observing the suggestive movements of that dancer. With a sneer on his face, Powell sticks his left hand, the word “HATE” tattooed on his fingers, into his jacket pocket. When the blade from his switch-blade knife rips through his jacket, Powell’s expression turns from straightforward sneer to upturned reverence, as he asserts, “There are too many of *them*. You can’t kill a whole world” (*Night*). Sexual transgression, emphasized by the voyeuristic implications of the “keyhole” lighting, and punishment overlap in the scene. Powell’s interest in the dancer is immediately translated into the desire to punish, or, more specifically, when his switch-blade erupts, his gaze turns towards God; the threat of sexuality is mediated by the divine Law. Insofar as he must pay the price of admission to see the show, Powell is drawn into the theater by the temptation of sexual *jouissance*. Still, his repulsed expression belies any kind of “normal” sexual interest in the dancer. Likewise, later in the film he will refuse Willa’s sexual advances on their wedding night. Even the “legitimated” sexual interaction between husband and wife cannot purify sexuality for Powell, who confines the feminine to motherhood when he forces Willa to examine herself in the mirror, “You see the body of a woman. The temple of creation and motherhood. You see the flesh of Eve that man since Adam has profaned” (*Night*). His ambivalence toward the sexually enticing Other is embodied in the phallic knife that he compulsively opens while



watching the show. Both a symbol of uncontrollable erection and the instrument of judgment that he uses on his victims, the knife represents a transformation of *jouissance* from the sexual repetition of drive (and hence reproduction) into the death associated with desire. Ultimately, the fulfillment Powell's sexual relationship(s) ends his partner's life, which begins the whole gruesome process anew. The knife is a surrogate object propping up his impotence in the face of sexuality.

### **H-A-T-E, The Hand of Cain**

If Powell's ecclesiastical "occupation" illustrates the significance of appearances within the small town, then Cresap's Landing reflects this superficiality both at the narrative level and the set design.<sup>13</sup> From Spoon's Ice Cream Parlor where Willa works to the generic small-town characters like Uncle Birdie Steptoe (James Gleason), whose alcoholism is tolerated because of his affability, Cresap's Landing seems to be an innocuous and innocent small town ripped off the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. While the opening establishing shot of Cresap's Landing presents a far more rustic Main Street than Harper, Connecticut, in *The Stranger*, the dirt streets and simple storefronts are nostalgic icons of the typical Midwestern small town. If the image initially seems somewhat bare and, perhaps, too superficial, it is because it was intended to be. As set designer Hillyard Brown explains,

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<sup>13</sup> Here I realize that I'm running the risk of contradicting an earlier claim that Powell is sincere in his faith. While I would argue that the film presents Powell as sincere no matter how hypocritical his actions, his appearance as a Preacher allows for a (mis)perception of the nature of his faith. The townsfolk welcome Powell into their community on the symbolic weight of his appearance, but do not delve any further into his doctrine. Powell does not necessarily disabuse them of their misperception, and, in fact, takes full advantage of it. For Powell this is not necessarily hypocritical, but, instead, all part of following through with the Lord's work. In other words, Powell operates as though he has a blank check from the lord.

Because Laughton said he was approaching the film from the boy's point of view, I'd often design and build sets but only put in the things the boy paid attention to. You know, little boys don't attend to everything that comes along. They run up and down the street and they see certain buildings and certain things, and everything else in-between is a blank. The boy paid attention to the fences along the street that he could hit with a stick. I decided I'd put a picket fence along there, and there wouldn't be any house behind it at all, just a vacant place with a fence. (Jones 113)

Brown's design might initially appear to contradict the argument for the importance of appearances in small-towns,<sup>14</sup> insofar as he leaves gaping holes in the set. However, the concept behind arranging and constructing the set pieces as a reflection of John's point of view mirrors the constitution of reality through perception, however distorted, within a small community. The construction of Cresap's Landing reflects John's perception of it, and, consequently, what piques his interest or captures his gaze. While John will certainly examine his surroundings with a different set of criteria from those of his adult counterparts, the nature of composing the small town, physically in John's case and symbolically for the adults, remains the same. Perception and appearances, regardless of their depth and factuality, underpin the small town.

John's limited, child-centered perspective is reflected not only in the composition of the set, but also in the interest the townspeople take in John and Pearl's family life. Whereas the limited set may mirror the narrowed focus of a young boy, the adults and other children in town are narrowly focused on the specific trials of the Harper family. Our initial introduction to the town of Cresap's Landing takes place on a schoolyard playground. A sound bridge creates an overlap between the macabre song ("Hing, Hang,

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<sup>14</sup> Responding to Hillyard Brown's design philosophy, Davis Grubb recalls the importance of appearances Ohio River Valley small towns:

It's funny, there happens to be a town in West Virginia that is kind of down and out economically, and on their main street they have about five frame office-building fronts, like a western movie set. There's nothing behind them, they just want to look prosperous. Really, it's true (Jones).

Hung”) John’s classmates sing, and Ben Harper’s executioner, Bart, in the previous sequence. Even before we catch a glimpse of Cresap’s Landing’s picturesque, rustic domesticity, the small town is announced in the children’s voices that differentiate John and Pearl from the norm. Much as Bart is isolated in the overlapping image, John and Pearl are ostracized and ridiculed by the children for the crimes of their father. Editing establishes the social differentiation and isolation that transpires in this brief sequence. The opening shot frames a line of children who give bodies to the voices haunting the previous image of Bart. It appears that they are all looking at the same focal point, presumably the target of their lampoon. The next shot would seem to confirm this, as we see Pearl and John seemingly staring back at their classmates, isolated from the rest of the group by their separate frame. Only when we see the next shot do we realize that John and Pearl are actually outside the playground, on the other side of the fence from the rest of the children, as one child runs around the fence to draw a chalk stick-figure of a hanged man on a fence post. While editing creates the illusion of an interaction between these children, John and Pearl are so estranged from the community that they cannot be directly addressed by their classmates. The false shot-reaction shot illustrates both the fascination the Harpers generate as well as their isolation. While John and Pearl might be point of focus and fascination for their schoolmates, like the camera insinuates, they cannot be directly addressed. Instead, the other children turn their backs on the Harper children, who are forced into the interstitial space of the road. While the other children remain safely within the confines of their schoolyard fence, John and Pearl are forced outside the normalizing discipline of the school.

Manifesting itself in ridicule amongst the children and pity with the adult denizens of Cresap's Landing, the fascination with the Harper family, despite being ostracized, draws undesirable skepticism. After being mocked by their classmates John and Pearl make their way down Main Street, stopping in front a variety store to window shop. Illustrating the power John's perception has upon the visual composition of the film, the camera tracks into the window to isolate and emphasize John's point of focus: a watch. While the watch will be a key symbol of stability in the film's conclusion, here it designates an unattainable ideal for little John. Simultaneously a representation of order and reminder of the money the children are not allowed to spend – Pearl naively asks, “are you gonna buy it, John?” – the watch serves as a symbol of the time John is deprived of by Ben's crimes (*Night*). A Christmas present from his surrogate mother, Rachel, the watch John will receive later in the film metaphorically returns the “time” of his childhood. Clearly establishing the road as a limit-point dividing John and Pearl from “normal” society, the store's proprietor, Ms. Cunningham, comes out onto the sidewalk as much to close off the interior of the store as to greet the Harper children; later in the scene John and Pearl will also be forbidden from entering Spoon's Ice Cream Parlor by their mother. After asking about the children's “poor, poor mother,” Ms. Cunningham voices the suspicion pervading the town, “Did they ever find out what your father done with all that *money* he *stole*?” (*Night*). While Mrs. Cunningham directly addresses the children in this scene, they are still identified as stained or marked by their father's crime, and, consequently, are forbidden entrance into the store. The inflection in Ms. Cunningham's inquiry indicates the town's morbid curiosity about and guarded scrutiny of the Harper family. Like in any respectable small Midwestern town, morbid curiosity is

appropriately “laundered” by feigning concern. While Ms. Cunningham does not turn her back to the Harper children, her inquiries about the money and her position blocking the entrance to the store indicate the particular symbolic position the Harper’s occupy. Both outside, insofar as they are tainted by their father’s crime, and inside, insofar as they belong to the community and are notorious within it, the Harpers are caught in a kind of in-between space within Cresap’s Landing.

A solution to this “inbetween-ness” is posed in the final stop of the children’s trip down Main Street. After John and Pearl refuse to answer Ms. Cunningham’s question, the camera follows them further down the street to Spoon’s. Despite the fact that the children are prohibited from entering, the camera tracks in to pick up a discussion between Willa and Icey. Unlike John and Pearl’s earlier interactions that illustrate the consequences of deviating from communal norms, Icey and Willa’s conversation establishes the path necessary to reclaim respectability. Icey, Cresap’s Landing’s foremost busybody, lectures Willa on the importance of dual-parenting now that she is single, “there are certain facts of life that add up as simple as two plus two makes four, and one of them is this: No woman is able to raise growing youngsters alone. The Lord meant that job for two” (*Night*). While Willa explains that she is uninterested in a husband, Icey, following a dissolve edit, explains “It ain’t a question of wanting or not wanting ... It’s a man you need in the house, Willa Harper” (*Night*). This discussion is intercut with two different shots of a train, presumably traveling to Cresap’s Landing and carrying Harry Powell, which is announced by Walter Schumann’s “Preacher’s theme” in the soundtrack. The dissolve, which introduces the first shot of the train, indicates that Icey’s work on behalf of Cresap’s respectable society is persistent, ongoing, and

methodical. Despite Willa's expressed lack of interest, Icey is willing to "preach" to her until she eventually comes around. The opening two scenes illustrate the kind of ostracizing that occurs when the norms that underpin small-town life are violated, when the appearances that hold the community together are not sustained. Consequently, the final scene with Icey and Willa introduces a solution to the plight of the Harper family. By marrying, as Icey suggests, Willa can re-integrate her family into the socio-symbolic network of Cresap's Landing. The distinction Icey makes between "want" and "need" illustrates the integral relationship between marriage and appearances. "Want" belongs to the unsettling realm of *jouissance*, as a kind of troubling surplus to the normal order of things, and "need" in this case is a manifestation of the norm. Need is what regulates the dangerous surplus of "want" in an appropriate and contained manner. According to Icey, Willa "needs" a man to contain the potential dangers of her "wants" – later Willa will identify her "wants" of "facepaint" and "perfume," traces of feminine sexuality that Powell abhors, as the reason for Ben's crimes in the first place. The sexuality of Willa and Ben's relationship is to be tamed by marriage, insofar as the potential remarriage is intended to solve the problem of parenting their offspring. With the father as the guarantor of authority, the family is the key component to appearances and social legitimacy in the small town. The passenger on the threatening incoming train will provide an answer and, consequently, legitimacy to the Harper family that has come under the perilous shadow of small town suspicion.

Through the shared language of religion, Powell is able to conceal his darker impulses to establish himself as a husband, father, and citizen of Cresap's Landing. Powell's initial invitation into the community appropriately takes place at Spoon's Ice

Cream Parlor; his introduction also marks the first time the Harper children are seen indoors in Cresap's Landing. Staging identifies the different levels of social integration in the small town. More specifically, spatial arrangements both within and outside Spoon's Ice Cream Parlor illustrate the stolen money's impact on John's social and familial relationships. Cut off from his people both physically and symbolically, John initially witnesses the preacher's introduction to the family from outside on the street. Immediately suspicious, John watches as Powell easily wins the love of his younger sister Pearl, who allows Powell to take her doll and kiss it. Unlike the younger, more innocent Pearl, John is capable of understanding the seriousness of the oath he swears to his father. The oath (and the knowledge that comes with it) establishes a distance between John and his community; he is forbidden by Ben from confiding in anyone. Positioning himself to be their father and Willa's husband, Powell draws the children into the community just as he draws John into the parlor. It is no coincidence that John reacts to Powell's play with Miss Jenny. While Powell does not know he holds the desired object in his hand when he takes Jenny, John is aware, and his vigilance forces him into action; the battle begins implicitly between John and Powell before Powell can show his hand. Ultimately, Powell's symbolic authority, as the ideal father/benevolent preacher, begins the process of suturing the family back into normal society at Spoon's.

Along with Pearl, Powell's charisma immediately wins over both the Spoons, who seem to be key social stalwarts in Cresap's Landing. While girlishly reluctant, Willa seems taken in as well. John, on the other hand, remains incredulous appearing intuitively to know that Powell is the shadowy figure that covered him when he told Pearl

her bedtime story the previous evening.<sup>15</sup> When Powell notices John staring at his tattooed fingers, he quickly launches into his “love/hate” mini-sermon, which causes Icey to swoon, “I never heard it better told” (*Night*). Predicated more on storytelling than teaching specific doctrine, Powell’s religion is a kind of fantasmic frame for the preacher. Gleaned from his own biblical readings seemingly focused on the vengeful Old Testament God, this frame organizes and structures Powell’s life. Most importantly, the religion worked out “betwixt” him and the Lord, explains his nefarious, deceptive crimes as necessary for his work of spreading the gospel. The performative aspect of Powell’s identity is indicated by framing in the scene. Isolated in a medium shot with two different audiences, Powell is given his own “pulpit.” Pearl and John are framed in a separate two-shot with Icey, Walt, and Willa in a three-shot. Intercutting between the characters depicts a preacher and his impromptu congregation. Only John and Pearl, framed beneath Powell’s menacing hands, momentarily share the frame in a metonymic sense with Powell. This brief integration of Powell, John and Pearl foreshadows the violence to which he will subject them to later on in the film as “Daddy Powell.” Powell’s performative storytelling and his repugnance toward sexuality reflect the common social mores and oral history of small towns. Sexuality and storytelling go hand-in-hand in the small town, insofar as communal gossip serves as simultaneously

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<sup>15</sup> Two key features of this particular scene stand out. On the one hand, Powell’s shadow, which emerges to cloak John in darkness, bears an uncanny resemblance to an early scene in Fritz Lang’s *M*. In Lang’s film, Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) is a child-murderer, who shares similar compulsion with Powell for music, insofar as he is ultimately given away by his compulsive whistling of “Peer Gynt” (being a cinephile, Laughton would have undoubtedly been aware of this connection); Powell frequently sings “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” The other important element of this sequence is John’s storytelling, which translates his situation into the exotic setting of Africa. Story-telling becomes an integral component of the children’s attempt to cope with their traumatic circumstances. Borrowed and invented narratives are used by John at different times in an attempt to situate the traumatic intrusion of the “hunter” in some comprehensible framework (more on this in the final section of the chapter). Pearl will do something similar as they travel down the river with her song “Pretty Fly.”



pleasurable and punitive activity. Religion, for Cresap's Landing and one might argue the small town in general, is not so much a deep-seeded belief in some set of doctrinal guidelines. Instead, organized religion is a social institution that significant in its role in the identity politics of ordering, classifying, and stratifying the community so that one knows clearly where one stands. With religion in the small town, and here I mean some denominational variety of Christianity, it is not merely a matter of what church one attends, but where one sits in that church, with whom one associates, and what one's relationship is to the minister locates one in the social hierarchy. The administration of a community's social stratification is carried out by figures like Icey Spoon, who in *The Night of the Hunter* takes an active role in shaping Willa's future with Powell. Icey, incidentally, is the most taken in and seemingly sexually attracted to Powell. Based on their common discourse of "generalist Christianity," Powell is immediately situated in Cresap's Landing social hierarchy, and, consequently, he is provided a wife and ready-made family through Icey's "social" work.

Much like the "ranch home" of the 1950s suburban family that conceals a darker interior, Powell's fantasmic frame has an obscene recto to the idealistic verso of his "Love and Hate" performance. Fantasy, in its more socially productive mode, underpins reality by offering some "minimally idealized" narrative that sutures the gaps in the symbolic order where meaning fails. Re-routing troubling *jouissance* in a more socially acceptable manner, fantasy is a narrative supplement to the law. However, the transgressive *jouissance* does not simply disappear in this process of re-routing. As the cost of subjectivization within a given social order, this re-direction creates a surplus *jouissance* located in some "other scene" of fantasy: a shadowy, more disruptive scene,

the same “shadow” place out of Powell emerges in *The Night of the Hunter*. While Žižek does not directly draw this specific distinction between the two fantasies in *The Plague of Fantasies*, he does argue for the transgressive nature of fantasy at its implicit level, “in order to be operative, fantasy has to remain ‘implicit,’ it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression” (18). Here, Žižek and Copjec intersect insofar as this inherent transgression harkens back to the primal father who is “the principle of *jouissance*” from which the ideal father’s law promises protection. The “other scene” of *jouissance* is not so much eliminated by the law as it is actuated by it; the law generates the surplus *jouissance* as a leftover of the process of symbolization that must go somewhere.<sup>16</sup> As a set of formal, explicitly stated rules, the law can be housed under any number of discursive frames. Either religious doctrine, a professional code of conduct, or the juridical law that underpins a given society, the law, in a psychoanalytic sense, can assume a number of forms. At its most fundamental level, the law is a symbolic guideline governing a given social network. At the explicit level, fantasy is the rationale for desire within the confines of the law’s symbolic parameters. In other words, fantasy explains why the *objet petit a* is the object elevated to a certain transcendental space.

Disrupting the “illogical” orbit of drive, fantasy is the narrative that tells us why we

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<sup>16</sup> Here I am drawing on Copjec’s argument regarding the Law’s generation of excess pleasure:

For the ideal father *is* the father who interdicts – *jouissance*. He is able to shelter and protect only because he interdicts excess pleasure. According to Freud, it is his interdictions – therefore not the other contradictory discourses or subject positions – his *interdictions* that give the subject a whiff of hope; it is they that suggest the possibility of transgression. In forbidding excess enjoyment, they appear to be its only obstacle (RMD 156).

In other words, in order for the Law to work, to create its meaningful parameters, the possibility for an excess of pleasure must be announced and prohibited. The illusion of some excessive pleasure, a full pleasure, unmediated by the law, sustains the authority of the law itself, insofar as it promises something which can never be delivered nevertheless creates a certain hope or belief in its future realization. The law creates the distance necessary for the fantasmic workings of imagination, which misrecognize the law as the obstacle and not generator of (the illusion of full) *jouissance*.

engage in our games of desire and why a certain object is the impetus for these centrifugal games. However, the idealized narrative conceals a much darker, unsettling pleasure that must remain unspoken in order to be operative. The moment it emerges at the explicit level, that is, the moment it is confronted directly, the subject loses his conception of reality. For Powell, this distinction is akin to one between his left and right hand, between love and hate. His belief that love guides him, his love of God, conceals the vitriolic hate beneath the idealistic veil; the hate of the Other that has stolen enjoyment from him. It is no coincidence that when he is about to kill he enters a trance-like or animalistic state, insofar as he is no longer Harry Powell but an instrument of God, detached from the dirty little things he is “compelled” to do. When the “Lord’s a’ talkin’” to Powell, he crosses over into the dark territory of implicit, obscene fantasy.

If Powell is a figure of discipline containing the explosive, unsettling force of *jouissance*, he does so out of a deep-seeded sense of envy. Unable to extricate himself fully from the entanglements of sexual enjoyment, Powell transforms the renunciation of pleasure into the pleasure of renunciation. The Law does not work, in the sense that it establishes a meaningful and sustainable life-world, without the invigorating force of *jouissance*. As Copjec notes apropos of the ideal father, “the only way to be master of his desire – which is what the ideal father is supposed to be – is to be either impotent or dead. The fraternity this father constructs is equally impotent, paralyzed by the interdictions that are required to stave off the conflict between brothers” (157). Without the life-force of *jouissance*, the symbolic order is impotent much like ideal father, who cannot indulge in desire without violating his own interdictions. Enjoyment re-emerges in the social order in the little games of desire, which are primarily of a neurotic nature.

The obsessive neurotic, what seems to be the normal state of being for thinkers like Copjec and Žižek, steals little bits of enjoyment from the law or big Other when it is not looking.<sup>17</sup> Fantasy offers a rationale for these thefts as merely taking a little bit of the renounced pleasure back from the big Other. Ultimately, this petty larceny is part of power's effectiveness. As long as the stealing is minor, then it keeps the subject perpetually bound within the matrix of power. The neurotic's theft simultaneously acknowledges the big Other's authority, while (falsely) believing he is undermining that authority through minor transgressions – ultimately, the Other factors in these minor transgressions to keep the whole machine going. Here it is necessary to make a distinction between the explicit law, the written code which symbolically orders and structures a given social order, and the “unwritten code” of norms and traditions that explain how one is to interpret the law. Fantasy is the rationale for these norms, which are integral to small-town life. As Žižek claims,

the paradoxical role of unwritten rules is that with regard to the explicit public Law, they are simultaneously *transgressive* (they violate explicit social rules) and *more coercive* (they are additional rules which restrain the field of choice by prohibiting the possibilities allowed for – guaranteed, even – by the public Law ... Fantasy designates precisely this unwritten framework which tells us how we are to understand the letter of the Law. (*TPF* 29)

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<sup>17</sup> My conception of the neurotic is drawn from Žižek's explanation of the neurotic's petty larceny in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

a neurotic has made the sacrifice of *jouissance* (which is why she is not a psychotic), which enables her to enter the symbolic order, but she is obsessed with the notion that the sacrificed *jouissance*, the *jouissance* 'taken' from her, is stored somewhere in the Other who is profiting from it 'illegitimately', enjoying in her place – so her strategy consists in getting at least part of it back by transgressing the Other's norms (from masturbating and cheating, up to speeding without getting a ticket)" (33)

While Powell's fixation upon the Other as the thief of his sexual pleasure would seem identify him as neurotic, his “thefts” are not of the petty, transgressive nature. Rather than leaving the power dynamic intact by taking little things back, like the neurotic does, Powell establishes a new power dynamic in which the Other, who steals *jouissance*, must be punished according to his law. In this respect, he is merely fulfilling his duty in punishing the Other. The pervert is the administrator of justice for the neurotic Law.

More so than the explicit law (be it religious or juridical), this “unwritten” code emerges as a construct of norms and traditions to underpin a given social order, insofar as it explains how, when, and why it is necessary to transgress the explicit law in certain situations. In the earlier example of the neurotic, fantasy is a road map for minor transgressions, telling him what he can lie about, how fast he can speed without getting a ticket, or what minor items he can “lift” from the office without getting canned; this unwritten system of codes and norms is elaborate and often ambiguous. Fantasy also explains why one cannot transgress the unwritten code and remain in good standing within a given community. Similar to its role in plugging desire into the gaps in the symbolic, fantasy supplements the law by prohibiting options permitted by law but unacceptable by way of tradition, as well as opening ways that the law explicitly prohibits.

In *The Night of the Hunter* Powell is able to perform an identity that reflects a keen understanding of the unwritten code of norms and tradition that bind Cresap’s Landing together. However, Powell is not a neurotic subject, which is ultimately why he cannot establish permanent roots in a community. More than a philanderer or a town drunk, like Birdie Steptoe, Powell commits transgressions that go beyond the petty ones allowed by the implicit fantasy. Powell transgresses through, as opposed to against, the law. In his strict administration of his particular religious law, Powell is a pervert in the strict psychoanalytical definition of the term. While both hysterics and neurotics fear the prospect of being taken advantage of by some other or the big Other, the pervert specifically seeks to be exploited; as Žižek claims, “there is nothing a true pervert enjoys more than being an instrument of the Other, of his *jouissance*” (*TPF* 33). Opposed to Ben

Harper, who in his neurotic desire tries to take something back the Great Depression stole from him, Powell follows a greater law to the letter. No matter how twisted and insincere Powell's religious faith may appear, given his murderous actions, he understands himself as a true instrument of the biggest Other, God. Ben and Powell are working within two different legal orders, and, consequently, Powell's legal transgressions should be strictly opposed to those of his paternal counterpart. Unlike Harper, whose weariness of his socio-economic conditions compels him to transgress the official law of the land, Powell is following God's law and plan for him; there is no legal authority, for Powell, that supersedes God's. Whether it is stealing or murdering, Powell's crimes are nullified, or in more religious terms, forgiven, because they are committed in service of a higher power. Unlike Ben who is weary of being an instrument of socio-economic conditions over which he has no control, Powell is the true pervert in his willing acceptance of his instrumentation<sup>18</sup>. In his perversion lies Powell's complicated relationship to Copjec's binary of ideal/primal. The preacher formally appears to be the ideal father, whose interdictions are intended to dispel enjoyment. From his disgust at the burlesque show to his rebuffing of Willa's sexual advances on their wedding night, Powell's apparent impotence is directly in line with Copjec's notion of the ideal father. Powell's perversion presents wrinkle in Copjec's binary. With perversion, the *jouissance* forsaken by the ideal father is rediscovered within the very implementation of the Law or, more

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<sup>18</sup> As Žižek claims in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*:

What we encounter here is the properly *perverse* attitude of adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will: it's not my responsibility, it's not I who am actually doing it, I am merely an instrument of a higher Historical Necessity. The obscene *jouissance* of this situation is generated by the fact that I conceive of myself as exculpated for what I am doing: isn't it nice to be able to inflict pain on others in full awareness that I'm not responsible for it, that I am merely an agent of the Other's will? (112)

specifically, in the dirty little acts necessary in order to sustain that Law. The preacher's God condones his murderous activities. As Powell claims apropos his transgressions, "not that you mind the killings, your book is full of killings" (*Night*). Because he is merely an instrument of the (ultimately responsible) Other, the pervert is relieved to indulge in the most horrific and disturbing acts serving the greater good.

### **"The Lord's a Talkin' to Me Now"**

What we encounter with Powell is the pervert of the law *par excellence*, whose guilt and culpability for his nefarious deeds are excused by reference to some truly culpable transcendent thing or idea. This relief from responsibility allows for enjoyment to come back into play in the guise of duty like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. The pleasure Powell seemingly takes in his nefarious deeds might account for Mitchum's cartoon-like performance in some of the film's most violent scenes. Be it his wide-eyed reaction to Rachel Cooper's shotgun pointed at his nose or the pratfall he takes when chasing the children up the basement stairs, Mitchum's exaggerated, cartoonish performance conjures a sense of childish play in his most villainous moments. While Powell's obscene pleasure in his work, a substitute for his impotent sexuality, is certainly evident in the half snarl, half smile at the burlesque house, a different manifestation of this pleasure comes through in the comedic moments in the film. Unexpectedly and disturbingly humorous, these scenes collapse Powell's perversion and the audience's pleasure in watching the film; in a displaced manner we share his perversion. This collapse of Powell and audience is evident in the basement scene when the preacher has captured John in a lie about the ill-gotten money's location. Following Willa's murder, the children are left defenseless in the face of the Preacher's persistent and cruel

interrogation. In order to protect Pearl, John tells his surrogate father that the money is buried beneath a stone in the basement floor. Here, his father's initial two charges, to guard Pearl with his life and remain silent about the money, come into direct conflict. When he digs into the basement floor, Powell discovers, in a moment of pure comedy made possible by Mitchum's drawn-out delivery, "this is CONNCRETE!" (*Night*). John's lie is the last bit of "impudence" Powell can tolerate. Preparing to slit John's throat, Powell claims that the Lord is telling him "a liar is an abomination before Mine eyes," once again grounding his sadistic pleasure in the big Other (*Night*). Unable to watch any longer, Pearl confesses to the money's location (*Night*). What ensues is a chase scene reminiscent of the slapstick comedy of "Tom and Jerry" cartoons.<sup>19</sup> After having a shelf of old jars and cans dropped on his head, Powell chases the children up the basement steps. With his arms stretched rigidly straight forward, the camera captures the scene in profile indicating the distance between Powell and the children. The shot highlights both the suspense, insofar as Powell is closing in on John and Pearl, as well as the absurdity of Powell's bodily gesture. From the side Powell looks like a rendition of Frankenstein's monster from a *Scooby Doo* episode. The blend of comedy and suspense continues at the top of the steps when John slams the preacher's fingers in the door – the monster is threatening to emerge from the basement, but he howls in comically high pitched manner belying the threat. Like a child, Powell quickly puts his wounded digits in his mouth to sooth the pain. Just as quickly, he transitions back into the cartoon villain emphasized by his overly dramatic language, "open that door, you spawn of the devil's

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<sup>19</sup> Simon Callow in his BFI monograph on the film makes a similar point, "John and Pearl's desperate evasion of their step-father is given a *Tom and Jerry* dimension: Preacher is humiliated and outwitted" (71).



strumpet!” (*Night*). While Powell is certainly the one taking the brunt of punishment in this sequence, the playful tone of the scene, while downplaying the horror, emphasizes the perverse sense of enjoyment Powell takes in performing the “Lord’s work.” For the pervert, it is the component pieces of the game that are as important if not more so, than the actual realization of the “end-game” of desire. In this sense, the slapstick quality of the sequence illustrates the pleasure in the steps towards the final outcome, which, in truly perverse fashion, is delayed so that the game may continue.

Both Davis Grubb, the novel’s author, and Mitchum expressed reservations about the comedic tenor of the performance, fearing that it took the edge off the appropriate horror in the scene (Jones 245). Both Grubb and Mitchum miss what Laughton accomplishes in this sequence. By playing the tension for humor in the basement scene, Laughton transforms the obvious horror in the sequence into a kind of grotesque comedy. This comedy is a view into the world of the preacher, insofar as our spectatorship overlaps with his sadistic pleasure where torture and humor intersect. At the level of content, what takes place on the screen is truly horrific; we watch Powell torture the poor children, who have already suffered the loss of both their parents. However, Laughton’s decision to transform the scene into a cartoonish comedy depicts the strange short-circuit between horror and humor in perverse enjoyment. Like the preacher, we have a twisted, uncontrollable laugh at something that is not, in terms of content, particularly funny. Like the Preacher who is unencumbered by the law he serves, the comedic performance of Mitchum and the slapstick elements of the sequence relieve us of the pressure of the horror so that we may laugh where it would otherwise be inappropriate or unexpected. Laughton is way ahead of his time in this technique. Later horror films will adopt this

narrative technique as a generic trope, particularly “slasher” horror films of the 1970s and 1980s like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). As the film’s producer, Robert Gregory, claimed, the music provided a key to this short circuit between horror and comedy, “the music underneath was terrific, it never let up, and he played the comedy against the frightening music” (Jones 236). Gregory uses the term “relief” to explain Laughton’s intentions for the sequence. While Gregory’s invocation of relief is intended as a positive apology for the scene, it is directly in line with the relief of responsibility Powell experiences as pervert of the Law, insofar as he is “relieved” of culpability for his murders. Although the scene is one of frustration for him, it’s comedic, impish enjoyment for the audience mirrors the secret, dirty pleasure he takes in discovering his widows with a wad of cash in the “sugar bowl,” whom he can dispatch on account of their abominable sexuality.<sup>20</sup>

The recurring short circuit between comedy and horror in *The Night of the Hunter* is a reflection of Powell’s estranging function within Cresap’s Landing. Both preacher and murderer, Powell twists the social norms of Cresap’s Landing to reveal a darker, more sinister side lurking beneath their benign exterior. On the one hand, the preacher is Ben Harper’s double as the children’s father, and, unlike Ben, Powell’s occupation identifies him as an ideal father. However, Powell’s dogmatism is predicated on the

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<sup>20</sup> This perverse enjoyment emerges once again in the latter half of the film with the hangman, Bart (Paul Bryar), who earlier in the film expresses distaste for his job after hanging Ben Harper. Faced with the prospect of hanging Powell, Bart enthusiastically responds, “this time, it will be a pleasure” (*Night*). While Bart normally feels the psychological weight and responsibility to his duty – he recognizes his responsibility for executing his task regardless of authority for which he works –, this burden is lifted with Powell’s pending execution. Not unlike Powell, who serves his own law, Bart is free to enjoy his duty when he believes the prisoner is deserving of punishment. Indeed, Bart’s justice is strictly opposed to that of the mob, who demands retribution outside of the appropriate channels of legal sanction. Bart’s pleasure in his job, in serving the law, is coded as light-hearted and comedic, thus, lifting the melodramatic burden of the earlier scene at Bart’s home. The mob, on the other hand, is a vision of unfettered *jouissance*, driven mad by the unveiling of its own innermost fantasies.

deprivation and eventual death of his children. More sinister on the exterior than the preacher's, Ben Harper's transgressions are opposed to Powell's interdictions in that they are designed to provide for John and Pearl: morality is turned on its head in the world of *The Night of the Hunter*. As Willa's husband he again doubles Ben, but unlike Ben he lacks the potency upon which the sexual relationship is predicated. Concealing his impotency in morality, Powell grounds his explanation for sexual renunciation in Biblical law. The sexual relationship, what Icey Spoon dismisses as "flap doodle," is subordinated to the moral duty of raising children. Finally, his role as preacher establishes the most nefarious of perverse doublings. While his identity as a man of God allows for his easy integration into Cresap's Landing, his form of religion reveals an obscene fantasy already lurking within the small community. The darker side of Powell's morality is not one that is wholly foreign to the small Ohio River Valley town. After Powell's crimes have been exposed, the good Christian people who welcomed the preacher into their community and encouraged his marriage to Willa, turn on him to demand vigilante justice. The "sword" that supports Powell "through many an evil time" is turned on him by Icey and Walt Spoon (Don Beddoe), who lead an angry mob seeking retribution for unspeakable transgressions (those exercised through the law) (*Night*).

Unlike his criminal transgression, Powell's community violations cut to the very fantasmic kernel of Cresap's Landing, insofar as Powell occupies and corrupts a certain idealized space. If fantasy explains to us what laws we can break and still be a part of some order, then it does so by way of the unwritten code of norms and customs that cannot be transgressed. Powell's real crime, at least for the citizen's of Cresap's Landing, is that he violates this unwritten code, which he exposes a latent pleasure in

small-town Christianity. In Powell's ultimate judgments, the murdering of "sex-starved" widows (and the pleasure he takes in that judgment), the pleasure of petty gossiping and social discrimination comes into stark relief for the denizens of Cresap's Landing. In the extreme case of Harry Powell an obscene core appears in the cherished, shared narrative of religion. While otherwise supporting a sense of community so integral to the small town, the fantasy frame of religion also becomes a source of pleasure in judgment, the pleasure of establishing the discriminatory small town hierarchy predicated on a shared set of communal values. Powell's justified killing is the extreme end of a spectrum, judgment taken far too literally to be sustained within the norm, with pettier, acceptable judgment on the other end located in characters like Icey Spoon or the children that shun John and Pearl at the beginning of the film. The children's song is a less macabre manifestation of Powell's pleasure in punishing the sexual transgressions of women, insofar as their childlike play is predicated upon the moral discrimination of John and Pearl.

If Powell exposes a latent corruption in small town morality in the case of Cresap's Landing, then *The Night of the Hunter* serves a similar function for the suburban American landscape. Displacing them onto the rural countryside during the Great Depression, the film exposes some of the familial issues that could not be raised in *Good Housekeeping* or *Father Knows Best*, the frustrations and dysfunction lurking behind closed doors in the suburbs. Insofar as the small town is the paradigm for the suburb in the 1950s, Cresap's Landing, safely displaced by time, allowed for the representation of some the unspoken transgressions occurring within the repressed 1950s family without hitting too close to home. A master of artifice, Powell exploits the power of appearances

within the small community, and, in so doing, exposes a latent corruption thinly concealed by the fantasmic frame. Powell estranges the small town by performing or “appearing” to be a good husband and father, only to negate that appearance by exposing the latent violence, greed, and sexual deformation that already lurks beneath the thin veneer of the ideal small town. As the “Hing, Hang, Hung” song John and Pearl’s classmates sing in the opening scene of *Cresap’s Landing* indicates, a certain pleasure in executing the law is already a part of the community experience. Powell merely brings this perverse pleasure into sharper focus through the execution of his own perverse games of enjoyment. While the mob justice is a reflection of Powell’s own justice, sanctioned by his Lord, it emerges from the good Christians in the town of *Cresap’s Landing* who have clearly forgotten Rachel’s lesson in the film’s opening scene, “judge not lest ye be judged”(Night). It is not that Powell’s violence is wholly foreign to *Cresap’s Landing*, but, instead, it is always-already there<sup>21</sup> as the obscene, fantasmic supplement to the superficial veneer of Christianity. What is so troubling for the Spoons and the other outraged citizens of *Cresap’s Landing* is not that Powell is some demonic outsider, who has invaded and corrupted their community. Quite the contrary; Powell appears just like them on the surface, and the malevolence lurking beneath his collar simultaneously undermines their superficial community and exposes their own troubling malevolence.

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<sup>21</sup> The inherent violence, a pleasure that already lurks in the execution of duty, is evident in the children’s song created to torment John and Pearl, “Hing hang hung, see what the hangman done” (Night). Along with the children’s rhyme, the morbid fascination with the stolen money pervades the citizens of *Cresap’s Landing*. The town oscillates between envying Ben Harper’s realization of an implicit neurotic fantasy, of taking back a certain measure of enjoyment sacrificed to the big Other, and the unspoken, perverse fantasy of the law’s punishment, which Powell will bring to the surface. Stuck in the middle of these alternating subject positions, neurotic and pervert, is John, who becomes a hysteric in the process, insofar as he comes to distrust authority thoroughly. Indeed, the latter half of the film at Rachel Cooper’s explores John’s recovery from this distrust of authority. Only in the presence of a strong, skeptical matriarch can John reclaim a piece of his innocence.

Playing on the exposure of the artificial composition of appearances within the small town, the set construction reflects Powell's exposure of the obscene side of superficial, small-town mores. In his essay "Text and Texture: A Comparative Analysis of *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Cape Fear* (1962), and *Cape Fear* (1991)" Harvey O'Brien identifies Laughton's deliberate foregrounding of his *mis-en-scène* and the "emphasis on the iconographical" as the source of the film's ability to slip between reality and fantasy fluidly. O'Brien argues that the stark binaries Laughton establishes allow for both a sense of hyper realism and nightmarish fantasy at different moments in the film. Forsaking certain classical Hollywood conventions in terms of staging, O'Brien asserts,

Laughton and cinematographer Stanley Cortez presented these scenes as if they were on a theatrical stage, with the edges visible to the eye. This casts greater emphasis on the symbolic meaning and the charged sense of space in these scenes, giving the freedom to foreground its symbolic and thematic material and literally clueing the audience in at the same time. (103)

O'Brien is referring to the scenes of Willa's murder and the basement scene, both of which were clearly announced by their framing as having been shot on a sound stage; the edges of the set are evident in both. One could also add the river scene with the fleeing children, where the blatantly artificial is mixed with the natural, insofar as, real animals are dropped into the setting that is quite obviously a sound stage. Forsaking any pretenses of verisimilitude, Laughton's deliberate foregrounding of the *mis-en-scène* is a formal mirroring of Powell's exposure of a fantasy frame through the execution of his perverse duty. The easy identification of the set pieces and sound stage for the film's audience is akin to the way the pervert brings the implicit fantasy underpinning reality to the explicit level by closing the gap that separates *jouissance* from the law. Powell takes

his artifice completely seriously, even if he hides it from the citizens of Cresap's Landing; for Powell, his preacher persona is not a fiction and his crimes are not transgressions in his eyes. Laughton emphasizes the staged quality of the film, showing what convention otherwise dictates should remain invisible. Laughton violates the unwritten code of conventional filmmaking or classic Hollywood style. It is no wonder that the film's reception was deeply ambivalent, since Laughton, like the pervert Powell who reveals too much about the good Christian people of Cresap's Landing, had the audacity to reveal too much of his artistic process.<sup>22</sup>

This intersection between the exposure of the fantasmic and the cinematic artifice is evident than in the scene of Willa's murder. Emphasizing the importance of appearances for sustaining one's identity in the small town, Willa's murder is a result of Powell inadvertently revealing his murderous interior. Despite John's insistence that his step-father frequently inquires about the stolen money, Willa, hypnotized by preacher Powell's promise of absolution and purity, refuses to believe her son. However, Willa is forced to acknowledge the violent "HATE" side of Powell when she overhears him interrogating Pearl from outside the Harper home after returning from a visit with the Spoons. The film establishes a binary in this scene between the concealing "comfort" inside home that is reserved for the terrorizing patriarchal force and the limited perspective of the outside community that is bound by small town decorum to maintain a

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<sup>22</sup> A common critique of *The Night of the Hunter* is that it was "too arty" for its audience, as Simon Callow claims, "the words 'art' and 'arty', even when used approvingly, cut no ice with the broader market, and to praise a film by saying that it's out of the usual Hollywood mould, does it no favours – certainly not in the 50s of Eisenhower's America" (53). Laughton's refusal to adhere to common, classical Hollywood conventions is not wholly unlike the Preacher's exposure of underlying fantasies in Cresap's Landing. Like the preacher, who reveals certain things that are better left hid within the small town, Laughton plays with artifice in ways that might have made 1950s "Eisenhower America" a little uncomfortable and confused.

certain respectful distance. Concealed beneath a heavy fog in this scene, the small town mirrors the effects Powell's artificial appearance have on Cresap's Landing. Up until this moment in the film, Willa, like the rest of the little town, had been taken in by Powell's charismatic preacher persona. The town, as Willa is in the opening moment of this scene, had been enveloped in a heavy fog. Not unlike Powell's preacher exterior, the fog conceals the Harper home and the Preacher's nefarious intentions from the community, and, consequently, only when Willa approaches the home too closely, traversing the fog that separates the rest of Cresap's Landing from her house, is she able to encounter what has been concealed within.

If "passing through the fog" for Willa signifies an unveiling of the preacher's fantasmic artifice, then the self-conscious staging of the *mise-en-scène* in her death carries that theme over to the formal level. Willa's murder is one of several scenes in which Powell's benevolent, charismatic exterior breaks down to reveal the murderous intentions beneath, and, in each case, stylized, self-conscious staging announces that psycho-social disintegration. Drawing upon the conventions of German Expressionism, the sharp angles of the bedroom ceiling, whose height seems irregular, and the chiaroscuro lighting create a menacing, nightmarish space; this is no regular master bedroom. Not hiding the artificial soundstage setting, the camera is placed at a distance so that the edges of the set are evident within the frame, even if they remain dark. Exposed by his conversation with Pearl, Powell is like the artificial studio. Now that Willa can see the rough edges of the preacher, Powell can no longer sustain the illusion of his idealized appearance as a reality. Both Mitchum's and Winters's performances are rigidly disciplined in posture and delivery, and, consequently, they take on an unnatural



quality that explicitly announces their performative nature. Waiting for her execution, Willa lies on the bed with her arms crossed like a corpse. Aware that she is saying her last prayer, she transposes this knowledge into her newfound religious narrative incorporating both Ben's crime and Powell's manipulation into something ultimately positive and divinely ordained. Illustrating the revisionist power of idealistic fantasy, Willa whitewashes her dire circumstances in this scene, "You must have known about it [the money] all along, Harry. But that ain't the reason you married me. I know that much. Because the Lord just wouldn't let it be. He made you marry me, so you could show me the way and life and the salvation of my soul. So you might say it was the money that brung us together. The rest of it don't matter" (*Night*). Bathed in a bright overhead light, Willa speaks in a voice drained of emotion when expressing this peculiar, sincere contentment. Powell, who refuses to acknowledge her questions during the scene, moves towards the window with his face turned up towards the light shining through and raises his left hand, the one of HATE, towards the ceiling presumably towards God. Even as he prepares to kill her, there is no emotional expression in his face. The exaggerated motions he makes in his move towards Willa with his knife, lifting his hand high above his head, are accomplished with mechanistic control, which are similar in grace to a dancer's movements. The music that accompanies the scene is not the harsh strings one might expect in a scene of such horrific content, but, as O'Brien notes, "coupled with a gentle waltz on the soundtrack composed by Walter Schumann, create a stylized, almost operatic atmosphere," (103). The *mis-en-scène*, along with the music in this sequence, creates an atmosphere of self-consciousness that rejects natural movement, realism, and generic conventions to announce its artifice. Mitchum's and

Winter's precision and discipline in movement and speech is directly akin to the pervert's attention to detail: each action is restrained, disciplined, and methodical. Grounded in the absolute certainty of his pleasure and the dogmatic approach to executing his law/desire (these two are the same for the pervert), the pervert pulls back the veil of fantasy by exposing its component pieces; fantasy only works at a proper distance with the pieces coordinated by a narrative into a meaningful harmony. Laughton even rejects the code era horror convention of implying the murder through a shadow representation on the wall. Consequently, the absence of the final scene of Willa's death cements the precision of the film's depiction of perversion. The pervert is a figure of "infinite approach," that is, he builds up small tasks or duties on his way to the desired object. Lest it prove unsatisfactory, the pervert continually puts off the final step towards the desired object or thing.<sup>23</sup> The final thrust for the pervert is ultimately the moment of the collapse of his desire inasmuch as it is the discipline of the game or the law that he truly enjoys.

The self-conscious staging in *The Night of the Hunter* and Powell's perverse abuse of his patriarchal authority resonates with the 1950s suburban family. The illusion

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<sup>23</sup> Alenka Zupančič explores the concept of "infinite approach" in her work *Ethics of the Real vis-à-vis* Sadean perversion:

The "Sadeian movement" implies that we will approach the whole of the object of desire *ad infinitum*. With each step we come closer to it, yet we never really 'cover the whole distance'. Therefore, as Sade puts it in his famous statement, we (always) have before us *one more effort* to make. This why the Sadeian 'paradigm' is apt to strike us as quite tedious: Sade's narratives progress exceedingly slowly, 'bit by bit' (as if Achilles were actually trying to catch up with the tortoise); they are overloaded with a myriad of 'technical details' and lengthy digressions. (106) Grubb's account of the Preacher from his novel bears a close resemblance to Zupančič's description of Sade, "Nothing would ever stop Preacher. Already the glitter was back to those hunting eyes; already the question was forming again behind those thin, mad lips. A feller almost had to hand it to Preacher" (19). The game between Ben and Preacher in their cell is dragged out in more meticulous manner in Grubb's novel, as the preacher devises ever new techniques and ruses to trap Ben. His patience, precision, and persistence make Powell a Sadeian pervert, who is as much in love, if not more, with the process than he is with the goal.

of Harry Powell as the ideal husband and father, in the eyes of Willa and the Cresap's Landing public, begins to disintegrate the moment Willa passes through the fog.<sup>24</sup> While Powell may still have been sent by God to show Willa "the way and the life," he is no longer the ideal husband for whom she strives to be "clean." Instead, Willa's deathbed resignation transforms Powell into a purely authoritative force, to whose will she unreservedly surrenders as a means to save her soul. If initially Willa's acquiescence is an attempt to live up to Powell's moral purity, on her deathbed she becomes the masochistic counterpart to Powell's sadistic pervert. While Powell punishes and tortures as an instrument of God's will, Willa suffers because ultimately Powell's intentions are superseded by the Lord's. One is "called" by God to punish, the other "called" to suffer; they are the perfect pair for Lacan's famous claim that "there is no sexual relationship." Their sado-masochistic games are not only a substitute for their own lack of sexual rapport, but also the stifled pleasure of the ultimate ideal father, God. Regardless of its legitimacy, Powell's patriarchal authority makes him the unquestioned wellspring of

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<sup>24</sup> Opposed to the unconscious, which uses its many means of distortion to ultimately function "like a language," to borrow Lacan's terms, the world following a passage through fantasy is one that is completely out of joint. As Žižek claims:

In 'traversing the fantasy' we do not learn to suspend our phantasmagorical productions – on the contrary, we identify with the work of our 'imagination' even more radically, in all its inconsistency – that is to say, prior to its transformation into the phantasmatic frame that guarantees our access to the reality ... At this 'zero-level', impossible to endure we have only the pure void of subjectivity, confronted by a multitude of spectral 'partial objects' (*TS* 51-2).

In other words, traversing the fantasy does not designate simply a renunciation of hallucination to confront reality from a more critical, sober point of view. Quite the contrary, traversing the fantasy designates a passage through the fantasmatic workings of the imagination through a close identification, or through some traumatic experience, that renders the hitherto meaningful parameters of reality, supported by some minimally idealistic frame, null and void. Here we should recall Žižek's frequent reference to Hegel's conception of the 'night of the world,' "in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghostly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears" (Hegel in *FA* 102). The close proximity to fantasy initiates an experience of extreme fragmentation. To pass through the work of the imagination is to endure its "inconsistency" and erratic organizational tendencies, which are not predicated on the rational forms of significance indicative of the symbolic order. It is critical to stress that this is not Powell's world, but the aftermath of his traumatic intrusion in the lives of Pearl and John, more specifically John because his increasing awareness brought on by being thrust into adulthood.

domestic discipline. His otherwise benevolent and charismatic exterior belies a perverse pleasure in exacting God's discipline.

This ideal-exterior/obscene-interior split in Powell mirrors a similar split experienced in the most repressed of suburban homes. While the patriarch's domestic "terror" could manifest itself in sexual molestation, alcoholism, or spousal abuse, the father was often well-insulated by popular opinion and practicing psychologists from culpability<sup>25</sup>. If, as Coontz notes, battered women were considered by some psychologists to be simply "masochists" and molested children were merely "fantasizing their oedipal desires," then fathers were protected by the discursive framework of the ideal family (35). An important institution in the 1950s, the family, particularly its homogenous, suburban manifestation, was too often protected by the intersection of numerous socio-political discourses and the workings of idealistic fantasy. When approached too closely, as Coontz does in *The Way We Never Were*, the ideal façade begins to fall apart, revealing the potential harsh realities of living beneath that veneer – of course, this is not to say that all suburban homes were shaped by this type of dysfunction. The component pieces of the ideal family narrative that remain otherwise seamlessly composed in 1950s popular culture representations, become glaringly evident when we, like Coontz, start to interrogate the fantasy. Much like the composition of the set in Willa's murder, the edges of that fantasy come into view when Coontz cites the increase in electro-shock therapy used on women who needed to be coerced into their roles as housewives (32). These "schizophrenic" women, unlike Willa who accepts her

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<sup>25</sup> Citing a number of different historical sources, Stephanie Coontz claims, "we will probably never know how prevalent incest and sexual were in the 1950s, but we do know that when girls or women reported incidents to such abuse to therapists, they were frequently told that they were 'fantasizing' their unconscious oedipal desires" (35).

fate, were thought to be deeply emotionally disturbed because they refused the trappings of domestic bliss. When the continuity of the ideal fantasy is broken, like the film's break with verisimilitude, the terror and violence that had remained concealed behind closed doors comes to light.

Opening the way for a more unsettling look at the small town, Powell forces a traversal of the underlying fantasmatic narratives, both ideal and obscene, that underpin the small community. Willa's confrontation with Powell's darker side begins a process of fantasmic dissolution for both Cresap's Landing and, more importantly, John. For Willa, Powell's dogmatic insistence on the morally appropriate reasons for marriage forces a direct confrontation with her "abominable" sexual desire. While the film does not dwell on Willa's sexuality in any great detail, leaving her attraction to Ben Harper largely at the implicit level, Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter* offers a more detailed view into Willa's sexual imagination:

When he looked across the room at her hanging her clothes on the chair the record started playing again: Lucky Lindy up in the air – Lucky Lindy flew over there! And he had stared at her with his gentle, burning eyes and said how beautiful her breasts were. It was the first time he had seen her naked. Why, sure they are! She laughed, blushing, eyes flashing, running to him, still giddy from the whiskey they had drunk. Why, sure! It's the only pretty thing I own – my pretty figure. (127)

Willa's figure as the sexual gift is diametrically opposed to Willa's figure as the maternal body, which Powell conjures in his rebuke of his new bride's sexual desire. This direct confrontation with her sexual desire enacts a kind of subjective destitution for Willa. Deprived of her innermost fantasy, her sexual longing to give her partner her "only pretty thing," she is emptied of her subjectifying substance. If her body is her "only" possession, the source of her empowerment, Powell negates its force by renouncing it and

convincing Willa to renounce its urges as well. Thus, Willa has nothing to give to Powell but the perpetual renunciation of her most cherished possession. Following the wedding night, she is no longer a positive maternal figure for Pearl and John, but, instead, she becomes a kind of religious automaton for Powell. Willa is the masochistic, perverted counterpart to Powell's sadistic pervert, insofar as she only finds pleasure only in renunciation. Emotionally distant from her children and her community, Willa is brought to ecstasy in the religious revival overseen by her husband. At the old-fashioned tent revival, Willa's re-imagining of Ben's crimes, particularly the aftermath when he throws the money in the river, absolves her of guilt for her husband's transgressions. Here, Willa offers an alternative story, built around Powell's fiction that Ben threw the money in the Ohio River, to her husband's crimes in which she plays a causal role; her material desires were the reason Ben stole and murdered. Willa's selfish sin of "hounding" Ben for "face-paint" and "perfume" is washed clean in the river when God intervenes to compel Ben to "baptize" the iniquitous, contaminated money. Reserved with Ikey and Walt and virtually emotionless with her children after her marriage to Powell, Willa erupts at the revival, burning with emotion like the torches that frame Winters's face in the scene. She, like Powell, has turned the renunciation of pleasure, into the pleasure of renunciation.

With Willa's death, John loses the last trace of his original home.<sup>26</sup> If the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* are physically un-homed by the Great Depression, John and Pearl

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<sup>26</sup> If Powell intentionally removes John's mother as an obstacle to discovering the loot, then he unintentionally removes John's remaining, benign father figure, Birdie Steptoe. For Uncle Birdie, subjective destitution is an effect of his traumatic confrontation with Willa's corpse at the bottom of the Ohio River. A short circuit of identification takes place for Birdie between Willa and his long-deceased wife, Bess, whose photo watches over the aging alcoholic. Earlier in the film, Birdie expresses resentment for Bess's constant surveillance of him from her picture frame in his small wharf boat. The trace of Bess,

Harper are deprived of both their physical home and the *story* or symbolic significance of it by Powell; they lose the fantasmic underpinnings of home. Insofar as he occupies and estranges both their physical home and its symbolic conception, Powell undermines home from within for Pearl and John – the burning that Ma Joad takes on to save her sanity, is inflicted by Powell upon John and Pearl who can take no ownership in the loss of home in contrast to Ma Joad. As a result of Powell’s crimes, John loses his mother, first symbolically, insofar as she becomes so obsessed with her own salvation that she denies the terror the children undergo at the hands of Powell, and then physically when she is murdered. These two pillars, the maternal Willa and paternal Uncle Birdie, who proves incompetent, are the remaining foundational blocks upholding John’s increasingly tenuous conception of home in Cresap’s Landing. Here we enter the night of the hunter.

### **Dream Little One Dream**

In her essay “The Failure of Narrative and the Efficacy of Dreams in *The Night of the Hunter*,” Mary Papke cites the common critical conception of *The Night of the Hunter* as an exploration of the unconscious, “If it is a nightmare, then we should be granted access to the dreaming child’s unconscious and so should be able to piece out a narrative

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the framed photograph that sits next to his rocking chair, becomes a kind of superego supplement expressing Birdie’s shame in his drinking. His irrational guilt over Willa’s murder, a belief that he will be blamed, exposes an obscene desire to kill his wife a second time (to kill her superego surveilling), so that she stops haunting and rebuking him. This repressed fantasy is evident in his gesture of turning her picture down before he takes a drink in his initial scene in the film. In the scene after his encounter with Willa’s body, the photograph is placed upright again, presumably the encounter has activated Birdie’s irrational guilt. The more Birdie tries to “kill” her with alcohol, the more condemnatory she is in her return to watch over him. Powell unveils Birdie’s underlying fantasy by acting it out. By killing his own wife, Powell does what Birdie wants to but cannot do. As a result of this traumatic, direct confrontation with his underlying fantasy, Uncle Birdie is rendered impotent and incoherent. When little John comes to seek his surrogate father’s help, Birdie is incapacitated by his alcoholism.

of the sort constructed in psychoanalytic sessions” (147). Papke’s essay addresses the nightmarish elements and the shortcomings of different storytelling moments in the film that fail fully to address and encompass the children’s experience of trauma. Citing Willa’s story about Ben’s disposal of the stolen money or Uncle Birdie’s tortured story of his guilt, Papke convincingly argues for the failure of different narrative attempts to explain away the traumatic reverberations of Ben Harper’s transgressions. The competing narratives emerge in the film, all somehow actuated by Powell, reveal a great deal about the unconscious desires of the characters authoring them. However, an understanding of *The Night of the Hunter* that confines itself to the unconscious, fails to account for the pervert’s relationship to the unconscious. While it may be easy to chalk up the film as a “child’s nightmare,” this reading oversimplifies the film’s complex depiction of fantasy. *The Night of the Hunter* does not simply present us with the fantasy world of a nightmare, but, instead, it gives us the nightmarish world deprived of its support in fantasy.

Let us return for a moment to Žižek’s definition of the pervert and his relationship, or lack thereof, to the unconscious. As Žižek indicates, the pervert, who is wholly encompassed within the realm of his law, lacks the necessary doubt in authority associated with the unconscious: “the Freudian Unconscious is *not* the secret phantasmatic content, but something that intervenes *in between*, in the process of translation/transposition of the secret phantasmatic content into the text of the dream. The Unconscious is that which, precisely, is *obfuscated* by the phantasmic scenarios the pervert is acting out” (TS 247-8). Not the locale for secret, obscene fantasies, the unconscious introduces doubt into the realm of the symbolic. As a stumbling block that



intervenes or erupts into the conscious world, the unconscious creates uncertainty about the claims of authority of the symbolic order – it is the job of the symbolic to contain the impish unconscious that erupts in ways that can be embarrassingly revealing. While it may certainly appear as nightmarish, the world Powell creates for the children in *The Night of the Hunter* is not a dream-world, wrought from the realm of the unconscious. Quite the contrary, Powell's world is that of reality deprived of its idealistic fantasmic support. Powell's world is the distorted, fantasmic realm of the pervert, who brings to the surface that which has hitherto remained implicit. Far from the displacements, distortions, and condensations associated with the unconscious that put off a confrontation with some unsettling thing/idea, Powell forces a direct confrontation with the obscene work of fantasy.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of this confrontation, Powell forces a passage through fantasy for the children, which tears apart the signifying fabric of reality leaving only fragmented pieces deprived of their meaningful context. Through his excess of patriarchal control and the pleasure that he takes in implementing that control, Powell demystifies the family and its domestic comfort for Pearl and John. Whereas mothers and fathers ideally are supposed to protect and nurture their children, John and Pearl are forced to confront the fact that home is where the true threat lies. What remains in John and Pearl's case is the obscene fantasy of Powell, the darker side of the imaginary realm where the ideal father is transformed into the inhuman monster: where the ideal father becomes the primal father.

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<sup>27</sup> Žižek expands on the pervert's "acting out" that exposes certain secret fantasies within the symbolic order, "the pervert, with his certainty about what brings enjoyment, obfuscates the gap, the 'burning question', the stumbling block, that 'is' the core of the Unconscious. The pervert is thus the 'inherent transgressor' *par excellence*, he brings to light, stages, practices the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse" (*TS* 248).

While Pearl goes along for the ride as the lone familial trace sustaining her brother's drive to live,<sup>28</sup> John is old enough to be aware of his horrific circumstances. Having passed through the fantasy of family like Willa through the fog, John the experiences the kind of symbolic destitution of which Pearl is incapable. Travelling down the Ohio River, fleeing from Powell, the children experience the kind of nightmarish fragmentation that is a consequence of traversing the fantasy.<sup>29</sup> Not unlike the scene of Willa's murder, the artificial setting of the children's flight down the Ohio River is made explicit; the few location shots stick out like a sore thumb against the studio shots that comprise the majority of the sequence. From the reduced scale of the river to the distorted architecture of the barn in which the children take shelter, John and Pearl's voyage down the Ohio River is a perpetual confrontation with such "phantasmagorical productions" that emerge in the dissolution of reality's fantasmic support. The self-conscious announcement of the *mis-en-scène's* artificial quality is seemingly catalyzed by Powell's transformation from charismatic "preacher" into the "hunter." Simultaneously

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<sup>28</sup> This notion of the trace sustaining the "zero-level" of subjectivity is indebted to Žižek's conception of symbolic suicide from *The Fragile Absolute*: "Here, the subject finds itself totally deprived of its symbolic identity, thrown into the 'night of the world' in which its only correlative is the minimum of an excremental leftover, a piece of trash, a mote of dust in the eye, an *almost-nothing* that sustains the pure Place-Frame-Void" (30). While Pearl is certainly not an "*almost-nothing*," in terms of her childhood lack of awareness, she is already a kind of Void of subjectivity. This youthful blank slate might help explain why she so quickly latches onto "Daddy Powell," insofar as she can easily and quickly shift from one identity to the next. In this respect, the "almost-nothing" might be Miss Jenny, Pearl's Doll that sustains John's last connection to his parents as a stable couple.

<sup>29</sup> One could argue that the entire film incites us to identify more directly with our imagination. The opening frame with the beatific Rachel reading to the children is accompanied by the music which compels us to "dream little one, dream" (*Night*). While I would still argue against the story as merely a passage through the unconscious, this conjuring of the dream world is not wholly distinct from the identification with one's fantasmatic productions. The obviously unreal quality of the opening frame, which is closed on the back end of the film with Rachel breaking the fourth wall, departs from a hard and fast conception of reality, which is a motif in repeated in the film's *mis-en-scène*. A more strict psychoanalytic reading would call for a change to the opening compulsion to "dream" into "imagine," but the demand to surrender one's firm grip on reality to identify more closely with his work of imagination remains analogous to both; that is, our surrender to the opening request is one that invites the traversal of one's fantasy frame, the passing through the unsettling realm of unfettered imagination.

recognizable but unnaturally distorted, the *mis-en-scène* in the river sequence embodies the nightmarish world deprived of fantasy, insofar as its distortions reflect the closure of distance between the meaningful realm of reality and the traumatic Real otherwise established by fantasy. We recognize the objects (the river, the spider web, the barn, and the farmhouse), but their distorted scale and proportions make them unnaturally distorted copies of their “natural” counterparts.

Close-ups emphasize the fragmented experience of the children as they move down the river. A series of natural objects are framed in close-ups, including a frog, a rabbit, and a spider web; the spider web is the only artificial object among these close-ups.<sup>30</sup> Not only does the obviously artificial backdrop of the soundstage displace these natural objects, but the displacement is re-doubled by the cinematography. The extreme close ups isolate the animals within the frame in a manner that estranges them. Depriving the animals of a natural backdrop, the framing creates a distortion of scale making the animals seem peculiarly large. While studio-shooting would have been a standard practice at the time, particularly for a low budget film like *The Night of the Hunter*, the play on natural and artificial, fantasy and reality (or Reality), in the film gives the alternation between location and studio, real and artificial an increased symbolic weight. Although they are not necessarily nightmarish, the isolated objects in the river scene are not without their unsettling qualities. Both in scale, insofar as they are small creatures

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<sup>30</sup> While pragmatism can explain the artificial quality of the spider web, insofar as a natural spider web is virtually invisible to the camera, another, more symbolic explanation, might present itself. Unlike the frog and the rabbit, small creatures that mirror the children, the web designates a natural device for trapping prey. Pearl’s song during this scene about the “pretty flies,” which mirror’s John’s African Prince story in intention, aligns the children with the flies that the web is laid to trap. An overhead shot during Pearl’s song illustrates this comparison, as the children pass beneath the artificial web in their skiff, appearing to be momentarily trapped in the web. The artificial web is akin to Powell’s fantasmic machinations, which are intended to trap the children, the flies, and prey upon them.

increased in size by their framing, and in contradiction to the artificial set, insofar as they are the living things, the animals are doubly “out-of-joint” with their setting. This “out-of-joint” quality attributed to the animals is akin to the “zero-level” of subjectivity for the children, who, deprived of their “home,” experience the world as a series of fragments incapable of being organized into a comprehensible narrative in which they may situate themselves. Ultimately, the disjointed animals are simultaneously an indication of the frayed edges of the children’s reality, insofar as they are rendered disproportionate to and contradict their artificial surroundings, and symbols of their subject positions, insofar as they are technically within their natural setting but somehow estranged from its meaningful parameters. Not unlike John and Pearl in Cresap’s Landing before their escape, the animals are somehow estranged within their “natural” surroundings.<sup>31</sup>

### **Symbolic Death and the Resurrection of Story**

In Ford’s version of *The Grapes of Wrath* Ma Joad burns the material embodiments of home before they set out on their voyage to California, incinerating the photographic and written traces of their life in Oklahoma. For Ma this is a gesture of symbolic erasure, a clearing of the slate so that a new life can come into existence when they arrive at their destination in California. Ma’s vision of this new life is not built upon the painful, melancholy traces of a place and existence that can never again be reclaimed. What Ma wills in *The Grapes of Wrath* takes place against the wills of John and Pearl in

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<sup>31</sup> This loss of home, a result of Powell’s intrusion, is given historical context when John and Pearl, in line with a number of other children left parentless by the Great Depression, seek food from a farm near the Ohio river. A series of orphaned children are given meager sustenance by a nameless farm woman, who is apparently weary from what seems to be a common occurrence telling the children, “oh, go away, go away” (*Night*). Cast off, John and Pearl are like numerous other children during the depression, homeless, parentless, and devoid of any meaningful, signifying roots that ground one’s identity in a narrative of home, community, and family

*The Night of the Hunter*. The story of home falls apart for John and Pearl, and it is not sacrificed for some dreamed-of future. Instead, it is stolen by a traumatic bogeyman who undermines the imaginary cornerstones of home (both mother and father). Papke explores the importance of narrative to John's traumatic experience in *The Night of the Hunter* arguing that John is bombarded by different stories that he struggles to make cohere in order to form some stable conception of reality. From Willa's fabrication about the money at the tent revival to the bedtime story John makes up for Pearl about the African king, Papke examines the different modes and purposes of storytelling in the film, particularly focusing on its potential for healing. While Uncle Birdie and Willa's self-centered narratives prove to be the undoing of John's conception of family, Rachel Cooper offers a different set of stories at the end of John and Pearl's arduous river voyage. Unlike Birdie's and Willa's, Rachel's stories are not spun to absolve her from some transgression, but, instead, they are directed at her numerous adopted children as devices of both moral training and psychological healing. In particular, Rachel focuses on John, who proves to be suspicious of her kindness after his ordeal with Powell and Willa. Rachel selects biblical narratives that reflect John's exodus to her home, even if he does not know the whole sordid story, and consequently, starts to heal the traumatic rupture introduced by the preacher. The ability to write oneself into a story, to subjectivize oneself in a more precise psychoanalytic sense, is necessary for John's healing process. As Papke argues, "perhaps the film may be suggesting here that it is less important to create ameliorative fantasies than it is to read originary narratives correctly and to find the right plot in which to invest oneself, a plotline that will console and redeem" (152). Papke refers here to Rachel's two Biblical stories from the latter half the

film; the first of these is the story of Moses, and the second is that of the birth of Jesus. John's ability to identify in the initial story with Moses, who is found on a riverbank like himself, and the unborn Jesus in the second, whose parents are forced to flee for their life from tyranny, initiates his emotional convalescence. As Papke claims, "these stories and the actions that accompany them, such as John's tentative caress of Rachel's hand, show John's progressive healing and his seeming acceptance of his hard lot" (152). Unlike in the earlier story of the African prince that is interrupted by Powell, John is not forced to create his own story. Instead, he can insert himself into the details of an already existent narrative, much like children who enter into symbolic coordinates already established for them by a parental unit. The alienation and adulthood thrust upon him by his father, whose gold he must protect in his African prince narrative, and by his ensuing trials can be abandoned to his surrogate mother, who intuitively selects stories that allow him to situate his tribulations. Unlike Willa, who is taken in by Powell's religious façade and all but abandons her children, Rachel Cooper is simultaneously a strong maternal force and the source of John's healing narratives. While it differs from his original home in Cresap's Landing, Rachel offers John both a physical and narrative home, in which he slowly comes to locate his identity.

If the Joads set out in search of the Edenic promise of California, John and Pearl's quest for home down the river is an open-ended one. Indicative of the "zero-level" of subjectivity that is a consequence of their traumatic experience with Powell, John's escape is a wager or, more appropriately for the ending of *The Night of Hunter*, it is a leap of faith. Like the Joads, John and Pearl do not find an Eden, but, instead, find a healing maternal force, whose admiration for children's ability to "abide and endure"

speaks to the “resurrection” of Christianity in the latter half of the film. If it is religion that is the source of evil in the film, it is also the source of salvation and healing in the end. The juxtaposition of destructive and constructive Christianity is evident in the standoff between Rachel and Powell the night before he is captured. Both Powell and Rachel sing the same hymn, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” but a slight variation in lyrics illustrates the dramatic difference in their religious approaches. Ultimately, the shift in religious perspective between Powell and Rachel is the difference between Powell’s two hands, and, consequently, the Preacher’s earlier claim that “it’s LOVE that won” proves to be prophetic. As Powell sings the refrain, “Leaning, Leaning,” Rachel counters with “Lean on Jesus, Leaning on Jesus” (*Night*). Throughout the film, Powell’s violent retributive justice aligns him with a wrathful, Old Testament God, and, indeed, he tells Rachel, who threatens him with a shotgun, “the Lord, God Jehovah will protect me” (*Night*). “Jehovah” is the proper name of God in the Old Testament. And it is to this Jehovah that Powell speaks earlier in the film when he claims, “your book is full of killings” (*Night*). As a kind of legal precedent for Powell, the divinely sanctioned violence of the Old Testament is the source of Powell’s perverse religious perspective, and, consequently, functions as his justification for his actions as a chosen son of the Lord. Rachel, on the other hand, embodies the forgiveness advocated in the New Testament. Her charity and willful acceptance of duty bear the traces of living in “*imitatio Christi*,” that is, she assumes her burdens, no matter how heavy, like the Christ she refers to in her version of the hymn. Unlike Powell, who preys upon and punishes women for their sexuality, Rachel forgives her charge Ruby (Gloria Castillo) for pursuing love through sexuality: “you was looking for love in the only foolish way you knew

how” (*Night*). Strictly opposed to Powell’s wrathful HATE, LOVE is what heals in *The Night of the Hunter*, and, more precisely, it is the kind of love grounded in its difficult, painful expression in the New Testament. Unlike Powell’s destructive interdictions that are predicated on his conception of retributive justice, Rachel’s love establishes a new home for the children by transforming Powell’s patriarchal Old Testament into a more matriarchal, loving New Testament. Her (and the children’s) ability to forgive, endure, and abide creates a stable home.

Perhaps Rachel’s lesson of love might explain John’s inability or unwillingness to identify Powell at the preacher’s trial. Unlike Ikey Spoon who, in hysterics, points an accusatory finger at Powell, John refuses to “cast the first stone,” despite all his monstrous surrogate father has done to him and his sister. The small town of Cresap’s Landing that Powell leaves in his wake is one locked in the infinite, repetitive cycle of transgression and retribution. Consequently, John and Pearl’s former home is left in utter disorder. Our last view of the Cresap’s landing community is of an indecipherable mass of hysterical people, unhinged by the vengeful necessity to punish Powell for his crimes. Not driven by the blood lust for justice, John has a stable home at the end of the film. The order and stability stolen by his traumatic experience with Powell is restored to him, and is embodied in the watch that Rachel gives to him for Christmas. As Mary Papke claims, the watch allows John to move beyond the zero-level of subjectivity and back into time: “John is symbolically given back time through the gift of the watch, perhaps time to enough to heal his wounds” (153). In a scene from James Agee’s original screenplay, which was mostly scrapped and re-written by Laughton, John’s watch becomes a source of stability that seemingly replaces the burden of Miss Jenny, “I ain’t



afraid no more! I got a watch that ticks! I got a watch that shines in the dark!” (in Papke 155). Uncoupled from the cycle of law and punishment, which entraps Icey and leaves her unhinged from reality in an ecstasy of revenge, John can move forward like the hands on his new watch.

## Chapter 4: The Small Town's Infinite Ransom

While the city has at different points in the last one hundred years been regarded in a more positive light, those upticks are countered by a strain of anti-urbanism lingering throughout the twentieth century. Grounded in the United States' agrarian roots, this anti-urbanism manifested in many different forms throughout the century with the development of the modern suburb being perhaps the most significant. Physically set between the rural countryside beyond its parameters and the teeming metropolis that often serves as an economic base, the suburb is a convenient quasi-rural oasis from the vice-filled, dangerous city. Not only a physical middle ground, the suburb serves as a conceptual in-between "space," insofar as it borrows from the rural's romanticized narrative tradition. Citing this opposition between the rural and urban, David Thorns claims, "the earliest attackers of the city and urban life were those who saw the city as the source of all that was evil and corrupting in life as against the rural life which was the repository of all virtue" (11). Thorns cites Thomas Jefferson's writings on the virtues of agrarian life to anchor the rural opposition to the city more specifically in a long narrative tradition; in a way, the story of rural virtue is the oldest American story. This American myth and its evil other, the city, persists in the explosion of suburban life during the post-war period. For Irving Allen agrarianism and anti-urbanism are not necessarily synonymous, but he argues anti-urbanism is coterminous with a certain "suburban ideology": "the anti-urban ideology has its antithesis in suburban utopia. The pertinence of anti-urbanism for contemporary new town proposals is best understood in terms of what is being *sought* in a social movement, rather than what is being fled. Thus, one can speak of *suburban* ideology as synonymous with *anti-urban* ideology" (6). In order for

Americans to identify what a “would-be suburbanite” sought, what Allen calls the “ersatz small town,” the metropolis had to play the role of nefarious villain. Against the backdrop of the corrupting vice and moral decay of city, a hot topic for *films noir* in the late 1940s, one found sanctuary in the virtuous and “homogenous” realm of suburban utopia.<sup>1</sup>

Allen’s language in the above quotation intersects with the psychoanalytical notion of desire. The key term in the intersection between Allen’s conception of the suburb and the concept of desire is “sought.” Here we need to return to the earlier Žižek passage in *On Belief regarding* desire, “desire is always caught in the logic of “this is not that,” it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* from the *sought-for* satisfaction” (Žižek *OB* 90). Desire is predicated on distance like the charged space between two magnets whose un-opposing poles continually push each other apart. Distance can be created by a law, which precludes the object of desire creating an obstacle, or distance can be caused by dissatisfaction with the object, which either causes increased fascination with the frustrating object or pushes one to another object. Desire has numerous means of misinterpreting its ultimate end for the sake of self-perpetuation. In the case of the suburb, dissatisfaction with the city pushes the suburbanite out of the metropolis towards the ersatz small-town that promises to be both anti-metropolis and the original, lost hometown. The “sought-for” satisfaction in the suburbs is the ideal image

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<sup>1</sup> The real driving force behind the migration to the suburbs had to do with an illusion of the “postwar abundance” promised to returning veterans that turned out be sorely lacking after the war, particularly in terms of housing. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen illustrate in *Picture Windows*:

Despite the GI Bill and people’s fantasies, living conditions for many worsened. Millions of veterans and civilians continued to be ill-housed. In 1946 Chicago reported 100,000 homeless veterans. In Atlanta 2,000 people answered an advertisement for one vacancy. A classified in an Omaha newspaper read, ‘Big Ice Box 7 by 17 feet. Could Be Fixed Up To Live In.’ Senate investigators found thousands of veterans living in barns, garages, and chicken coops. (87-88)

of the small town, for which the suburb will ultimately be an obvious copy. While certainly not everyone who lived in the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s were frustrated, the numerous frustrations of many illustrate the gap that emerges between the sought-for and the obtained satisfaction of actually living in the “burbs.” To put this in psychoanalytic terms, the small town for the suburb is the original and illusive Thing, the place of a perfect harmony where desire finds full satisfaction, and the suburb is the *objet petit a*, the surrogate object that never quite lives up to the dignified place to which it is elevated.

While “suburban” has become an almost pejorative<sup>2</sup> term in contemporary America, the postwar suburbs were supposed to be ideal places for their residents. This idealism illustrates an ideological merger of two seemingly hitherto opposed poles. As both Allen and Bernadette Hanion indicate, the suburb seems to be a place that is most closely associated with the “American Dream.” Hanion opens her book on the suburb *Once the American Dream* with James Truslow Adams inscription of the now ubiquitous concept:

the American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement ... It is ... a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (qtd. in Hannion 1)

Building off the Adams quote, Hanion articulates the capitalist, materialist portion of the suburb’s idealism: “the American Dream manifest itself most acutely in the American

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<sup>2</sup> David Thorns sums up the less favorable conception of the suburb and the suburbanite as a “destroyer of the individuality of the population by its insistence upon conformity and the promotion of status divisions, competition and upward mobility striving. The suburbanite is seen as the leading example of the mass-produced man” (11). The suburb and homogeneity are seemingly synonyms for many, who see neither small town nor city in the communities, but, instead, a place stripped of the particularity of both, and characterized by a mind-numbing sameness.

suburb. Over time, suburbia has evolved to become that imagined land of opportunity, the place where life is better and richer and fuller, for everyone” (1). The unique socio-economic conditions of post World War II America made housing relatively cheap and the transformation of wartime industrial innovation and mobilization established a more materialistically driven culture. If the American Dream was one where people were “fuller” and “richer,” then the postwar suburban home and its material accoutrement (riding lawn mowers, televisions, automobiles, dishwashers, and innumerable other gadgets) promised more space than the tenement to store the spoils of this rich fullness. At the core of the American dream were certain attainable (if you were white, middle class, and Protestant/Catholic) icons. As Hanion indicates, “a house and an automobile in the suburbs were viewed as the as marks of success, achievements of the American Dream” (2). Moreover, one’s occupation and social status mattered less in the suburbs than one’s ability to acquire the material components of the dream. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen claim, “who cares what Mr. Kilroy did during the day? What mattered was that his home bore the trappings of a middle-class life – a new house, a car, new television. It was what one consumed – not what one produced – that was important” (147). Opposed to a more outmoded notion of class or status as a stratifying factor, the suburbs offered a baseline, middle class ideal that was presumably, available to everyone; at least, it was available to everyone who fell under the classification of “normal.”

With the economy primarily being industrial in the 1950s, the kind of material focus on success required an urban base, which, particularly during the immediate postwar period would have seemed antithetical to a more traditional notion of the

American Dream. When one thought of the American Dream, one rarely envisioned tenement homes, the smoke stacks of factories, and lascivious nightlife, even if the city was given credit for being the site of cultural diversity and quality. While Truslow Adams coined the term in the 1930s, the America Dream's deeper ideological roots belong, as I have noted in previous chapters, to Jeffersonian Agrarianism and its advocacy for the virtues of clean, country living. Exploiting the image of such virtue, the architects of early post-war suburbs deliberately "quoted" the small town in their design. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen claim in their work *Picture Windows*, William Levitt, the mastermind behind the residential "Model T" of the American postwar generation, conceived of his suburb as grounded in small-town imagery:

Levittown was designed as the perfect American environment, immune to the dislocations and discontents of industrial urban life, for people who fit this description. Cape Cod houses, curvilinear streets called Lanes (with names like Harvest, Normal, Prairie, Cobbler), seven village greens, ten baseball diamonds, nine swimming pools, and sixty playgrounds contributed to Levittown's Norman Rockwellesque appearance. Levitt felt so strongly about this vision that in 1947 he arrogantly changed the name from Island Trees to Levittown. (143)

Greater in scale than the typical small town and within commuting distance to the financial base of the urban center, the suburb offered the best of the country with all the convenience of the city. In other words, what Levittown and many other suburbs were able to do so ingeniously, was meld the nostalgia (the Norman Rockwellesque appearance) for an ultimately fictitious lost time and place with a modern and more lucrative mode of being. If Levittown was a "new place" then it was a new place with an old fantasy adjusted for the purpose of selling the numerous goods of a more modern lifestyle.

As much as it was predicated upon its “newness”— a new house, a new car, and a slew of new material goods to purchase for that home —, the suburb was a nostalgic copy of its small-town ancestor. However, this copy was not one predicated upon the small town of times gone by as they actually existed. Instead, as in the case of the small town mobilized for the war effort during World War II, the suburbs’ organizers, builders, and residents aimed to conjure a material counterpart to the ideological small town. The suburban rejection of the urban might be regarded as a variation on an old theme. As Thorns indicates, “this position in American writing on urban life is typified by Thomas Jefferson, with his infamous view of the city, ‘as pestilential to the morals, health and liberties of man’ (11). Borrowing a new consumerism from the trappings of modernity that had hitherto been unsettling for the small town, the suburb deploys a certain morality or virtue identified with rural living that stretches back to the founding of the nation (and beyond). While suburban developers and residents may have forsaken the rustic simplicity of the village or the small town for the culture and opportunity of the modern metropolis, they remained concerned with establishing a moral way of being that was grounded in the idealism of the small town as the original “repository of all virtue.” Consequently, the suburbs of the 1950s were a peculiar admixture of nostalgia and the superego, which demanded a dual fidelity to modern materialistic conditions and an ideal morality grounded in the ideological small town of a time gone by (that never actually existed). One is aware of this in both Levittown, where William Levitt “felt he had really brought the dream of a small-town life within everyone’s reach,” and Disney’s Main Street U.S.A., which opened in Disneyland in the middle of the suburban explosion of the 1950s (Baxandall and Ewen 144). While Main Street U.S.A. is explicitly a façade,

ideologically it is remarkably similar to Levittown. Both seek to interject an abstraction of the idealized small town into a hyper-materialistic 1950s America.

Levittown, as a kind of Model T of the suburbs, is a particularly useful example of the early disciplining normalization created by the myth of suburban utopia. More precisely, William Levitt employed a coercive norm to discipline his suburb into the image of that myth. As Baxandall and Ewen claim, Levitt “hoped that residents would learn the ways of middle-class civility and manners once they had moved into nice new homes,” but was disillusioned when the residents failed to live up to his rigid and subtly or not-so-subtly enforced standards (144). Levitt used the two local newspapers to forward certain aesthetic ideals for his suburb, including how his residents should park their cars, how to maintain their flooring, and when the wash could be hanged out (Baxandall and Ewen 144). Maintenance standards were so important to Levitt that he would cut the lawns of those residents deemed to be lax in their duty, and then send them the bill for the service and, undoubtedly, as a partial fine. The planner’s active intervention by establishing certain core ideals was a reflection of the homogenizing function of suburban normalization. This myth of homogenization was a fiction both in its own time and one that persists today as a historical reflection of the stultifying “sameness” of suburban life.<sup>3</sup> If one’s “ego-ideal” could be purchased with a home, a

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<sup>3</sup> Irving Allen addresses the apocryphal belief that the suburbs were homogenized, mass-produced places, which engendered residents in its image:

There is evidence ... that people do live somewhat differently after moving to a new town, but it is largely because the new town permits them to realize some life style change, which is often the reason they moved. When middle-class people move from the city, they bring their life style with them, and when working-class and ethnic groups move *en bloc*, their subcultures largely survive any influence of the suburban environment. (10)

While televisual and filmic depictions of the suburbs from the late 1950s to our contemporary moment tend to depict the suburbs as a place that is predominantly white, middle-class and white-collar, as well as suffocating beneath the conformity, the actual “burbs” were far more diverse and its people were, as Allen indicates, “largely satisfied with the suburbs” (9).



car, and a television, then the overarching price was that of suffocating conformity. Although it may have been couched in terms of a happy substitution, as Hanion indicates, the exchange of material goods for status is one that for workers was little more than a resignation, “for these workers of the postwar era, real advancement through the production process was unattainable” (2). More a manufactured fantasy created by developers and moneyed interests, the suburban dream sublimated what was attainable to a certain ideal status – one could suddenly purchase one’s dream with a decent, middle-class salary. Consequently, suburbanites were encouraged to trade to accept the glory and significance of wartime mobilization for a new Buick.<sup>4</sup>

No one felt the pressure of conformity, discipline and idealism quite as much as the women of the suburbs, who were largely coerced into sacrificing a new found autonomy during World War II. Discouraged culturally from a career, suburban women became slaves to unrealistic and demanding domestic standards. Quoting a 1948 *McCall’s* article about Levittowner Helen Eckhoff, Ewen and Baxandall illustrate the duality of consumption and constriction that was indicative of the suburban housewife’s life: “despite Helen’s enthusiasm for efficiency, studies suggest that all her time-saving devices and practices probably made her spend more time on housework and the application of more rigorous standards of housekeeping” (151). If one were to step out of

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<sup>4</sup> This is a storyline taken up in Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*, more specifically with the character of Fred Derry (Dana Andrews). As an airplane gunner in the war, Derry becomes a decorated hero, whose achievements elevate him from his working-class, small Midwestern city roots to a status that would have been unthinkable and unattainable in Boone City, Iowa. When he returns to Boone City following the war, he first refuses to return to his old place of work as a soda jerk in a local drugstore, but is ultimately forced to take up his old job when his uncaring, exploitative wife burns through his savings from the war. Once a significant figure in the war, Derry is forced to confront a world where his training and skills cannot possibly help him achieve the same status as during the war. If the battle offered the opportunity to distinguish oneself through acts and character traits, then the postwar world was more closely tied to one’s purchasing power. A well-respected, honored hero during the war, Derry is less than average afterwards.

line with the suffocating norm, whether out of circumstance or by choice, the community gaze could become harsh and unforgiving. Levittowner Betty Scott, whose divorce pushed her to the fringes of Levitt's suburban utopia and forced her to accept welfare, faced the brunt of the community's disciplining gaze: "generally they avoided me. The men were often hostile. I remember remarks like, 'You are draining our tax dollars, why don't you get a job?'" (Baxandall and Ewen 149). One can imagine the confusion Betty Scott felt in the face such contradictory influences. On the one hand, women were discouraged from pursuing a career. On the other, if a woman were suddenly a single parent who needed governmental support, then she should get a job. The only way to steer clear of such cultural discrimination was to embody the stultifying norm fully and happily. Even if the myth of suburban homogeneity is a historical fiction, the pressure to actualize its utopic underpinnings was felt intensely by the organizers and residents of these communities. As a result of this pressure, the developers and residents took on the impossible task of bring to life, in thought and action, the fantasmic foundation of the suburbs. If there was a homogenous ideal, then it was subtly or overtly enforced by a myriad of socio-cultural influences (television, magazines, politicians, neighbors, spouses, etc.).

Both Levittown, which spun off many copies like factory reproductions of a prototype, and Main Street U.S.A. were, in part, ideological abstractions. While I do not mean to imply that they were only ideas clearly one can still visit both, I contend that they liquefied difference at some level to establish a kind of ideal norm with which its residents and visitors were encouraged to identify and integrate. Like the small town, whose lasting myth of domestic harmony and virtuous, unspoiled innocence persists

despite obvious factual discrepancies, the myth of homogeneity remains the defining characteristic of the 1950s American suburb. While neither myth fully explains the diversity and complexity of the place, they do indicate a certain ideological influence that both sustain. The myths illustrate the way the fiction of both have come to have an actual impact upon the discursive historical narratives of the places and the people that inhabited or still inhabit those places; to quote *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” For an American culture that places a great deal of value on individuality, homogeneity may not seem at first blush to be synonymous with idealism. However, for the suburbanites of the 1950s aspiration to a certain sameness promised the realization of the American Dream:

The expansion of the postindustrial economy after World War II was supposed to make it possible for second-generation families to realize the dream: women at home, men at work, children in school. Suburbs in particular became synonymous with the achievement of this new status. Given this pressure, it is not surprising that most suburban women did not seek paid work outside the home until two decades later. (Baxandall and Ewen 149)

As Baxandall and Ewen illustrate, failure to adhere to this shared idealistic vision was not without consequence: “families who did not fit with the accepted mold were isolated and ostracized” (149). Whether it emerged from magazine articles in *McCall's*, television commercials peddling the newest domestic gadget, or orders directly from William Levitt to his Levittowners, a sense of duty pervaded the suburbs, a superego imperative to live up to the ideal consumer, virtuous small town, that coalesced in the modern suburbanite. Like the suburban developer that imposes the romantic conception of the small town on to the suburb, John Ford's western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* depicts a similar kind of standardization evident in the transition from rough frontier territory to official, civilized statehood. While suburbia and the western film genre seem

to be antithetical in numerous ways, Ford's story about the development of the American west explores the imposition of an idealistic norm on a frontier ripe with potential. In the process of "statehood," the west becomes tamed by rational, legal order, which promises to bring civilization and all its benefits to a territory terrorized by wealthy cattle barons and their hired hoodlums. If the promises of statehood are more or less delivered, then it costs the town of Shinbone, the primary setting for the film, its vitality. A sense of melancholic nostalgia pervades the present day (presumably late 1800s) scenes in Shinbone, which form the frame for a flashback examination of the pre-statehood Shinbone. Like the nostalgia for the small town in the suburb, the "present day" manifestation of Shinbone leaves much to be desired when compared to its more vibrant predecessor. Ultimately in the discrepancy between past and present, we encounter the ideological weight the small town carries. For the small town, appearances and myths, regardless of their basis in verifiable truth, are integral to reality: fact matters far less than legend.

### **How the West Was Lost**

The western genre was becoming obsolete in the 1950s and seems as antithetical to the suburb as the stagecoach would be to a suburban commuter. So, it might seem strange to begin the discussion of a western with an examination of the development of suburban America in the 1950s. However, the establishment of a new mode of community and its normative ethical structure that occurs in places like Levittown is at the heart of many westerns, particularly those of John Ford. In his article "'*Shall We Gather at the River?*'" Robin Wood, drawing a comparison between Howard Hawks and

Ford, astutely claims that the latter “is the American cinema’s great poet of civilization. Where Hawks’ world is dominated by the id, Ford’s is dominated by the superego” (31). Wood is, undoubtedly, correct in his assertion of the superego orientation of Ford’s work. The director’s cinematic realities often hold duty and law to the highest order of importance and, in some instances, seem to advocate the sacrifice of a more appropriate course of action, though transgressive, for the uncompromised accomplishment of duty. Like the suburb’s founding myth of civilization in the small town, Ford’s westerns are concerned with the establishment of a foundational myth of civilization on the frontier. Ford’s westerns and suburbia share a common interest in “representing” foundational myths: the small town for the suburb, the myth of the west’s development for Ford. Be it in military outposts or small western towns, Ford’s “poetry” is that of civilization at its birth where sacrifice and duty become indispensable virtues to overcome harsh conditions and thwart self-interested, malevolent villains. While not as romanticized as the belief in the “garden paradises” of the suburbs, particularly in his westerns of the 1940s, there remains a latent idealistic belief, for Ford, in the redeeming qualities of community. His ideal conception of community wanes from more overt endorsement of collectivity in a film like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) or *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), to the more cynical, conflicted view in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. If community, as a place of collective action inspired by empathy for the neighbor, was the answer to the problem of the depression, then in the 1960s the shine of its promise has worn off much as the newer Shinbone seems a poor, banal copy of old Shinbone. The collective at “Wheat Patch” in *The Grapes of Wrath* looks far more effective and politically significant than the community organizers in Levittown upholding common landscaping standards.

Much as the homogeneity of the suburbs is initially perceived of as an ideal only to be later ridiculed, Ford's late westerns are darker examples of the genre that illustrate a skepticism and deep-seeded ambivalence about the potentiality of community. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* explores the same issues of guilt, sacrifice, and duty that are at work in a film like *My Darling Clementine*, but offers a critique of idealizing mythology that seems subdued or absent in his earlier westerns. Ford's vehicle for this critique is Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) who is an Easterner stranded in the wild western territory surrounding the tiny town of Shinbone. Stoddard is making his way west to establish a life for himself as an advocate of the civilizing effects of law and order. Like Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*, who contrary to his initial intentions becomes marshal in Tombstone, Ransome inadvertently becomes stranded in a small town. In stark contradistinction to his more refined eastern roots, Ransome is initially shocked and befuddled by the strange, tough world of the territory. This "toughness" accounts for Ransome's unexpected arrival in Shinbone, insofar as an encounter with the "second toughest man north of picketwire," the criminal Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), leaves the lawyer beaten and broken. Unlike other notable Fordian "foreigners" who attempt to integrate into their new communities,<sup>5</sup> Ransome is not interested in integrating himself into the customs and rituals constitutive of Shinbone's social order. Ransome is not escaping the east for the folksier, looser west, but, instead, brings the east with him as a progressive

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<sup>5</sup> Ford provides an alternative vision of social integration in *The Quiet Man* through the figure of Sean Thornton (John Wayne), an Irish-American that returns to his boyhood home in Innisfree, Ireland. Unlike Ransome, Thornton is looking to escape his past by simply blending into the small Irish community, but, like Ransome, runs into trouble with one of the town "toughs," who is the brother of the woman he seeks to marry. Ultimately, Thornton is able to integrate into the community by acquiescing to the cultural norms and traditions of his community, more specifically the patriarchal norms that establish male power and female submissiveness, rather than changing those traditions to suit his more progressive, American perspective. If Ransome's civilizing will be tied to an oppressive guilt, Thornton's operates on the corrective measure of shame, which exerts pressure on his conception of masculine violence and potency.

advocate of civilization. From the opening moments of the flashback narrative, Ranse is at odds with the violent individualism of the American West embodied by the good and evil poles of Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) and Liberty Valance, which, in the final analysis, are not as distinctive as they may initially appear. Consequently, Ranse sets about civilizing the crude social order embodied in the coercive “diplomacy” of Liberty’s whip and the vigilante justice of Tom’s gun. As a lawyer, Ranse wields the weapon of the law, which he continuously attempts to use with little effect throughout the film to bring Liberty Valance to justice. Much less effective in scaring Liberty than Tom’s gun, Ranse’s law books are not a physical match for the man who has beaten him and terrorized Shinbone and the surrounding areas at the behest of wealthy local landowners. Like most other semblances of civilization in the small community, the legal structure in Shinbone is crudely organized and headed by a figure of incompetence, Link Appleyard (Andy Devine). As impotent as Ranse’s law books, Appleyard is perpetually slipping out the backdoor of Ericson’s restaurant whenever Liberty is entering the front. Despite failed attempts to order the community through education, clever use of the local media (*The Shinbone Star*), and political action, Ranse finally surrenders to the only effective legal avenue available to the citizens of Shinbone, the gun, killing Liberty Valance in a gunfight.

Framed by a flashback narrative that bookends the violent founding of statehood for the unknown territory with the more civilized Shinbone of the narrative present, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is plagued from the outset by a certain melancholic tone. Whereas the younger Ransom Stoddard would have found the more sophisticated and modern Shinbone to be an orderly and, effectively, pleasing place, there seems to be

something lost in the opening scenes even before the audience learns of Tom Doniphon's death and its significance. If, as Robin Wood has noted, there is a certain sense of nostalgia common to most of Ford's westerns, the frame of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is "more than nostalgic: it is overtly elegiac" (24). While the pervasive sense of loss in the film resonates with the sense of discontent with the suburb's homogeneity (we will deal with this later in the chapter), it would be useful here to account for what is lost in the middle portion of the film. The elusive lost piece of old Shinbone is characterized by a more vibrant life, even if that vibrancy is in part predicated upon a looming sense of danger posed by Liberty Valance. If, ultimately, Ransome gets everything he wants from Shinbone; his wife Hallie (Vera Miles); a political career that *Shinbone Star* editor, Maxwell Scott, claims could very well end in the White House; and, most importantly, the civilization of the west, it seems to come at a price that strips his life of all the idealistic passion that initially spurs him west. Ransome's story explaining who Tom Doniphon is will be a variation on "how the west was won." However, given the "overtly elegiac" tone and the potentiality embodied in Doniphon, whose coffin cements that potential's end, Ransome's tale is a story of "how the west was lost."

As the suburb draws upon its own fantasmatic origins of the small town and certain conventions or stereotypes associated with it to create itself in that image, Ransome Stoddard embodies the idealism of rational, legal order (deprived of its violent foundations). Unlike Earp who is able to negotiate between custom and law, as well as use force when necessary, Ransome's power (or impotence as it may be) resides in an unflappable belief in the power of the law as a force of civilization. As Sidney Pearson claims in his article "Why it is Tough to Be the Second-Toughest Guy in a Tough Town,



“clearly young Stoddard is one who views law as the very essence of any civilization worthy of the name. He knows what Machiavelli knew, that the written law is the code that separates men from beasts. But, unlike Machiavelli, he has forgotten, if he ever knew, that men also fight outside the law” (174). For Ranse, the law, as an idealistic force of civilization, possesses an almost quasi-magical force to condition citizens who fall under its juridical boundaries. The violent origins of law, or more specifically, of the authority that administers that law, have vanished for the idealistic young lawyer. While this may be the case “back east,” Ranse’s overestimation of the law’s independent force is quickly put to test by “western law” when Liberty Valance and his cohorts rob the stagecoach that brings Ranse west. Defending a female passenger, who pleads to keep an heirloom from her deceased husband, Ranse furiously and incredulously asks, “What kind of men are you?” (*MLV*). This question appears in variations in other Ford westerns,<sup>6</sup> and here it serves a similar function illustrating Ranse’s unfamiliarity with the unsympathetic violence and brutality of the frontier. To the “tenderfoot” Stoddard, Valance’s character type is clearly alien. Valance meets Ranse’s question with a vicious backhand in response, “this kind, dude,” that knocks the young lawyer to the ground and replies with the same question, “Now, what kind of man are you, dude?” (*MLV*). The casting of the rail thin Jimmy Stewart contributes to Ranse’s physically unimposing

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<sup>6</sup> Pearson makes this point indicating that it is a central question for Ford the *auteur*:

When Liberty Valance asks the same question of Ransom Stoddard, it is the question Ford has asked over and over again in his films: Who are we? And each time the answer that comes back is that we are defined by our virtues – courage, honor, fidelity to our friends, most especially our comrades in arms, and a stoic sense of humility in the face of our inescapable trials. (174)

If it is the case that Ford believes we are defined by our virtues, as Pearson contends, then the purity of these virtues becomes increasingly suspect for the aging Ford. While Ranse is not necessarily duplicitous in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, for all his virtue, courage, honor and fidelity he is ultimately a deeply conflicted person at the end of the film. Earp, Abe Lincoln, and Tom Joad to name just a few Fordian heroes, despite facing conflict and an uncertain future, demonstrate a sincere hope and determination is absent in the aging Senator, who, by the end of the film, is more playing the role of senator than one driven by his ideals.

appearance; Ranse seems as weak and frail as an aging Jimmy Stewart looks. Despite lacking strong physical presence, Ranse is unflappable, responding that he is an “attorney-at law” that is “duly licensed for the territory” and will “see them jail” for their actions (*MLV*). Simultaneously humored and infuriated by the lawyer, Valance digs through Ranse’s belongings to discover law books. Valance’s ability to determine the subject of Ranse’s books demonstrates an intelligence that makes his presence even more menacing. Unlike Ranse, Liberty is capable of both intelligence and physical cruelty, and while he might “know better,” he is too violent and cruel to care. Disgusted by the implied civil order of the books, Valance dismisses their authority by ripping pages from the spine and replacing rational order with the violence of the west, “I’ll teach you law, western law” (*MLV*). Valance, who removes the handkerchief covering his face, proceeds to beat Ranse viciously with his bullwhip, enacting his interpretation of “western law”.

For the better part of the film Ranse will hold to the ideals that he establishes in his initial, unsettling encounter with Liberty Valance. While Ranse’s stance is predicated more upon a sense of baseline civility, for which he is sarcastically deemed a “ladies man” by Tom,<sup>7</sup> than legality, this civility is grounded in Ranse’s upright sense of right and wrong as established by the law. Still, Ranse, who studies his law books for legal precedent and specific statutes to entrap Liberty Valance, is distinct from Abe Lincoln

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<sup>7</sup>Ranse’s incompatibility with the territory is emphasized by the numerous nicknames given to him, particularly by Tom and Liberty. Liberty continually refers to him as “dude” throughout the film, identifying him as the weak, sophisticated easterner that is too soft and refined for the crude, subsistence-living of the west. Tom similarly categorizes Ranse as “pilgrim,” “tenderfoot,” and “ladies man” throughout the film, with “pilgrim” being the most consistent term associated with Ranse. While this term is commonly associated with Wayne as a character actor (this film is the first time he uses it), its use in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is particularly meaningful, that is, its meaning is similar to that of “dude”. A pilgrim is one who is ultimately unprepared for the harsh conditions in which he finds himself upon arrival to a new land.

(Henry Fonda) in Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, where he interprets *Blackstone's Commentaries* (the law) in a more "aw shucks" fashion: "By Jean, that's all there is too it, right and wrong." The different responses to the same question of being indicate the gulf between Ranse's idealistic belief in the law and Valance's rough instruction in "Western Law." Both times the question is asked in a rhetorically, since both Ranse and Valance realize that they encounter foreign presences. Still, the question cuts to the core of both of their identities. Ranse's response does not ground his defiance in the virtues of protecting the honor of a lady, but, instead, he establishes his elevated legal authority. While it is fairly obvious that Ranse's authority is about as formidable as the book from which Valance tears pages, it is also evident that Ranse believes in the civilizing, disciplinary force of the law; his authority is legitimated by the law that is, in his belief, all that is necessary to contain transgressive forces. Valance's response is the dark, practical counterpart to Ranse's law. It is no coincidence that the education Valance administers requires no language; the bull whip replaces the law book. Administrators of "western law" do not research for legal precedent, but, instead, use the experience of the whip and the pistol to back their "legal authority" with force. If Ranse believes there is no distance separating his "ideal ego" (Ransom Stoddard Attorney-at-Law) from the frail easterner signified by his title, then Valance's removal of his handkerchief accomplishes a similar identification. When Valance shows his face to Ranse it is the signifying equivalent of Ranse's response to the question "what kind of man are you, dude?" as well as his gesture of hanging his "shingle" (Ransom Stoddard Attorney-at-Law) outside of Peabody's office. Valance is the violent face of western law, where one's authority is equal to one's force, will, and weaponry.

Despite the unmerciful beating, Ranse's education is a slow one, and what he lacks in physical force he makes up for in stubbornness. Bent on imprisoning the outlaw, Ranse establishes roots in Shinbone despite the threat Valence poses. Biding his time to see Liberty imprisoned, Ranse takes a number of jobs to pay off his debt to Tom and the Ericsons, who offer food and shelter to the wounded lawyer in their restaurant. Following his vicious beating, Ranse's entire reason for existing is predicated upon bringing civilization to tiny Shinbone, and that goal is grounded in shackling the seemingly uncontrollable Liberty Valance. Whether reading his law books while washing dishes at the Ericson's restaurant or working as a reporter for the local newspaper, *The Shinbone Star*, Ranse, like Earp in *My Darling Clementine*, slowly establishes the possibility of rational order in the otherwise uncivilized territory. Unlike Earp, whose job as town marshal in Tombstone implies the use of force, Ranse's work is predicated upon non-violent reason and the ordering force of language. If Tom and Valance's authority are underpinned by the weapons on their hips, Ranse establishes a more subtle authority in Shinbone as its first educator. Recognizing the power of knowledge, Valance acknowledges the threat Ranse poses when he attempts to destroy his law books to effectively "disarm" the stubborn young lawyer. Ranse repairs his "weapons," gluing the pages back into the books, and responds to Liberty's cruel tutelage by establishing a more traditional education system in Shinbone.

Establishing a crude one-room school for the children and willing adults of Shinbone in the back of Dutton S. Peabody's newspaper office, Ranse designs a curriculum stretching from the basics of language (the singing of the ABCs) to introductory civics (studying the constitution). The work of civilization, the idealistic

force of the law, and the growing authority of Ranse are all indicated by the *mise-en-scène* in this sequence. Following a traditional classroom arrangement, Ranse sits behind a desk in front of the diverse student body. Behind Ranse is a picture of George Washington and a chalkboard with the phrase “Education is the basis of law and order” written on it (*MLV*). The simple phrase in conjunction with the picture of the founding father, serve as the ideological foundation for Ranse’s work as an educator. The inscription of legal, rational authority for which Ranse is an administrator works in conjunction with the formal filmic elements in this scene. Following primarily a standard shot, reverse shot format that first depicts Ranse and then his students, the placement of the camera for this otherwise standard formula is particularly telling. A perspective more indicative of a stage play than a film, the straight-on shots of Ranse’s students create three distinct planes within the classroom. The more traditionally cinematic approach would have been to present these shots from a slight angle immediately over Ranse’s shoulder, which would conceal him from the “reaction shot.” In the background are the students, who listen with rapt attention to Ranse. The lawyer/educator sits in a middle ground, framed in his chair from the waist up with Hallie slightly off to his right. The third plane is the creation of an implied viewer who watches, straight-on, and is a creation of the seeming extra space between the camera and Ranse, who would otherwise not be a part of the standard shot reverse shot sequence. The subject for whom this camera serves as a replacement is what Lacan would have called the “big Other,” or, in other words, the third plane that watches over Ranse and the students is the Law as an ideal authority – it is the spectatorship of Washington and the phrase on the board.<sup>8</sup> It is

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<sup>8</sup> The big Other, like the Lacanian Real, only exists in its effects on the structure of reality. In other words, the big Other is the product of a collective belief established by our frustrations with the insufficiencies,

worth noting that the angle of the camera is placed above the seated educator and his students, indicating an elevated, authoritative position; the more “straight-on” camera position is indicative of a subjective point of view. Likewise the reaction shots from the individual student’s perspective indicate a standing, elevated position (the students do stand to address Ranse when answering questions). In standing, Ranse’s pupils address the dignity and authority of the Law. This elevated framing allows the camera to capture the “ideal” statement on the board in the top edge of the frame slightly above the seated Ranse. Literally backed by the law in this sequence, Ranse serves as the mediator between his students and the sense of the big Other he is attempting to instill, educating and administering it to his students, who submit to both him and broader ideological concepts.

Despite the deep-staging (multiple planes) shots in the small, makeshift schoolhouse, the straight-on camera has the effect of flattening the image. Shifting from the subjective view of the big Other, the reverse-shot places us in the audience of students who watch Ranse “perform” his duties as teacher. The emphasis on staging indicates a certain performativity and, perhaps, a lack of authenticity. Initially this “stage play”

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shortcomings, and short circuits in the meaningful structure of our socio-symbolic reality. Out of the ruptures that threaten to destabilize our life-world, the big Other is “produced” as a guarantor of significance. As Žižek claims apropos of *The Matrix* in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*:

What, then, is *The Matrix*? Simply the Lacanian ‘big Other,’ the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures for us. This dimension of the ‘big Other’ is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn’t speak, he ‘is spoken’ by the symbolic structure. In short, this ‘big Other’ is the name for the social substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, that is on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something else with regard to what he aimed at or anticipated. (216)

One’s orientation to this Other can be either belief in its unfailing benevolence (like Ranse’s belief in the Law or one’s faith in God), or a paranoid position afraid of that Other’s intentions in “pulling the strings.” For Ranse, the pictures of Washington and Lincoln that adorn the walls of his school are icons of this big Other, who establishes a meaningful realm or frame of reference, which seems to be lacking in the uncultivated west.

setting seems to be out of place for the depiction of the fundamental education that transpires in a one-room schoolhouse – what could be more authentic than the one-room School from the small town of yesteryear? Ranse’s lesson plan quickly shifts from the fundamentals of language and the law to “political theater,” with what he takes to be the “best textbook in the world, an honest newspaper” (*MLV*). Using a recent article in *The Shinbone Star* about the territory’s battle for statehood between larger cattle interests and individual homesteaders, Ranse transforms his desk from the locus of rational authority to the political pulpit. This pulpit allows him to argue the merits of statehood, the backbone of law and order, for the homesteaders of Shinbone. If Liberty Valance and Tom Doniphon’s practice of law is tied to the weapons on their hip, Ranse’s more idealistic notions of law are predicated upon a certain performative politics. Unlike Valance and Doniphon, Ranse and his boss, Dutton Peabody, “fight” with the weapon of rhetoric, and, as the staging suggest, there is something staged about Ranse’s lesson. In other words, there is a shift from education to ideology in the sequence; the fantasmic purpose, borrowing its “authenticity,” of the small one-room school confuses the line between education and politics. Ford’s staging here refuses the disintegration of the illusion, the seamless blending into reality, necessary for ideology to function. By foregrounding the artifice in the schoolroom, the film makes us aware of the manipulation that transpires in Ranse’s pedagogy. It is no coincidence that Ranse’s performance is interrupted by Doniphon, who furiously storms into the classroom after a conflict with Valance. While a more positive force than his villainous counterpart, Tom stands in for the vitality of physical force that is still lacking from Ranse’s conception of law; the picture of President Washington does not connote the general in the

Revolutionary War but the politician who was the Father of the Nation. Not only does Tom's violent intrusion disrupt the class, he brings news of Valance's new threat, which will be directed at both Ranse for persisting in the territory as a lawyer and Peabody, whose newspaper opposes Valance's violence with the force of language. The rhetorical force of the newspaper and Ranse's political performance remain impotent in the face of Valance; as Tom claims "votes won't stand up against guns" (*MLV*).

### **Ransom Lane in Stoddardtown**

Not unlike the film's conflation of the iconic one-room school and theater, the suburb conflates the nostalgia for small town with modern, post-war materialism. The obvious "staging" of the setting and the performative aspect of Ranse's teaching is a reflection of suburbia's play-acting as a small town. If Ranse is pushing statehood in the guise of education, then suburban homogeneity is pushing center socio-political ideals, most notably regarding the proper distribution of domestic labor, in the guise of the lost good old days. If suburbs were marketed as "garden paradises" in close proximity to the urban center, then the invocation of nature was misleading at best and, with further development, a promise of diminishing returns. Early advertisements of suburban developments often depicted a wealth of space and greenery, as Baxandall and Ewen explain:

the Levitt ads left out as much as they revealed. The pictures of houses in the ads were drawings, not photographs. These illustrations depicted the house alone – no neighbors anywhere – when in reality houses were on top of each other. In the ads houses were surrounded by lush green when, 'in actuality,' John Liell noted disparagingly, 'Levittown's trees were saplings, detracting rather than adding to its appearance.' (137)



Given that Levittown's original name was "Island Trees," these saplings were an apt indication the degree to which nature was controlled within the suburb and the falseness of the promise of the natural world in suburbia. Whereas the original small town could stake some claim to a rural countryside either cultivated for farming or lush with untamed forest, the suburbs' natural setting was a scaled down facsimile of the rural.

Consequently, the more developed the suburb the less actual green space existed.

Moreover, the more developed the suburban outskirts became the more the intervening distances between the city became populated by shopping centers to serve the dispersed population. In this realm of "contained nature," the emphasis on outdoor activity became increasingly important.<sup>9</sup> As Tim Miller explains in his essay "The birth of the Patio Daddy-O," "the number of people golfing and bowling increased during the same period [post-WWII]. Sales of bicycles, cameras, and fishing rods also rose, expenditures relating to boating grew by more than half ... Americans were getting of their duffs, and hitting the lake, roads, or backyard" (6). Replacing the more formal and traditional party, the block barbeque reflected the new interest in one's small piece of nature: the backyard. A similar "containment" of nature emerges in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Distinct from other Ford Westerns, many of which were shot in a stretch of desert that his films helped to make famous, "Monument Valley," *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was shot almost entirely on the studio lot. While the choice to forgo location filming is believed to be the result of financial constraints imposed upon the

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<sup>9</sup> Outdoor spaces were integral to Levittown. As Baxandall and Ewen explain, "Although Levittown lacked the schools, libraries, movie theaters, meeting rooms, and community centers that government-sponsored programs like Greenbelt featured, it was equipped with nine public swimming pools, seven commercial centers or 'village greens,' as they were called, and baseball fields" (131). Moving to the suburbs, as Levitt claimed, was not simply about buying a place to live, but "buying a way of life" that included "access to a swimming pool or a baseball diamond" (131). For Levin these outdoor activities were equally as important as "solid walls" or a "strong roof."

aging director, the obvious studio setting highlights the transformation of Shinbone from a vital (yet dangerous) frontier town to a more modernized, civilized small town, which loses the traces of its individuality.<sup>10</sup> As Scott Eyman claims in his book on Ford *Print the Legend*, “*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a memory play, from its under-populated sets to the archetypes of its characters,” (490). If it is indeed a “memory play,” then the director of that production is the “performing politician/educator/lawyer” Ransom Stoddard. The “claustrophobic” and obvious studio settings, emerge in place of the awe-inspiring depictions of the west that characterize other Ford westerns; as Pearson indicates, “Every scene in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, for example, seems suitable for framing. Here there is no Monument Valley, Rio Grande River, or stagecoach to Lordsburg to give away the place” (171). Pearson effectively argues that the stock, studio staging of the film lends itself to a certain lack of geographical specificity characteristic of Shinbone. Unlike Tombstone, Arizona, which has a specific history (however mythic it may be) and location, Shinbone is an abstraction of so many western towns. As Pearson claims, “it is a generic West, and unlike Ford’s other great westerns, this generic west is seen in the dark shadows. This claustrophobic quality fits nicely with the clarity of the evil, the misplaced idealism, and the misunderstood prudence that drive the story” (172). While Pearson’s argument is a compelling one, it would seem that the “claustrophobia” that he locates in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is grounded more specifically in the mind of Shinbone’s narrator, which tends towards “misplaced

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<sup>10</sup> As Scott Eyman indicates in his biography on Ford, *Print the Legend*, Ford westerns were no longer cheap productions, “for *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, John Wayne was getting \$750,000 and James Stewart \$300,000, against 7½ percent of the gross apiece ... The total budget was \$3.2 million, a great deal for a black and white Western with only a few days of location work” (488). After the commercial failure of several films, particularly *Two Rode Together* (perhaps Ford’s bleakest film), Ford’s power in Hollywood was diminished, which might have contributed to the decision to spend on the stars and not on location shooting.

idealism.” Ultimately, we are confined to Ransom Stoddard’s narrative perspective in the film, or, more precisely, the closed set of Shinbone is equivalent to Ranse’s memory.

In the limitations and specificities of Ranse’s perspective we can begin to see a connection between *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and the impact of the suburbs on American culture in the 1950s. If we take the flashback to be tied specifically to Ranse’s memory, then his recollection of Shinbone and its history is similar to William Levitt’s work as a suburban developer. Using a “flashback” technique of his own, Levitt as the architect of the paradigmatic suburb attempts to embody his idealistic notion of community (the small town) in Levittown. Like any obsessive creator, Levitt exercised oppressive control over his project. Insofar as our and “new” Shinbone’s access to the story of Tom Doniphon must emerge from Ranse, the senator enjoys similar creative control in his recreation of Shinbone. Ranse possesses a kind of authorial omnipotence of which Levitt, no doubt, would have been envious. While the lack of the defining aesthetic characteristics of Fordian westerns can be explained by budget issues with Paramount, they also point to the limited perspective of the architect of the flashback. Stoddard, unlike Earp who works as a cowboy in *My Darling Clementine*, does not come west to make his fame and fortune on the western landscape. If there are no panoramic shots of Monument Valley, rendered breathtakingly in “Technicolor” like those in *The Searchers*, then it is because Ranse simply is incapable of seeing the beauty of the uncultivated west. His desire to transform the desert into a garden is a variation on the desire to civilize the west, transforming it into a copy of the “fertile” east and, thus, duplicating his ideal society. Even the choice of black and white, which Ford insisted

upon despite objections from his cinematographer and the studio,<sup>11</sup> reflects Ranse's tunnel vision, insofar as he is bent on changing the west's more amorphous "natural law"<sup>12</sup> into a clearer, black and white, legalistic framework. Even if Ranse's vision is grounded in a certain idealistic belief in legal justice, the omissions of the particularities that make the west initially enticing, eventually strip that idealism of vitality. Ultimately, the more entrenched Ranse's symbolization of the territory becomes, culminating in statehood, the more general and stale Shinbone becomes; herein lies the nature of loss that is evident in the opening and closing frames. If Ranse, as he claims at the outset of the flashback, follows Horace Greeley's advice to "go west, young man, go west, and seek fame, fortune, adventure," then what he ultimately finds is his own "misplaced idealism" (*MLV*). Seeking his fame and fortune, Ranse, in his administration of legal order, only finds what he had left behind. Consequently, Shinbone trades the specificity of Hallie's beloved "cactus rose" for what Ranse calls a "real rose."

Ranse's establishment of the "real rose" as a kind of standard implicitly superior to the regional cactus rose, is analogous to Levitt's ideal model for the suburb. Quoting

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<sup>11</sup>Eyman notes this in *Print the Legend*, "Although Paramount would undoubtedly have preferred that *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* be in color, Ford stood firm against everybody ... 'Goddamn it, we're going to do it black and white; it shouldn't be in color'" (490).

<sup>12</sup>Pearson makes a similar point in his essay, "He (Tom) represents a kind of natural justice, but without a philosophical sense of the purpose behind the sort of law Stoddard represents: it is the justice of live and let live, but don't tread on me" (176). In Tom and Ranse, Ford separates the young Abe Lincoln from his earlier film, insofar as Lincoln is both a figure of official legal justice as well as a formidable physical presence that can "whup any man here" (*Young Mr. Lincoln*). Tom is the physical force of right, who refuses the official, discursive structure of legality, most notably in his refusal of nomination as a delegate for the territory regarding the political discussion of statehood. Ranse is the official, discursive portion of the law, who refuses the physical violence associated with enforcing the law. Roy Grundman makes this case in his essay "Populist Motifs in John Ford's Films," "these two eras are split into two separate characters, Tom Doniphon and Ransom Stoddard" (200). The two eras Grundman refers to are the historical moment of the Young Lincoln's development into lawyer and politician, and the implied later era that requires a strong, rational mind to hold together the union; this is the era Lincoln marches into at the end of *Young Mr. Lincoln*.

the romanticized small town, more of myth than history, Levitt designed his suburban development “Island Trees” to be the realization of a common small town dream: “we began to dream of a low income community, complete in every phase with shops and amusements and planned houses and parks and 1,000 other things” (in Baxandall and Ewen 143). As Baxandall and Ewen indicate, Island Trees was to be the “perfect American environment” with “Cape Cod houses,” numerous parks, and swimming pools (143). Despite this enthusiastic idealism, the actual translation of the romantic vision into reality quickly shifted into “dulling uniformity,” which was a part of the process of the “mass-production” of the suburbs (Baxandall and Ewen 143). Levitt and his sons began the project with the idea of naming each subdivision within the suburb according to some theme like “celestial section” or “the homesy set,” but quickly ran out of clever ideas. Unable to thinking of something wittier or nostalgic, they then picked letters and attached a word according to that letter. In a telling expression of the homogeneity and conformity that emerges in the suburbs, Levittowners, as Baxandall and Ewen point out, “referred to the sections of Levittown by these letters: the T section, the W section” (144). What began with the vision to embody the idealism, both aesthetically and morally, of the small town, ends up becoming an exercise in classification and abstraction that strips away all particularity. Even the empty romanticism of the subdivision name, intended to connect some elevated notion to a particular portion of the suburb, is reduced to a letter, whose empty signification ends up being far more signifying than its romanticized counterpart.

This signification in the absence of real meaning resonates with Tom Doniphon’s death, which ultimately means more than his life; loss and negation come to take on

greater significance with both the suburb ('W' section) and Tom's death, insofar as they designate a failure of an original ideal. Whereas Tom was once important in Shinbone, representing the idealistic balance between violence and justice latent in natural law, statehood and its explicit legal order make him obsolete; this is mirrored in his relationship to Hallie, who chooses Ranse over Tom. In both cases, some potentiality is lost in a process of standardization. Like the 'W' section that "castrates" the remaining letters negating the idealism for which it is meant to stand, the meaning of Tom's death is ultimately negated by Scott, who tosses Ranse's story into the fire. If the studio settings of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are a reflection of Ranse's abstract, legal perspective that can only see the universal (homogenous) and not the particular, then the suburbs are a kind of "studio setting" of the small town, which attempts to create an abstract, universal small town out of the elements common to the small town and "1,000 other things." This excess, the 1000 things, is the demarcation of a certain surplus *jouissance*. This "1000 other things" connects the suburb to the imaginary small town, insofar as that imaginary place was more than any actually existing small town. Born out of both the frustration with the metropolis and the false belief that the original "hometown" can be reclaimed, the 1,000 other things indicate the surplus investment of imagination in that original small town; the suburb's surplus is the answer to "urban frustration" and the "lost home." The actual "small town" manifestation of the suburb, then, is inevitably unsatisfying also fails to live up to its initial vision. To put this in terms of the film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valances* strips the traditional western of its distinguishing features (Monument Valley for Ford fans, the aesthetic appreciation of the west, and the potentiality of the frontier) to render what is aesthetically a flat, bland copy

of the genre poured into a studio, just as the small town is homogenized, abstracted, and pasteurized to be poured into the suburb. The suburb is an elaborate studio set for the small town that somehow lacks the density of the (fantasmic, non-existent) original.

### **Once a Desert**

If there is a certain “elegiac” quality about the frame of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, then it is very much tied to the consequences of Ranse’s success as a civilizer. The good townsfolk of Shinbone ultimately get what they want, statehood and the protection of the law. However, as the tone of the opening and closing frames indicates, they lose, as Roy Grundman claims, “the frontier town as the exciting heyday of outlaws like Valance and heroes like Doniphon” (200). Tom Doniphon’s death, as it would be in the time of Dutton Peabody, is not news for *The Shinbone Star*, inasmuch as Doniphon, the figure of natural law, dies symbolically with the progress of civilization. His death, which draws Ranse and Hallie back from Washington, is the echo of the past in the burgeoning small town; it is the nostalgic, barely audible lamentation of what is sacrificed to the common American Dream. The cactus rose that Hallie puts on Tom’s coffin commemorates Tom and his vivid moment in history, serving as a melancholy symbol of what is lost through historical progress. Connecting the two historically different Shinbones, Tom gives Hallie a cactus rose in the flashback, and she places one on his coffin in the closing frame.<sup>13</sup> In the flashback sequence, set in the Ericson’s

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that the cactus rose is pulled from the burned out home of Tom Doniphon. Following his decision to kill Liberty Valance to protect Ranse for Hallie, Tom recognizes that Hallie has made her decision between Tom, an outmoded way of life disappearing in the west, and Ranse, the progressive march of civilization. Without Hallie, as a force of positive containment, and Liberty Valance, as a negative force to be opposed, Tom loses his ethical moorings, and goes on a drunken rampage. When he returns to his home, he burns it down, starting with the room addition that he was putting on for Hallie. While his physical death comes many years after this rampage, he dies symbolically with the burning of his

kitchen, Tom's gift to Hallie represents not only his love for her, but also the geographical specificity of Shinbone; Tom's gift is one grounded in and limited by its present place and moment. Admiring the flower, Hallie calls to Ranse to share in the beauty of the rose: "Isn't it the prettiest thing you ever did see?" Ranse responds, somewhat dismissively: "It's very pretty. Hallie, did you ever see a *real* rose" (*MLV*). Presumably having never left the territory, Hallie indicates that she has not seen a "real" rose, but that "someday, if they ever dam the river, we'll have lots of water and all kinds of flowers" (*MLV*). Vera Miles' acting is crucial in indicating a shift in perspective from an appreciation of one's locality to Ranse's broader ideological vision of the future for Shinbone. Unlike Tom, Hallie is capable of envisioning more than what already is in Shinbone, and, unlike Tom, Ranse represents the promise of that future. Initially, Miles plays the scene with a kind of reverence for the cactus rose, with a beaming face that is bathed in light. When Ranse asks her about the real rose, her demeanor shifts dramatically to an expression of consternation, but then quickly shifts back to convey the vibrancy in her vision of the future.

In these subtle changes we can trace the movement of civilization in Shinbone from the particularity of the territory to the standardization of statehood, which ultimately does bring "all kinds of flowers" we see in the final scene of the film as Hallie and Ranse leave the town behind. As Grundman argues, the rose designates a link to the past:

The cactus rose symbolizes Hallie's significance for both men and thus links both phases of civilization. The rose is given to Hallie by Doniphon, but is taken up by Stoddard. It not only is a classical symbol of chivalry and courtship, but

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home and the lost future with Hallie. Hallie extracts the cactus rose from the ashes where the room addition had once been, resurrecting Tom through this melancholic gesture of acknowledging what she also has lost. For Hallie, only in death and through the surrogate object, the cactus rose, can she acknowledge and minimally possess the emotional connection she renounced in her (seemingly unhappy) marriage to Ranse.



constitutes the entry point into another one of Ford's mythological circuits, this one linking civilization to the flow of nature and, more particularly, water. The cactus rose gets discussed in connection with the irrigation bill and can thus be compared to the symbolic dimension of the river in *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Its changing current correlates with the changing values associated with the rose. Both represent transition and continuity, both provide a mythological dimension. (201)

What Grundman misses is that the rose Doniphon gives to Hallie is not "taken up" by Stoddard, but subtly demeaned and dismissed by Stoddard. Instead of helping to cultivate the cactus rose, Stoddard attempts to displace its particularity with the standard of a "real" rose, which we can only presume is a red one. The irrigation bill is not mentioned by Hallie, but, instead, by Ranse at the end of the film as his last political act before retiring to Shinbone; it is only after he has fully prepared the desert for cultivation that he can return to it. Ranse's real rose embodies the homogenization that reduces the territory to a common standard. To put it in Levittowner terms, the "real" rose is the equivalent to the Cape Cod home on Garden Lane, which is eerily similar to the Cape Cod home on Harmony Lane – like a "real" rose, perhaps one could request different colored siding and shutters, if one were so bold. Consequently, the cactus rose is not precisely a symbol of "transition and continuity," but, instead, a broken connection in the chain of historical development that Ranse has initiated. This broken connection is precisely why *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is not one of Ford's stories of the potentiality of change (unlike *Young Mr. Lincoln* or *My Darling Clementine*).

The subject of the film's denouement is precisely the disjunction between the rose and the garden that Ranse has created. When Hallie asks if Ranse is proud of the garden he has created in the territory that was "once a wilderness," he responds with a question: "Hallie, who put the cactus roses on Tom's coffin?" (*MLV*). It was, of course,

Hallie, whose melancholy gesture seeks to reclaim (in its loss) the relationship with Tom and the potentialities of the natural law. Along with Link Appleyard the only other remaining “link” to old Shinbone,<sup>14</sup> Hallie makes a special trip “out desert way” to retrieve the cactus rose from Tom’s burned-out homestead. Even if it is only a symbolic gesture, both where she retrieves the rose and its personal, historical significance subtly express her discontent with her choice in mate and the inevitable progress of civilization. The only time Hallie appears to embody the same vitality of her youth in the wild Shinbone is when Ransome expresses an interest in forsaking politics to return to Shinbone and set up a law practice. This beaming Hallie quickly disappears with Ransome’s question about the cactus rose, reminding her that even if she returns that she cannot reclaim what she has lost. Like Tom Joad and the Harper children in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Night of the Hunter*, Hallie realizes, in trading a “real” rose for the cactus rose, she can never really go home again. Ultimately, the copy never quite approximates the fantasmic investment in the original.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Link’s name is one of three proper names that are particularly important in the film, and functions as a connection between Liberty as a criminal and Ransome as a lawyer. More specifically, Link designates a failed connection between the two insofar as he fails to fulfill his duties as marshal for Shinbone; his failure eventually forces the violent confrontation that launches Ransome’s political career. Ultimately, Link is also the connection to the past; he is the first person Hallie recognizes on the Stoddard’s arrival in new Shinbone. Link’s failure to connect Valance and Ransome in a legal sense creates the necessity for the natural law of Tom, and, consequently, he serves as the last connection to that bygone period. To put it another way, Link’s incompetence creates a “Liberty” in old Shinbone that is ultimately “Ransomed” to the law of statehood.

<sup>15</sup> Another explanation for the studio setting of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* lies in the juxtaposition between the authentic place and its copy, that is, there is no “original, authentic” place, as such. Even if the country was once primarily rural and small-town oriented, it was not the small town of our imaginative investment. It was beset by regional or geographical particularities that were characteristic of a certain specificity that belies the abstract, ideal origin located in the small town. The studio setting speaks to the original place as a fantasmic one, grounded in our frustration with the present that generates an other where and when that was not frustrating or unfulfilling, where things were better. For Hallie, this place is old Shinbone, but, as we frequently see in her frustration with its lack of education and agricultural diversity, she was not content with its limitations. The placement of the cactus rose on Tom’s coffin is more an attempt to reclaim an imagined version of Shinbone than an acknowledgment of its lost authenticity.

## The Infinite Loss of “Liberty”

The last scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, particularly the final lines of the film, illustrate not only Hallie’s specific loss in the development of the territory into a state, but a loss inherent in the process of civilization in a more general sense; there is a certain sacrifice that emerges in subjecting oneself to the law. This sacrifice is tied to the mythic foundations of that law, or, to put it in the film’s terms, the sacrifice is the source of the legend that becomes the fact upon which the community is constructed.<sup>16</sup> If the ideological object of the small town designates a nodal point of certain fundamentally idealistic American myths, then *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* stages how these myths are constructed – it does so, not coincidentally, in the small town of Shinbone. After dropping Hallie back into her melancholia with the question about the cactus rose, Ranse, talking to the porter on the train that is carrying them to a connection back to Washington, shifts into his bombastic senator persona, performing with calculated, diplomatic ease. Responding to the special treatment that he receives from the railroad workers, who have held the express up for him in the next town, Ranse promises to bestow his senatorial grace upon the railroad with a letter of appreciation. The porter responds, “nothing’s too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance” (*MLV*). Like

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Shinbone only becomes ideal by the revisionist effects of passing time, and Hallie’s frustration with the path she ultimately chose.

<sup>16</sup> Here I am drawing on Žižek’s conception of the “primordial” loss associated with a subject’s social integration:

Desire emerges when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition, in the vicious cycle in which ‘*jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire’ (Lacan’s definition of castration) – and fantasy is the narrative of this primordial loss, since it stages the process of this renunciation, the emergence of the Law (*TPF* 32).

While at some level this transformation is happening for the entirety of Shinbone in the process of statehood, the most representative case of this sacrifice is Hallie Ericson, who gives up both the cactus rose and Tom for Ranse, the figure of the law.

Hallie before him, Ranse collapses into a melancholy silence that reverberates after his political grandiloquence; these are the last words of the film and they stop Ranse dead in his tracks. If the cactus rose has haunted Hallie as the path not taken, then the identity as “the man who shot Liberty Valance,” which runs counter to Ranse’s idealistic belief in legal order, has equally haunted Ranse. This moniker has plagued Ranse both as a reminder of his inability to live up to his own ideal belief in law and order, and as the mythic, ideal-ego imposed upon him. These two failures intersect in the “the man who shot Liberty Valance”: Ranse’s failure and the (possible) fiction of the myth. Hallie’s rose designates the imaginative force of potentiality, bolstered by melancholic longing, and Ranse’s false identity is indicative of the pressure the myth places upon its subject. In both cases, the work of fantasy creates a symbolic mandate that is impossible to realize, as well as a vision of some socio-symbolic harmony that is unattainable. One can “never go home again,” and, more specifically for the film, Ranse can never really, fully be “the man who shot Liberty Valance,” insofar as it designates an ideal, however complicated, to which no one can live up. In the case of the porter’s (mis)identification, Ranse’s failure to really be the “man who shot Liberty Valance” may be a means of concealing an inherent failure within his ideal belief in the law.

As Tom informs him at the caucus for statehood, Ranse’s political identity is misplaced; Tom claims to be the man who really shot Liberty Valance. Tom’s presumably killed the outlaw for the sake of Hallie, who is torn between her desire for education and knowledge beyond Shinbone, embodied in Ranse, and her appreciation for the more natural life in the small western outpost, embodied by both Tom and the cactus rose. Realizing that Hallie has chosen Ranse, perhaps a suggestion of the inevitability of

progress, Tom kills Liberty seemingly as an act of self-sacrifice, saving Ranse and thus acknowledging Hallie's desire and his own need to ensure her happiness, even if that contentment comes at the expense of his own.<sup>17</sup> Up until his last encounter with Tom, Ranse "falsely" believes himself to be the man who shot Liberty Valance. As a result of Tom's alternative history, Ranse is partially relieved of responsibility for the killing, but is left with the new responsibility of bearing the "mythological" identity; he must shoulder the weight of the hero character in the "printed legend." Ranse is torn, like any noteworthy public figure, between the identity traded in the socio-symbolic network that delineates his place, and the unsettling, if not embarrassing, truth lurking beneath that official role however complicated that truth may be. In this split subjectivity we encounter the inevitable superego guilt characteristic of a failed process of subjectivization, or, as Žižek claims,

the superego emerges as the outcome of the failed interpellation: I recognize myself as Christian, yet deep in my heart I do not really believe in Christianity, and this awareness of not fully endorsing my interpellated symbolic identity as the superego pressure of guilt ... At a "deeper" level, the superego gives expression to the guilt, to a betrayal, that pertains to the act of interpellation *as such*: interpellation *qua* symbolic identification with the Ego-ideal is as such, in itself, a compromise, a way of 'giving up on one's desire.' (FTK lxxi)

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<sup>17</sup> While it would take a ballistics expert from *CSI* to determine who precisely shot Liberty Valance, I contend that the actual shooter may have indeed been Ranse Stoddard. The three figures involved in the shooting form a right angle triangle, with Ranse at an almost 90 degree angle facing Valance and Doniphon to the immediate left of Ranse. When the bullet hits Valance he falls directly backward, that is, he falls as if the bullet that hits him came from immediately in front of him, not from the side. Had Tom Doniphon been the man to shoot Liberty Valance, given the angle he was positioned in, the momentum of the bullet would have carried Valance not backward but in a direction slightly back and to Valance's right, Ranse's left. Of course, the possibility for both bullets having landed has to be considered, which makes the determination of the killer a matter for autopsy. Significantly, the indeterminacy of the killer offers a distraction from the more disconcerting shortcoming of the law; that is, the concern over who actually shot Liberty Valance conceals the failure of law and order for Ransom. Even if Ranse knows he can never really live up to myth that will tell "his story," that concern will be a tolerable (if ultimately depressing) diversion from the more devastating realization. Ultimately, this distraction allows him to continue with his political career; the an alternative myth Tom provides props up failure of juridical action for Ranse.

What Žižek means here is that the process of subjectivization, indicated here by the Althusserian notion of interpellation, inevitably involves the experience of superego guilt. Every interpellation is characterized by its inescapable failure, insofar as, no one can live up to the ego-ideal imposed upon him/her, either by the perception of the other or an internal pressure self-imposed in the aspiration to that ideal. Consequently, partial interpellation, and all interpellation is inevitably partial, creates the sense of guilt that is a consequence of the inability to realize the ego-ideal completely. Along with this guilt from the partial interpellation comes the “deeper” guilt of compromising one’s perceived essential kernel of self for the sake of subjectivization. In other words, in becoming a subject, the person sacrifices some illusive, essential kernel of desire that continues to haunt the subject as a consequence of the renunciation; it is the little piece of desire that refuses the signification associated with interpellation – for Hallie, this desire is represented by the cactus rose. Whereas in the first case guilt stems from the inability to accomplish full interpellation, to live up to perception, in the second, the guilt emerges from a perceived betrayal of the essential, particular core of self that is an unavoidable consequence of becoming a subject.

Does Ranse not encounter both of these experiences of guilt as a result of Tom Doniphon’s confession? Regarding the case of the compromise inherent to interpellation, Ranse’s initial reservations about building his career on “killing a man” refer to the principles of law and order that he renounces by aiming his pistol at Liberty<sup>18</sup> His desire

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<sup>18</sup> Just as Ranse enters into the violent realm of gun fighting that governs Liberty Valance’s world, Liberty makes his own incursion into Ranse’s world of law and order during the delegate nomination at Shinbone’s local bar. While Liberty attempts to stage a hostile takeover of the proceedings, he does so largely through the appropriate observance of protocol by having his cronies nominate and second the nomination of the outlaw for one of the two delegate positions. However, Liberty is dealt a losing hand in the scene, as the rule of the majority usurps the tyrannical rule of the outlaw’s violent coercion. Liberty loses the fair and ordered election to Dutton Peabody and Ransom Stoddard. Still, when the results turn out to be

to return east “where he belongs,” which he confesses to Tom during the caucus for statehood, is a retreat from this unsettling renunciation of principles back to the wellspring from which these indispensable values emerge. As Ranse claims, “I’m going back east, *where I belong*” (*MLV*). All of his idealistic exhortations regarding the importance of law and order as the foundation of civilization are seemingly voided by the shooting, which ironically destroys Ranse’s “liberty,” replacing it with the restrictive bindings of an implacable guilt: first the guilt of Liberty’s death, then the guilt of Tom’s “sacrifice.” It is no mistake that Valance’s only connecting shot hits Ranse in his right arm. To borrow from Preacher Powell’s education in *The Night of the Hunter*, Ranse’s right arm is his “good” one, both in terms of strength but also in metaphorical terms, his moral one. It is the left hand that is “evil,” the one that Cain used to strike “his brother low,” and, consequently, it is this neglected hand that Ranse must use for violent action when his “goodness” (i.e., all legal recourse) has been incapacitated. This renunciation of his own ego-ideal, the man of law and order, leads to the creation of a mythic identity as the “man who shot Liberty Valance,” which becomes an ideal-ego imposed on Ranse from outside. Ironically, this imposed ideal-ego allows him to more effectively become the man of law and order.

In the case of failed interpellation, Ranse builds his political life on the ideal-ego that continually haunts him as “the man who shot Liberty Valance.” The stinging force of this notoriety is all too evident in the film’s final line of dialogue. These words freeze Ranse in the moment before he lights his pipe and cause Hallie to stare absently forward. Perpetually following them as the inescapable kernel of Ranse’s public identity, the

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unfavorable for Liberty he resorts to the rule of the gun, threatening Ransom and calling for the gunfight that will inevitably result in his death.

words, “nothing is too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance,” are slap both Hallie and Ranse into a momentary stupor. Not only does this phrase remind them of the supposed lie upon which Ranse’s political career is built, it is also a reminder for Hallie of the intensity of Tom’s feelings for her, insofar as Tom supposedly killed Liberty to protect the man she loves, Ranse. Camera movement intensifies the force of this statement by tracking in closer to Hallie and Ranse. Ford’s “seldom moved” camera mirrors a kind of superego scrutiny accompanying the identity imposed upon the celebrated senator. This camera movement denotes the absent gaze of Tom, who through his confession perpetually watches and demands that Ranse live up to the misplaced subjectivity he has afforded the budding politician. The porter’s statement also triggers the musical motif that accompanies the scenes in the funeral parlor, effectively linking the railroad employee’s identification with the back room in which Tom’s coffin rests. This music signifies Tom’s “presence in absence,” who is, at least in Hallie’s and Ranse’s minds, *the man* who shot Liberty Valance. The music is Tom’s ghost following Ranse like the dark cloud of smoke spewing from the locomotive carrying the Stoddards to and from Shinbone. Consequently, the music which marks Tom’s constant presence and the porter’s enthusiastic claim indicates that Ranse’s privileged treatment in life is inevitably misdirected from the shooter (or the person Ranse is led to believe is the shooter) that “nothing is too good for” to the forever unworthy Ransom Stoddard. To put this in terms of the superego, the more Ranse benefits in life from the ideal-ego he believes has no legitimate right to, the guiltier he is, insofar as each success, each new and great privilege is a testament to the claim that Tom



has over his life. Ultimately, the more he tries to live up to Tom's injunction to "give her [Hallie] something to read and write about," the deeper in debt he buries himself (*MLV*).

### **The Legend Becomes Fact**

Ranse's confession to the editor of *The Shinbone Star*, then, is not accomplished for the sake of "telling the truth," but, instead, it is a like a religious confession intended to deliver him from the guilt that has plagued his professional life. When Maxwell Scott refuses to print the truth, tossing his notes into the fire, he acknowledges the power and significance of ideological fantasy. Scott's decision to "print the legend" is a symbolic debt owed to the big Other. In other words, fiction, the myth of the man who shot Liberty Valance, has become "fact," and, consequently, it is an indispensable part of the history of the west; it is the way things are even if they are not really that way. Like Ranse's debt to Tom Doniphon, Scott acknowledges the symbolic debt owed to appearances and the ontological weight that hinges upon narrative origins, regardless of their basis in historical fact. Nostalgia, in this instance, is not simply romanticized recollection, but the perpetual re-inscription of the symbolic debt one owes to the original myth. Like the debt of the superego, nostalgia retrieves an idealistic depiction of the past and holds it up as a kind of ethical backdrop that exerts a certain disciplinary pressure upon its subjects, who can never really repay that original debt. Acknowledgment of it – "nothing is too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance" – merely testifies to one's entrapment in the endless cycle of its repayment. The peculiar thing about the debt to the superego is that the more we try to pay for it, the more we seem to owe; in the case of nostalgia, the more we try to live up to the ideal past, the more we fail, the harder we try

(and so on). For better or for worse, Scott recognizes, seemingly to everyone's chagrin, that the western civilization embodied in Shinbone owes its history to Ransom Stoddard, even if he is not equal to the fictional foundations of his identity. Both Shinbone and Stoddard share a common and infinite "ransom."

If this is a marked change in tone for Ford, who expresses disillusionment with the idea of community that had been a hallmark of this earlier westerns, then it is fitting that it emerges as the western began to go out of fashion. It seems appropriate given Ford's own ego ideal as "the man who made westerns"<sup>19</sup> that *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* calls into question the redemptive power of community and the ideals of the American Dream in a more complex and ambivalent manner than any of his earlier films. Like Ranse who discovers an opportunity with Maxwell Scott to unburden his tormented soul, Ford's last great western presents a more morally ambiguous world than those of the younger, more idealistic director: old Ford takes young Ford to task for his belief in the suturing power of community. This shift in Ford is indicative of the Western film in general. Replaced by interest in urban crime stories of the gangster film, the fascination with the potentiality of the frontier seemingly faded in the 1950s. The rugged individualism of the Western, gives to a more consumerist conception of individuality. The gangster film's exploration of monetary success and the luxury it can purchase is a reflection of this shift. In a certain sense, the battle, represented in the western, for

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<sup>19</sup> While there are numerous accounts of this statements' origin, Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein offer a succinct version in the introduction to *John Ford Made Westerns*:

At a Directors Guild meeting in October 1950, director Cecil B DeMille led a right-wing faction in accusing guild president Joseph L. Mankiewicz of being a Communist. At one point during the meeting, a guild member rose from his seat to comment. Since the proceedings were being recorded by a court stenographer, the man, in rumpled clothes and dark glasses, identified himself for the record: "My name's John Ford. I make Westerns." Ford called for a motion demanding that DeMille and the board of directors resign. He then asked the membership to endorse Mankiewicz's presidency so they could "all go home and get some sleep. We've got some pictures to make tomorrow." (2).

civilization and the creation of self-sustaining community, is one that has already been won, or lost depending on how one looks at it. Consequently, the cementation of the middle-class lifestyle in suburbia replaces an older model of the American Dream with a more contemporary one, one that can be purchased like so many luxury items in a gangster film. Still, this newer model is predicated on nostalgia for the small town that exerts pressure upon modern, suburban culture. Ultimately, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* expresses the frustration with the homogeneity of the contemporary suburb, which threatens to collapse diversity and potential into a crushing sameness. Older Shinbone, with its vitality, geographical particularity, and wellspring of possibility, represents the mythic, original small town where right and wrong was organically balanced between the poles of good (Tom Doniphon) and evil (Liberty Valance). Consequently, the new Shinbone, one wrought from the image of Ransom Stoddard who simultaneously stands for and eradicates the natural law in his founding act of violence, is a bad copy of the original small town which demands a conformity and idealism that the suburb can never fully embody – the more it tries, the more it fails, the more it tries in the endless loop of superego guilt. New Shinbone is dripping with melancholy sadness at the beginning of the film. Like the subject afflicted with an overactive superego, it was doomed – a bland, disappointing copy of old Shinbone – long before the death of Tom Doniphon, who dies symbolically long before his actual, physical death.

In his determination to “print the legend,” Scott ultimately illustrates the ideological life of the small town, which, ironically, emerges in its death – as old Shinbone dies with Liberty Valance. To put this in terms of suburbia, whether the original hometown upon which the suburb is based actually ever existed (it never could

have) is ultimately irrelevant for its real-life impact on the composition of the suburb. Instead, what matters is the idealistic narrative passed down (through literature, film, television, magazines, and numerous other narrative avenues) that underpinned the blueprints and organizational rationale for figures like William Levitt. Ford's film illustrates the power of symbolic fictions, even in the face of historical evidence, which function much like a "fetishistic disavowal" in which one fully realizes that X is not the case (that is the object is not the original, missing Thing) but, nevertheless one continues to act as though X is the case. Ultimately incapable of living up to its idealistic conception, the small town is an "Other not supposed to know," that is, the Other not supposed to know that he, or it (Shinbone) in this case, is dead or incompetent. In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek explains the cultural significance of striking this balance:

One of the most elementary cultural skills is to know when (and how) to pretend *not* to know (or notice), how to go on and act as if something which has happened did not happen ... When parents with a young child have blazing arguments or illicit affairs, as a rule (assuming they wish to retain a minimum of decency) they try to prevent the child from noticing, well aware that such knowledge could have a devastating effect on him. (Of course, in many cases, the child knows very well, and merely pretends not to notice anything wrong, aware that in this way his parents' life is made a little bit easier). (133)

In both of these cases, either with the parents who attempt to spare the child or vice versa, the accomplishment of the elaborate performance is maintained for the "big Other," who demarcates a point of socio-symbolic stability that notes the smooth functioning of meaning and social exchange – the other stands in for the very possibility of meaning. Consequently, the big Other must be spared certain knowledge which would be devastating for appearances; as I indicated in the previous chapter appearances are more than superficial, they have a dramatic impact upon the composition of reality. Herein we can understand why Scott refuses to run Ransom's story and why the small town, despite

the urban orientation of the country and the bad copy of the suburb, can never be allowed to be aware of its death. Both Ranse's "true" story and the small town, even though they are imaginary, ideological constructions, are absolutely essential to their respective socio-historical narratives. Even if the suburb is a bad copy of the small town, even if the United States is primarily an urban nation in terms of population density, the perpetual re-emergence of the nostalgic longing for the small town as the original home indicates a symbolic debt that refuses full payment. The small town is for America what the identity of "the man who shot Liberty Valance" is for Ranse, a mythic identity, which can never be forsaken or fully embodied. Be it idealistic, like Levitt's vision for his suburb, or unsettling, like the nightmarish, rural world that Preacher Powell creates in *The Night of the Hunter*, the legend of the small town has outstripped its "true" historical narrative (if such a thing could be compiled), and it is the legend that continues to be invoked as the setting for films, novels, and political speeches.

### **Conclusion: Dutiful Monsters and Hard-Working Addicts**

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a story about origins, the origins of myth, and the ways in which myth, particularly the American myth of westward expansion, intermingles with history to create an ideological narrative that ultimately trumps historical fact. It would seem to be no coincidence that the film is set in a small town, insofar as the small town could serve as a case study for Ford's broader observation regarding the importance of legend in the composition of history. In many ways the historical narrative of the small town resembles that of Ransom Stoddard, which is a story run through with idealism, hidden violent origins, and endless guilt. Following rapid technological developments (telephone, cash register, transportation) and a certain architectural homogeneity in the late 1800s, the small town's iconic Main Street settles into a norm still recognizable today. As Richard Francaviglia claims, Main Street architecture in the late 1800s "reflect[s] a standardization that became a fact of life in the American small town in the latter half of the nineteenth century" (35). For Francaviglia, this is the moment Main Street crystallizes into a common image. While certain regional specificity emerges in varying forms, ultimately, Main Street becomes a portable, ideological Main Street that will come to serve as the source of inspiration for nostalgic recollections in television, film, and Disney theme parks. Ultimately, despite dramatic historical change whirling around small towns throughout the twentieth century, Francaviglia claims, "they seem to be havens *from* change" (131).

Francaviglia's "seem" in the previous quotation indicates the power of appearances both within the small town, and those of the small town in a broader ideological context. Within the small town, like its offspring "the suburb," appearances

are essential to the composition and understanding of reality. One's ability to put into practice the unwritten codes of social norms is part of integrating into a small community; deviating from those norms is met with harsh recrimination. Along with the importance of appearances within the community is the importance of the small town's appearance in the broader socio-political context. As a repository for certain commonly held, American values, the small town's narrative appearance is essential to its significance as an ideological object. The small town's importance to westward expansion, like Shinbone in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and the myth of self-reliant, rugged individualism that comes with that expansion cannot be understated. Examining the roots of America's virtue of "self-reliance" Stephanie Coontz debunks the myth of the tough, self-sufficient pioneer family that settled the west on only the sweat of their collective brow and persistence:

prairie farmers and other pioneer families owed their existence to massive federal land grants, government-funded military mobilizations that dispossessed hundreds of Native American societies and confiscated half of Mexico, and state-sponsored economic investment in the new lands. Even 'volunteers' expected federal pay: Much of the West's historic 'antigovernment' sentiment originated in discontent when settlers did not get such pay or were refused government aid for unauthorized raids on Native American territory. It would be hard to find a Western family today or at any time in the past whose land rights, transportation options, economic existence, and even access to water were not dependent on federal funds. (74)

Coontz notes that our conception of the mythic, self-reliant pioneer is as much a creation of revisionist history of culture like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series, edited by her politically conservative daughter in the 1930s, than it is historical fact (73). Not unlike the legend of Ransie Stoddard, the myth of the rugged individual frontiersperson, an indispensable component of American myth, is a story not born out by facts. Instead, this mythic frontiersperson is part of a fictional appearance that becomes

reality through repetition. A similar process of selective memory and editing takes place in the preservation of Main Street, particularly when considering the impact that Disney's "Main Street U.S.A" had upon the country at large. As Francaviglia claims, "many Americans returned from Disneyland to their home towns and learned to see them anew. Disney packaged Main Street as a commercial environment that was patently "historical" and aesthetic, and helped pave the way for later efforts to revitalize Main Street" (178). The quotation marks around historical are indicative of the authorial license Disney took in recreating Main Street from an admixture of history and fantasmic nostalgia. Like Wilder's daughter, whose revisions came to have an impact on the belief in the self-reliance of pioneers, Disney's Main Street U.S.A had a profound impact sedimenting the idealistic appearance of the small town – one might argue that this nostalgic recreation underpinned the association between the small town and certain idealistic virtues ascribed to those places.

Instead of a specific material place, the small town, becomes a "repository[y] of memory," which is subject to the whims and nostalgic revisionism of those recalling them (Francaviglia 130). Main street, the title of Sinclair Lewis' cynical depiction of the small town, has not always conjured positive, nurturing conceptions of home. The idea of Main Street and its small town is plagued by the ambivalence of home as a place of both comfort and confinement. More conceptual than material, the small town is the ideological clay for those who seek to mold it into an icon and mobilize its imaginary force. When it needs to be nostalgic, the small town can be the home we never actually had in the first place but think of as the home we have already lost. When it needs to teach us tougher moral lessons, the small town becomes a backward place, where darker



impulses play out against the relief of bucolic perfection. *The Grapes of Wrath*, the small town films of Frank Capra, and those of David Lynch nostalgically recall the small town in all its domestic idealism. In Lynch's case with films like *Blue Velvet* and the television series *Twin Peaks*, the small town's domestic idealism is subjected to a critique by the harsher, more disturbing criminal world lurking barely beneath its romantic veneer. Slasher horror films of the 1970s and 1980s mobilize this nostalgia to explore more brutal lessons in repression and morality, finding historical intersections with the emergence of methamphetamine manufacturing and use in the rural United States.

### **Don't Open that Door**

Before delving more specifically into the relationship between methamphetamines, the slasher horror film, and the changing ideological position of the small town in America, it will be necessary to distinguish the psychoanalytic conception of desire from drive. Both the slasher horror film villain and meth addict are figures of drive that emerge as darker manifestations of small-town fantasy. Through a close identification with the small town's idealism, the tweaker and the monster become disturbing realizations of fantasy's disciplining function. These two figures are the monstrous culmination of fantasy that moves from desire to drive. As developed in the earlier chapters, desire is predicated on a more "normal" orientation towards enjoyment (*jouissance*), which is appropriately mediated and situated by fantasy. Drive designates, as Žižek claims, "the domain of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture" (*TPF* 30). Unlike desire, drive has an unmediated connection to *jouissance* insofar as it does not require the rationale of fantasy

to explain its endless circulation. Whereas desire requires an object to pique its interest, drive simply enjoys the perpetual circulation around the empty void where desire locates its object; desire's chief function is to suture this void with the sublimated object. Drive is the motor propelling desire's fixation upon a particular object. Needing the circulation of drive but unable to sustain its unmediated *jouissance*, desire must somehow disperse its fixation from the void to some object or series of objects that serve as a surrogate for the lost "Thing" the void demarcates. Desire needs drive, but drive does not need desire. In other words, desire is the necessary distortion of drive that allows for the appropriate mediation of dangerous enjoyment; drive's relationship to *jouissance* is too direct, too unsettling to be integrated into the meaningful realm of reality. Fantasy, through its elaborate and clever narrativizing, becomes, as Žižek claims, "the very screen that separates desire from drive: it tells the story which allows the subject to (mis)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire" (*TPF* 32). As long as drive is entangled in the symbolic web of fantasy, the subject is desire-centered, substituting objects that emerge in the gaps in his/her socio-symbolic order that threaten the stability of meaning.

Ultimately, desire allows us to misperceive the source of our enjoyment; to misperceive where our *jouissance* really lies within our socio-symbolic network. If drive is the motor of desire, *jouissance* is the fuel that fires that motor. In *The Plague of Fantasies* Slavoj Žižek claims that *jouissance* "concerns the very fundamentals of what one is tempted to call psychoanalytic ontology" (48). According to this psychoanalytic ontology, being at its very core is grounded in a traumatic negativity that refuses to be reduced to the workings of the socio-symbolic order and its support in fantasy.

*Jouissance* is the source of this traumatic kernel, which is simultaneously indispensable and horrifying. As Žižek illustrates apropos of Lacan, “he [Lacan] links existence ... to *jouissance* as that which is properly traumatic – that is, whose existence can never be fully assumed, and which is thus forever perceived as spectral, pre-ontological” (TPF 48). It is important to indicate that the *jouissance* Žižek is describing above is one that is “uncut,” to borrow a drug term, from fantasy; that is, it is *jouissance* in its pure state. Despite its traumatic impact, which is mediated by fantasy, *jouissance* is indispensable to being:

*Jouissance* is thus the ontological aberration, the disturbed balance (*clinamen*, to use the old philosophical term) which accounts for the passage from Nothing to Something; it designates the minimal *contraction* (in Schelling’s sense of the term) which provides the density of the subject’s reality. Someone can be happily married, with a good job and many friends, fully satisfied with his life, and yet absolutely hooked on some specific formation (‘sinthom’) of *jouissance*, ready to put everything at risk rather than renounce *that* (drugs, tobacco, drink, a particular sexual perversion ...). (Žižek 49)

*Jouissance* is the necessary quotient of enjoyment injected into the socio-symbolic order to shift it from a stale, aseptic, meaningless formula to a comprehensible realm in which the subject can locate his identity. Enjoyment is a complicated term in this scenario, insofar as *jouissance* does not come without a modicum of pain. More precisely, this pain makes *jouissance* the “surplus” of enjoyment that simultaneously sets it apart from one’s “good life” and allows one to engage with that “good life.” Indeed, the pain emerges precisely *from the discrepancy* between the ontological balance of one’s life and the “aberration,” which runs counter to that existence yet is indispensable; the fact that they are antithetical is what simultaneously generates the pleasure in pain. A friend of mine who was virtually on his death bed with an indeterminate disease (the scenario was very much like a formulaic episode of *House*) told me after he had recovered that while

he had been in the hospital he snuck out to acquire a can of chewing tobacco. This surreptitious journey for “Skoal” is the pull of *jouissance*. Despite the fear of imminent death, the fear of living without his “sinthom” of enjoyment was greater. Life was not life, not one worth continuing, without his “dip.”

If *jouissance* is the essential enjoyment that allows the broader social network to keep spinning the turbines, then it must do so in a mediated form. The flow of *jouissance* has to be appropriately conditioned since it ultimately is an indecipherable, ontological aberration; direct confrontation with our *jouissance* in its immediacy is a traumatic encounter, insofar as we lack the means of conditioning or appropriately situating it. Fantasy is the means of taming *jouissance*. Installing a screen between desire, as the socially acceptable formula for *jouissance*, and drive, the strange, unsettling repetition that undermines the meaning-making flow of the socio-symbolic network, fantasy provides some meaningful co-ordinates for the otherwise indeterminate and traumatic *jouissance*. The “*objet petit a*” becomes the site of “*jouissance* rationing.” As Žižek claims,

It is the famous Lacanian *objet petit a* that mediates between the incompatible domains of desire and *jouissance* ... The *objet petit a* is not what we desire, what we are after, but, rather, that which sets our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire: desire is, of course metonymical; it shifts from one object to another; through all these displacements, however, desire none the less retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object. (TPF 39)

Fantasy, then, designates a “specific formula which regulates his or her access to *jouissance*” (Žižek TPF 39). Unmediated access to *jouissance*, an existence that would be grounded more in the experience of drive than desire, would be traumatic and

desubjectivizing for the subject.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging our enjoyment outside the bounds of fantasy is the endgame for the analytical process, which amounts to the beginning of a reconstitution of subjectivity. Fantasy filters *jouissance* by providing a certain narrative that centers upon the *objet petit a*, which is nothing but a cluster of “fantasmic features” that form the circuit through which *jouissance* is channeled. Given the traumatic potentiality of surplus pleasure and its stubborn persistence, the narrative constitutive of one’s fantasy is not a simple, linear story. Quite the contrary, fantasy is a complex, multivalent narrative system that splits off in numerous different directions, slamming into short circuits of *jouissance* that erupt into reality despite the elaborate channels composed by the socio-symbolic network and fantasy meant to contain it. Consequently, fantasy is an elaborate narrative machine constantly adjusting to these ruptures, spinning out new narratives, re-routing the energy of *jouissance* where it gets trapped in the repetitive cycle of drive. According to need and proximity to *jouissance* fantasy can be ideal or obscene, as well as repressive or permissive.

Drive, due to its unmediated relationship with *jouissance*, proves to be dangerous for the socio-symbolic order; it is disinterested in the socio-cultural conditioning that comes with calculating self-interest according to what is normal. While the standard reading of psychoanalytic fantasy is that it functions as a kind of symbolic closure

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<sup>1</sup> The feature on account of which I desire the object designates the point where *jouissance* touches or stains the object. It is this minute detail, the surplus above and beyond what the object is in and of itself, that simultaneously attracts us and displaces some unrecognizable feature of our enjoyment; this is why Lacan calls this feature “ex-timate” it is that which is in me that is not me. Addressing a particularly objectionable advertisement for sun tanning lotion, which addresses our “factor” (what sets into motion our enjoyment), Žižek claims, “There is nothing uplifting about this our awareness of this ‘factor’” such awareness can never be subjectivized; it is uncanny – even horrifying – since it somehow ‘depossesses’ the subject, reducing her or him to a puppet-like level ‘beyond the dignity of freedom’ (TPF 8). While fantasy works to conceal the compulsory nature of this “factor,” our enjoyment, as Žižek claims, is not well-within our control.

answering the questions emerging from the ontological cracks in reality, this reading misses the fact that these cracks are generated precisely by fantasy in order to offer itself as an answer. In other words, the cracks are far from threatening ruptures for reality, but, instead, perpetually generate the narrative of fantasy maintaining a (false) opening for which fantasy has an endless supply of objects to function as (false) sutures.<sup>2</sup> Fantasy is akin to the mother who keeps her child perpetually sick in order to offer herself as the ultimate caretaker or remedy. Drawing upon the Nietzschean concept of the “eternal return of the same,” Žižek claims,

The unbearable aspect of the ‘eternal return of the same’ – the Nietzschean name for the crucial dimension of *drive* – is the radical *closure* this notion implies: to endorse and fully assume the ‘eternal return of the same’ means that we renounce every opening, every belief in the messianic Otherness ... The point is thus to oppose the radical closure of the ‘eternal’ drive to the opening involved in the finitude/temporality of the desiring subject. (*TPF* 31)

Within the co-ordinates of reality delineated by the cooperative work of fantasy and the symbolic order, the desiring subject, spurred on by the false belief in the lost Thing (the Messianic Otherness), becomes subject of that order by elevating objects in its place. This process of substitution underpins one’s social order through its cyclical nature. When an object no longer proves sufficient, it is scrapped for a new object with fantasy always mediating the process of selection. To return to the “Munchhausen” analogy, in accepting the endless supply of remedies we consistently fail to acknowledge the origins of our sickness.

Drive, on the other hand, passes beyond the “sick games” of fantasy in its apathy for the subject’s pathological, “best” interest. Drive is, as Žižek claims, “death drive as

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am borrowing from a series of rhetorical questions Žižek poses regarding fantasy’s ultimate role in relation to the “abyss of the Other’s desire,” “What if it is fantasy itself which, in so far as it fills in the void of the Other’s desire, sustains the (false) opening – the notion that there is some radical Otherness which makes our universe incomplete?” (*TPF* 31).

such,” insofar as it operates in a closed loop, opposing itself to the rationale of fantasy and to the normal order of things (*TPF* 31). Refusing the existent means of meaning-making, drive proves to be ultimately inexplicable according to common sense rationality (*TPF* 31). As Žižek claims, drive “stands for an unconditional impetus which disregards the proper needs of the living body and simply battens on it” (*TPF* 31). Drive is not self-interested in the way that desire is. On the contrary, drive threatens to undermine the subject’s place within his socio-symbolic order, which is precisely why the “clinamen,” his little piece of *jouissance*, threatens his ontological stability. When the subject passes over the threshold between desire and drive, what Lacan calls “traversing the fantasy,” he becomes “desubjectivized.” In other words, the subject of drive is no subject at all, at least not in the individualized sense that we might think of a normal subject playing out his role in the world. The “traversing” subject is not a desiring subject, desperately attempting to live up to the cluster of symbolic mandates that are condensed into an identity/subjectivity. Instead, the being of drive is one that no longer requires the fantasmatic underpinnings of his socio-symbolic identity, and, moreover, against all his pathological interests, follows the endless loop of drive that is disinterested in the world.

This foray into psychoanalysis provides a frame to examine the extreme psychological positions of the meth addict and the slasher horror film monster. These figures are more contemporary manifestations of small-town life that signify a darker twist in the small town’s association with virtue. While meth has only become a more prominent story in the last ten years, the socio-economic origins of the meth epidemic in rural America overlap with the rise in popularity of the slasher horror film. If Capra’s films in the 1940s and the development of suburbs of the 1950s are key expressions of

small-town idealism, then meth and the slasher horror film present this idealism taken to an extreme level. What will be critical for my reading of the small town story in the latter half of the century is to understand that the “tweaker” and the monster are not simply manifestations of evil or corruption in the small town: they, unlike Franz Kindler, are not hiding beneath a thin veneer of fantasy. Quite the contrary; the addict and the monster are the embodiment of idealism taken to its absolute limit. Both figures represent the virtues of the small town taken thoroughly seriously. The burned-out “tweaker” and the slasher super villain are characters defined by drive, who reveal an unspoken and unsettling *jouissance* that is at the core of the small-town fantasy. In this respect, Harry Powell is their predecessor, which is perhaps another reason *The Night of the Hunter* did not get its due as a film until the 1970s and 1980s; it was too traumatic for its moment. Before moving closer to reality with the relationship between meth and the small town as an ideological object, we might usefully examine how this relationship is pre-figured in the emergence and popularity of slasher horror films in the 1970s and 1980s.

Most of the popular and lucrative slasher films of the 70s and 80s were set in small towns, rural areas, or suburbs, trading on their seemingly idealistic veneer as a setting for unspeakable and unexpected horror. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* were the four most significant series to emerge from this era, each set in small towns or suburbs and each spinning off numerous, generic sequels with their particular monster returning from the dead to wreak havoc yet again. Small town ideals of sexual innocence, hospitality, and domestic harmony are transformed in the slasher film into distorted, darker versions of



these original virtues, and are located in the monster. If there is a certain amount of repression necessary in the small town to sustain the ideal image of godliness, cleanliness, and innocence, then the force of that repression takes on a monstrous face in the slasher film. This monstrous repression may be a reflection of these films primary audience: the adolescent male. The combination of sex, violence, and punishment in the slasher film reflects, albeit it in a distorted and exaggerated fashion, the world of the teenage boy. More specifically, the villains, typically deformed and socially inept, become the vengeance of the socially awkward and outcast on the attractive, popular (and sexually active) “cool kids.” While similar in their indestructibility, each of the villains addresses a different problem in the small town, and, consequently responds to and perhaps critiques a different ideal. Before delving more specifically in the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series, I would like to provide a brief overview of these four major slasher series and their particular villains.

- Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series (three sequels and two remakes) comes from a family of unemployed slaughterhouse workers. Put out of business by more humane technological innovations, the family is a degraded, backwards manifestation of tradition and heritage. They represent a corruption latent in holding onto a traditional way of life after the normal world has moved on. If tradition and “the good old days” are a major part of small-town idealism, then *TCM* illustrates the perversion of convention and calls into question how good the “old days” really were. The all-male family, speaking to an overt patriarchy and male violence at the core of the slasher

film,<sup>3</sup> is rendered impotent by this change in industry where physicality and stoic brutality were important values to cultivate. The brutal sledgehammer is privileged by the family over the humane air gun in the practice of slaughtering cattle. Unable to adapt, the family become cannibals, slaughtering and eating their victims. The father, who in later installments will lament the plight of the “working-man,” opens a gas station and “BBQ” stand in their desolate, rural Texas landscape selling human meat to his unsuspecting customers. Leatherface, who like numerous other super villains does not talk, is the family butcher, and seems to be the tireless physical laborer in the films. Hard work, so closely associated with farmers and blue collar laborers of the small town, becomes corrupted by being inappropriately channeled into a perverse tradition of patriarchal violence.

- Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series (six sequels, one spinoff, and one remake) is the clownish super villain, who takes sadistic pleasure in occupying the dreams of his victims and torturing them to death. Set in what is either a small town or suburb, the *Nightmare* series follows a pattern of trauma and resurrection that is a common narrative structure for the slasher film. Fred Krueger was a custodian in an elementary

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<sup>3</sup> Citing interest in the slasher genre from feminist thinkers, Tony Magistrale in *Abject Terrors* addresses the overt misogyny in these films: “Many argue that despite its reductive plotline and the superhuman ability of the killer to survive somehow in order to be reborn in the invariable sequels, the slasher film has much to say to us about the proliferation of male aggression in postmodern society and the emerging survival skills of postfeminist women” (148). Each super villain is sexually impotent, or, at least, appears to sublimate his sexual interest into violence. As Magistrale points out, their weapons become surrogate phalluses, mirroring the Lacanian phallus insofar as they are objects that demarcate power, as well as being objects that penetrate. The choice between the bodily phallus, which designates union, and the surrogate one, which is a destructive object of power, is literalized in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* when the family father forces Leatherface to choose between a woman to whom he is attracted and his responsibility to the all-male family, “What’s it gonna be, Leather? Sex or the saw?”

school, who molested and murdered children. When the legal system fails to punish him appropriately, the parents of the victims, mostly residents of “Elm Street,” capture and kill Krueger by tossing him into a furnace in the basement of the local schoolhouse. Freddy returns with a vengeance, taking it out on the children of Elm Street, who pay for the sins of their parents. Unable to be fully resurrected like his horror film cohorts, Freddy lives in the unconscious of his victims emerging only in their dreams: in order to be killed he has to be pulled by the dreamers into the “real world” and dispatched. Like the Lacanian Real, which is evident only in its effects on the organization of reality, Freddy can only kill his victims in their dreams. Still, when Freddy sadistically slaughters the teenagers in their dreams, their deaths are real within the narrative. Not only do the films speak to the impotence of the small town or suburban legal system, emphasized by the lead character’s father who is the chief of police, they illustrate the dark side of sustaining the nice, hospitable community at all cost. While Freddy is indeed a pedophile and killer, the nice parents of Elm Street become vigilantes to protect their children, their town succumbing to “mob justice” like Icey and Walt Spoon. Freddy’s burned face bears the marks of this justice, which is horrific even if it is justified within the narrative by Freddy’s equally horrific crimes. Community, an important rallying point for the small town, becomes the source of unspeakable evil.

- Michael Myers of the *Halloween* series (5 sequels and 2 remakes) is the product of a dysfunctional, small-town family<sup>4</sup>. As a child he murders his teenage sister and is committed to an asylum. Like Leatherface before him and Jason Vorhees, Myers is an inarticulate villain, who, after being committed, refuses to speak. As an adult, Myers escapes from his mental hospital to return to his small town, Haddonfield, Illinois. What precisely draws Myers back to Haddonfield is not initially clear, but he begins stalking teenager Laurie Strode (Jaime Lee Curtiss). Later in the series we will learn that Laurie, who has been adopted by the local chief of police, is Myers sister; she was an infant when Myers was sent to the asylum. Punishing local teenage girls for their sexual indiscretions, Myers, like both Freddy and Leatherface, sublimates his sexuality, substituting violence against women for sex. *Halloween* (1978) follows a common trend in the slasher film in punishing sexually transgressive teenagers, who often neglect their babysitting responsibilities for enjoyment. Not unlike Leatherface, Myers is a product of familial disturbance, and it is unclear until the end of the film if he is stalking his sister to murder her or to reunite with her. If family is an integral part of

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<sup>4</sup> My understanding of Myers is culled from both the original film directed by John Carpenter in 1978 and from Rob Zombie's remake in 2007. What is particularly interesting about Zombie's remake is the way he fills in the gaps left by Carpenter between Myers incarceration at a young age up until the point at which he escapes. Zombie also provides a more detailed view of Myers' family, which is one that is corrupted by an alcoholic, lecherous stepfather. Unlike Carpenter, who provides seemingly little motivation for Myers' murderous insanity, Zombie establishes motivation, which takes us somewhat outside the realm of drive. In the remake, Myers is "psychologized" by Zombie, who transforms the hollow shell of Myers into a mentally tortured little boy that grows into a monster. Consequently, the adult Myers in Zombie's film is more of an obsessional neurotic, taking back the idealistic childhood that was deprived of him by his familial situation, than a being of drive bent on destruction for the pure repetitive enjoyment of the act.

community in the ideal conception of the small town, it becomes something more unsettling and unsafe in the slasher film.

- Jason Vorhees of the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series (eight sequels, two spinoffs, and one remake), like both Leatherface and Michael Myers, is inarticulate and, like both, wears a mask to cover his face; like the others, he is physically deformed. Predating the *Nightmare* series and the sequels to both *TCM* and *Halloween*, Jason is the first of these villains to demonstrate supernatural qualities. While both *Halloween* and *TCM* will in the years following the original *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) bring their villains back from the dead, Jason is the first to transcend death, which he does at the end of the first film. Like Freddy and Myers, Jason is the product of a traumatic event. Jason drowned at “Camp Crystal Lake” while negligent counselors were off indulging in pre-marital sex. While in the first film it is Jason’s mother who takes revenge on the camp’s staff (a different one, but rife with the same iniquities), Jason returns in all the sequels<sup>5</sup> to do his own dirty work of punishment – he is always dispatched at the end, and he always comes back for more revenge. More so than both *Halloween* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series is about the corrupted innocence of the small town or rural area. Although the camp setting moves outside the small town to a more rural setting, the close proximity of the town of Crystal Lake and the association between rurality and the small town (both signify isolation) makes *Friday the*

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<sup>5</sup> *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> V* does deviate from the supernatural elements by presenting a “copy cat” killer, who follows Jason’s killer, Tommy Jarvis (John Shepherd), to a home for troubled youth; Tommy deviates from the “final girl” trope in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part IV*. The supernatural angle is substituted by a more psychological one that is ultimately forsaken in the sixth installment, which returns to the supernatural approach.

13<sup>th</sup> a representation that trades on rural values. Upholding a generic trope that proves to be consistent in the slasher film, Jason is bested in the end by the “Final Girl,”<sup>6</sup> who, unlike her indulgent counterparts, refuses to succumb to sexual desire. If each of these slasher films is in some way about the corrupted promise of the ideal small town, then *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* most specifically links that corruption to sexual indiscretion and general moral degeneration. Jason, like his villainous cohorts, is a murderous manifestation of repression, not so much deviating from small town ideals as taking them to their gruesome limit. He is a stalking embodiment of the superego.

What distinguishes Jason from the other characters is that Jason harkens back to an innocence that is lost as a result of sexual knowledge. Jason’s death as a child is caused by the corrupting pull of *jouissance*; that is, the fall of the ideal small town is simultaneously the generation of its obscene counterpart, the monster. Unlike Freddy, Leatherface, and Myers, Jason is not somehow inherently corrupt; even as a child Myers is a killer. To put this in terms of the small town, the child Jason is the idealized innocence associated with the rural area, which can only be protected through repression of enjoyment that derails one from doing his duty. All of the other killers are corrupted or corrupting forces that are antithetical to the otherwise peaceful areas that they invade. Elm Street and Haddonfield are ideal small towns that are terrorized by the villain, who is

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<sup>6</sup> Citing other critics work on the slasher genre, Magistrale argues (*vis-à-vis* Carol Clover): Her [Clover’s] insistence that the audience’s alliances shift when the Final Girl demonstrates her ability to incorporate gendered masculine survivalist skills would appear to contradict Crane’s view that the splatter film parallels the nihilism of young people depressed by their own helplessness in the face of an uncertain future. Clover views the genre much more optimistically, almost as a fairy-tale paradigm, where survival – even if it is only one girl at the end of the picture – is emphasized as a potent counter to the chaos of a killer’s madness. (151)

an aberration (Freddy the pedophile and Myers the psychotic) to an otherwise stable order. While teenage sexuality is undoubtedly punished in the other two series, it is not the root cause of the villain's existence as it is in *Friday the 13th*. In the figure of Jason Vorhees, the ideal and the obscene fantasy intersect, insofar as, Jason illustrates that the repression inherent in sustaining the ideal generates its obscene counterpart. As Žižek claims,

the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed point of reference (are not the images of the ultimate horrible Thing, from the gigantic deep-sea squid to the ravaging twister phantasmic creations *par excellence*?).' (TPF 7).

Jason Vorhees, insofar as he is a supernatural force that refuses death, is a creation of fantasy born out of the type of repression that sustains the idealism the small town.

However, what exactly he represents is much more nefarious and unsettling than the sexuality he is seemingly sent to punish. As a kind of eternal return of the same, Jason embodies drive.<sup>7</sup> Like a true figure of drive, Jason is de-subjectivized. His hockey mask, which functions as a blank face devoid of individualizing features, and his inability or refusal to speak, signal Jason's lack of subjectivity; he is like a cyborg set to find and kill

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<sup>7</sup> Jason's "eternality" is emphasized across the series through the discrepancy that emerges between his drive to punish and his corporeality. In the latter sequels, starting with part six, Jason's body, like that of a zombie, increasingly decays, and his standard uniform, mechanic's overalls and his hockey mask, begin to fuse with his skin. While this physical degeneration contributes to the horror of his appearance, it would seem to hinder his "work." Quite the contrary, as Jason becomes less human in appearance, he adopts increasingly supernatural traits. In part six he is impervious to gunfire. In part seven he does battle with another ghost conjured by the "Final Girl's" psychic powers. In part eight, after being drowned in a Manhattan sewer, his body transforms back into the original child that drowned in Crystal Lake at summer camp. These supernatural qualities indicate the eternal quality of drive that refuses the death of signification, but instead, keeps turning in its endless repetition around some void. In the final installment of the original series, *Jason Goes to Hell*, drive is made manifest by the heart of Jason, which beats after his "final" bodily death. The heart compels whoever holds it to ingest it, and, consequently, the drive towards murder that lurked in Jason's hulking body transfers to the bearer of his blackened heart. Here, finally, Jason transcends his corporeality to become nothing but drive – the eternally beating heart that refuses to quit.

sexually active teenagers without deviating from that simple program.<sup>8</sup> The strange intersection between fantasy and drive lies in the figure of the monster. From the perspective situated in the meaningful, ontological stable perimeter of reality, Jason appears to be a kind of unreal bogeyman, culled from our worst possible nightmares. However, in and of himself, Jason is a manifestation of drive, stripped of all subjectivity and compelled to repeat the same patterns through innumerable sequels. Revenge, a response that is predicated upon a certain rational balance associated with the socio-symbolic network (a squaring of accounts), is no longer what motivates Jason; his mother more or less takes care of revenge in the first film. The repetition of the same actions, the same killings for the same reasons, moves beyond the rationale of revenge, and into the irrational, destructive loop of drive. At the outskirts of reality, in the horror film where the ideal setting that seems all too normal is transformed into a nightmare world, the figure of drive that is removed from the constraints of the socio-symbolic network is a fantasy creation that contains too much (R)eality to confront fully. Unlike a “normal” citizen of the small town, Jason is not concerned with how his actions appear and how they situate him within some social hierarchy. He is only concerned with doing his duty, which is purifying Crystal Lake through punishment.

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<sup>8</sup> *Jason X*, a hybrid horror science fiction film set in the distance future when a group of military scientists seek to regenerate a cryogenically frozen Jason, plays with Jason’s predictability and, hence, drive’s predictability. Attempting to distract the killer, who has run amok on their spaceship lab, the remaining crew design a holographic program to keep Jason occupied. The scene is a generic copy of the earlier series, with two young women preparing to engage in sexual activity. Jason emerges in the virtual scene and furiously attempts to kill the two women. However, the computer program is designed to keep him entangled, and, consequently, the two virtual camp counselors are incapable of dying. In this scene we encounter the difference being perverse desire and drive. For the Sadean pervert, this particular scenario would be ideal; that is, it provides the parameters for endless punishment without the finality and ultimate disappointment of an end (death in this case). In the case of drive, death is absolutely necessary insofar as it designates the completion and, thus, the re-boot of the program. The pervert seeks to endlessly delay the final moment (orgasm, death, etc.), preferring the approach to the end. Drive needs the end because the end is just the completion of a loop that starts over all again.



If Jason is a machine of drive, unaware, disinterested, or incapable of understanding and articulating his behavior, for us he is a symptom of repression. Just because Jason does not need to understand his actions does not mean that we cannot locate some significance in his murderous drive. He is not merely a monstrous presence unleashed upon purely innocent, unsuspecting victims without reason even if that reason is not necessarily his own. As Tony Magistrale claims in his work *Object Terrors*,

Even more than *Chainsaw* or *Halloween*, *Friday* features teenagers reveling in so much illicit play – smoking pot, drinking beer, pretending to drown for a lark, wearing as few clothes as possible, participating in sexual intercourse, and an attractive young woman hitchhiking alone on strange roads – that Jason’s rampage cannot be separated from their transgressive behavior. His violent retribution, in other words, is stimulated by their stupid and self-indulgent actions. (162)

In Magistrale’s view, Jason is a machine of repression, he is the manifestation of ideal fantasy of small town morality carried to its most gruesome and literal realization. We see a more comedic version of this in the British Comedy *Hot Fuzz*, where the “pillars” of the idyllic English village kill off fellow citizens whose bad taste threaten the maintenance of its bucolic perfection – from murdering an actress who mangles Shakespeare in the local playhouse to slaughtering a gardener who threatens to take her indispensable horticultural skills to another village. All in the name of “the greater good,” the village officials commit a number of gruesome murders. It is not simply, then, that through repression we generate an excess of the very thing we sought to repress in the first place; this is Foucault’s point in his volumes on *The History of Sexuality* and one that psychoanalysis already accounts for in its theory of repression. For example, the repression of sexuality in the small town does not simply generate “the Real” of sexual activity indulged in by the teenager counselors at Camp Crystal Lake – the unwritten

rules that make up one layer of fantasy allow for this type of transgression, even if it must remain unspoken and unacknowledged.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, the “Real” is not to be located in the rampant, “transgressive” sexuality that is repressed, but, instead, the Real emerges in the figure of Jason, whose transgression lies in the direct indulgence in *jouissance* of the very act of repression itself. As Magistrale’s language indicates, particularly the use of “stupid” and “self-indulgent,” the teenagers whom Jason punishes seem to “have it coming to them” for not being able to contain themselves appropriately. These teenagers, who “steal” the enjoyment forsaken in order to fit into the normal order of things, give the audience the occasion to exercise (exorcising) their pleasure in the law’s administration. Consequently, Jason is not a murdering degenerate. Instead, he is the “square teenager’s” revenge on the “cool kids,” who get to break all the rules and are often more popular for doing so; he is the renegade hall monitor who takes his job a little too seriously.

Consequently, what Jason reveals about fantasy and its relationship to the law is much more unsettling and horrific than the eruption of rampant teenage sexuality and indulgence. Žižek explains this dangerous, unspoken pleasure in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

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<sup>9</sup> Fantasy, at its implicit level, serves as a means of interpreting the explicit law. A modicum of transgression is built into rational, legal order, which ultimately generates both the pleasure of transgression and the necessity of the law in the first place – there is a dynamic, mutually interdependent relationship between law and its transgression, be it verbalized norms or explicit, juridical law. Fantasy serves to negotiate how we can transgress and still fit into functioning society. As Žižek claims:

Fantasy designates precisely this unwritten framework which tells us how we are to understand the letter of the Law. And it is easy to observe how today, in our enlightened era of universal rights, racism and sexism reproduce themselves mainly at the level of the phantasmic unwritten rules which sustain and qualify universal ideological proclamations. The lesson of that is that – sometimes, at least – the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit letter of the Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to *stick to the letter against the fantasy which sustains it*. (TPF 29)

It is not enough to assert, in a Foucauldian way, that power is inextricably linked to counter-power, generating it and being itself conditioned by it: in a self-reflective way, the split is always-already mirrored back into the power edifice itself, splitting it from within, so that the gesture of self-censorship is consubstantial with the exercise of power. Furthermore, it is not enough to say that the 'repression' of some libidinal content retroactively eroticizes the very gesture of 'repression' – the 'eroticization' or power is not a secondary effect of its exertion on its object but its very disavowed foundation, its 'constitutive crime', its founding gesture which has to remain invisible if power is to function normally. (27)

The prohibition that is the source of repression does not just generate the pleasure of its transgression; the split of law and its transgression is not the only libidinalized relationship of power. Law and its transgression is the simple relationship between the subject and *jouissance*, one that is easily mediated by the narrativizing function of fantasy; it is a mutually interdependent relationship between the two poles that keeps *jouissance* flowing in a safe, mediated form. What this normal "transgressive" relationship of power conceals is a deeper-seeded split already within power or in the law itself, which introduces a more fundamental and unsettling enjoyment. This unsettling enjoyment is the very pleasure that emerges *from the act of repression itself*. Not simply a by-product of repression, something we realize after the fact, *jouissance* is something that belongs from the beginning to repression in and of itself. Countering Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil argument" regarding Nazi death camp guards, Žižek explains this unsettling pleasure that emerges behind the curtain of the law or duty: "the only acceptable notion is that even if the actual gesture of compliance was very modest, we are dealing with 'surplus-obedience' the moment the gesture of compliance provides the subject with a *jouissance* of its own" (TPF 55). The Law, the "neutral" forces of socio-symbolic organization, is not stripped of *jouissance* in its administration and mediation of enjoyment. Quite the contrary, the law is always, already "eroticized," to borrow Žižek's

terms, by its implementation, which is grounded in the original act of violence that must be forsaken explicitly to sustain its objective distance. Ultimately, in the repression of pleasure emerges the pleasure of repression itself; this is the law's obscene supplement, its dirty secret enjoyment that keeps the boilers heated.

Consequently, Jason is not a psychologically twisted serial killer, whose murderous impulses can be tied to some mental illness like Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) or Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Instead, Jason is the “desubjectivized” manifestation of the unsettling enjoyment in repression that lurks beneath the benign face of the law. His utter lack of subjectivity or individualizing features illustrates his direct engagement with this *jouissance* in the law itself. Magistrale touches on this pleasure in punishment when he claims, “according to the logic of the juxtaposition that *Friday* makes between the teenagers’ conduct and Jason’ compulsive urge to punish – particularly their acts of sexual expression – the film implies that the killer is meting out a punishment that is somehow ‘deserved’” (162). As Magistrale notes, Jason never punishes the children who come for summer camp at Crystal Lake, but, instead, focuses his punishment on the counselors and random townspeople who step out of line (most notably town alcoholics and drug abusers in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part III* and *Part V*) (163). Transgression stimulates Jason into action, and the *jouissance* of the law emerges in his seemingly endless punishment. Unable or unwilling to speak, hiding his deformed face beneath a hockey mask, and refusing the finality of his numerous deaths, Jason embodies death drive. For viewers, on the other hand, Jason is the last line of defense for fantasy. As the exaggerated, imaginary monster designating some “return of the repressed,” the bogeyman Jason, is the final veil of fantasy that puts off direct

confrontation with one's unmediated *jouissance*. The last step in analysis is defined by the analysand's ability to confront his own unsettling enjoyment immediately, even if it proves to be monstrous like Jason, and readily admit "I am that Thing." For the viewer, Jason threatens to erase the safe distance fantasy establishes between desire and drive, which is sustained by the inherently implicit nature of fantasy, to force this "I am that Thing" moment. In order to remain functional, as Žižek claims, "fantasy has to remain 'implicit', it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression" (*TPF* 18). What Jason reveals is not the obscene pleasure of transgressing norms and laws, but, more specifically, the greater obscenity already lurking within the law itself; the pleasure that functions as a surrogate for sex for Harry Powell in *The Night of Hunter*. Obscene pleasure lies not in premarital sex, drugs, or some other common "transgression," but, more specifically, the ultimate transgression is in the establishment and administration of the law<sup>10</sup> that generates enjoyment in the first place. Consequently, Jason closes the distance that typically separates *jouissance* and duty by directly locating *jouissance* in duty itself.

Camp Crystal Lake, then, is a place of reform through rural virtues, or, more specifically, it is a place where the vice of the city is subjected to harsh purification of "idyllic" country living through the superego figure of Jason. The counselors who come

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<sup>10</sup> Here I am borrowing from an oft-quoted passage from Brecht that appears in numerous Žižek texts. Addressing modern corporate crime, Žižek quotes Brecht's *Beggar's Opera* directly, "What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a bank?" (*LET* 164). In *Enjoy Your Symptom* he paraphrases, "What is a transgression of the law against the transgression that pertains to the law itself?" (83). While the latter quotation is invoked in a discussion of the "subversiveness" of morality, the points here are somewhat similar. The founding of the law is predicated upon an act of violence that is retroactively legitimated by the order it establishes, which makes the actions, some violent, taken to sustain its authority also legitimate. As opposed to one violent, transgressive act that can be adjudicated by the law, the violence of the law itself is an elaborate system that erases its violent origins in a claim to authority. In the case of the bank, the robbing of a bank pales in comparison to the complex, legitimated financial practices that help create and sustain gross financial inequality.

to the camp are frequently identified as “city kids,” who take a summer job at the camp or escape the city to exploit the isolation of “the country” to indulge in sex, drugs and booze. While the isolation of the rural setting aligns *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* with the ideal, agrarian roots of the small town, it also allows for a “re-education” program in virtue – if overweight children are sent to “fat camp” to lose weight, then the teenagers in the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series are forced to go to “virtue camp” to contain their contaminating *jouissance*. Camp Crystal Lake is the “tough love” version of Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A., which offers an ideal vision of small town U.S.A. to its visitors that is comforting. Integral to this idyllic vision is the revisionist nature that returns us to childhood; as Francaviglia claims, “Main Street may appeal to a sense of collective innocence in that our youths are times of relative simplicity before we experience significant personal, economic, and sexual responsibility” (154). Main Street U.S.A.’s lack of saloons and funeral parlors speaks to a kind of omission of those encounters that spoil innocence; that is, it returns us to that innocent moment by excluding the kinds of forces that ultimately spoil innocence. Francaviglia’s invocation of “sexual responsibility” resonates with a reading of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, insofar as Jason’s sole purpose for existence is to create a morally innocent world through purging. In this purging, Jason embodies the darker side of Disney, evident in its glaring omissions; he purges the small town, like Disney’s “imagineers,” to restore it to its romanticized form. Out at Camp Crystal Lake, just a stone’s throw from Main Street, Jason is washing away the sins that threaten the harmony and innocence of the small town. If, as Francaviglia claims, “Main Street and other idealized place images [like one’s childhood camp] may be points of refuge for Americans who would just as soon turn back the clock if it meant

recapturing lost innocence and simplifying their lives,” then Jason is the force that turns back the clock one indulgent, corrupted teenager at a time (154).

### **Beneath the Mask**

By threatening to expose a pleasure that must remain implicit, Jason opens the way for viewers to “traverse their fantasy.” Fantasy establishes the distance that separates desire from drive, which is coterminous to the distance that separates the Real of traumatic *jouissance* from the normal, meaningful order of reality. When this distance is closed or traversed, the separation for meaningful perspective disintegrates, transforming the subject’s life-world into some uncanny, nightmarish realm. Citing a common trope in Lynch’s films, Žižek illustrates the consequence of closing the distance created by fantasy. From the appropriate distance the Lynch’s world around us appears to be stable and comprehensible, but when the camera approaches too closely, “an object turns into the disgusting substance of life” (Žižek *TPF* 66). The most notable example of this is in Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, when the perfectly manicured small town lawn, following a tracking shot into extreme close up, turns into a disgusting image of insects crawling all over each other; this unsettling image serves as a metaphor for what lies beneath the ideal veneer of the small town. There a correlation between this sudden shift in appearance that is a result of closed distance and the small town in which the horror film is set, insofar as the idyllic community is transformed by a confrontation into a nightmarish realm with the return of its repressed. This minimal distance that puts off the horror of the “disgusting substance of life,” *jouissance*, is also manifest in the killer’s mask in *Halloween*, *TCM*, and *Friday the 13th*. The mask is the minimal distance from the horror

of the monster's face, which interjects an expressionless barrier between what lies beneath the mask and the idyllic small town or rural area. Freddy Krueger, again, is the lone exception, whose burnt visage demarcates the traumatic, vigilante justice to which he was subjected. Leatherface, Michael Myers, and Jason, eventually, expose their faces, which are deformed in such a manner that they resemble the putrefaction Žižek associates with closing the distance created by fantasy. This physical estrangement reflects the traumatic impact of (obscene) enjoyment when directly confronted. Ultimately, the supervillains face bears the trace of the traumatic impact of unmediated *jouissance*.

Both *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* “traverse the fantasy” for the spectator by using point of view shots from the killer's perspective. As Magistrale notes, this perspective is indebted to the “original” slasher film, *Psycho*, and the voyeuristic Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), who watches Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in the shower (150). In this famous scene the camera adopts Norman's point-of-view, a staple of Hitchcock films, to place us in the uncomfortable position of the perverse killer. The generic murder sequence in the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series places us in the viewing position of Jason, situated somewhere out in the woods watching two camp counselors preparing for sex. While at some level this point of view shot heightens suspense by postponing the moment of the monster's “big reveal” when he will erupt on the post-coital scene, the establishment of our perspective with that of Jason's closes the comfortable distance between the viewer, who is presumably a normal, desire-oriented subject, and the monster, who is a being of drive. No longer able to establish a safe distance between us and *IT*, and, by association, our own obscene pleasure in punishment, we literally occupy the space from which he stalks his prey. This forced, point-of-view alignment along with



the aestheticization of violence illustrates a kind of “surplus” pleasure already lurking within repression itself. The sound of deep breathing, often accentuated in the soundtrack, speaks to the monster’s arousal at what he (and we watch) from behind his mask. However, sexual arousal designates a short circuit for the monster; as Magistrale claims, “the male monster in the slasher film is never interested in his own sexuality per se – as arousal serves only to stimulate his compulsion to assault the object of his lust rather than bond with her” (148). Only the “Final Girl” sustains an idealistic moral position to counter the degeneration of her teenage cohorts and the degeneration of morality in the super villain. Each film series and each film within the series has a “final girl.” From Laurie in *Halloween* to Nancy (Heather Langenkamp) in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the common generic trope in all four series maintains the connection between sexual purity and the female character that bests the monster. Without her to sustain a trace of appropriate symbolic identification, we would totally collapse into the world behind the mask, indulging in the come-uppance that the hubristic teenagers receive.

Along with these point-of-view shots, the “aestheticization” of violence in the murder scenes indicates the surplus pleasure in punishment these films depict. As Magistrale claims regarding the grisly splatter shows in these films, “the slasher film emphasizes the open wound of the broken body, the resplendently appointed corpse that is penetrated in order to open it out, like one of Francis Bacon’s paintings, to display itself as a visual feast” (148). The need to escalate the sex and violence in sequels, both in terms of the graphicness and volume, are indicative of drive’s “more!”; that is, more of the same, but still more of it. Along with this escalation is a demand for innovation in the murder sequences; the killer must invent new, clever, and ever more brutal ways to

dispatch with his transgressive victims.<sup>11</sup> The turning “inside out” of the body to be viewed with morbid curiosity and pleasure is a reflection of what the killer does to implicit fantasy. By making the implicit (inside) explicit (outside) the killer illustrates the deep-seeded, perverse pleasure in punishment, in the administration of repressive social norms. The more blood and entrails that are turned out of the body (the exterior in this case is a metaphor for reality as it is constituted by the cooperative work of fantasy and the symbolic) and the more elaborate the killing (what weapon, what location, and what technique) the more it aligns itself with the realm of *jouissance* – that excess pleasure that exceeds the normal execution of duty/law/repression. Ultimately, what remains on the inside of fantasy, the inner layers or entrails, must remain implicit, folded in, to be functional. In turning the body inside out the killer brings us far too close to a pleasure that cannot be squared away with the outer layers of ideal fantasy and its companion, the socio-symbolic network. The messiness of the broken, brutalized body is coterminous with the world deprived of fantasy. Such a world lacks the organizational matrix that would appropriately suture everything together.

There is, perhaps, no better definition of the slasher horror film setting than an ‘irreal’ nightmarish universe, which is made all the more nightmarish by the “homely” setting that is “unhomed” by the villain. The small town and rural settings of these

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<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of tools and scenarios that accompany the “splatter” scenes in the slasher film do not so much speak to the villain’s pathology as it does to the viewer’s, insofar as these elaborations function as “surpluses” over and beyond more straightforward execution. In his twentieth seminar *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Lacan claims, “Reality is approached with apparatuses of *jouissance*” (55). These apparatuses, or “devices” as translator Bruce Fink indicates as an alternative term, function to prop up reality insofar as they introduce or facilitate enjoyment. Without these devices reality loses some of its “density,” that is, it threatens to unravel. The *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchise in particular is defined by the increasingly elaborate means and situations in which Jason dispatches his victims. One victim meets his demise while walking on his hands, another is punctured with a fencepost while using an outhouse, yet another is beheaded while riding a dirt bike, and with numerous sequels, this is just a small cross section of Jason’s methods. Each different murderous instrument or unexpected location are new devices of *jouissance* that generate that surplus constitutive of enjoyment.

slasher films, particularly the bucolic perfection of Crystal Lake, intensify the horror of the film, insofar as Jason illustrates an innate corruption lurking in an unexpected place. Not a foreign presence that comes into the community to terrorize, the source of corruption comes from within the ideal community. More specifically, the small town's contamination in the horror film is a manifestation of the repression underpinning that community's idealism. If Jason is an example of "the return of the repressed," the source of that repression is precisely the pleasure taken in the restriction of pleasure itself. When we recoil in horror from the monster it is not because of his difference, but, instead, because he represents some piece of our own displaced truth, cast away or silenced to sustain the smooth function of the socio-symbolic network. At the end of these films, the safety and the harmony of the small town or rural area are restored, but it is not because we have passed through the fantasy to the other side. The end of the horror film is not coterminous with the ends of analysis because in killing the monster we do not directly occupy his position as our own displaced point of subjectivity. Ultimately, we can only recoil in horror from the monstrous truth about us that the villain represents in an exaggerated form; we are not encouraged to confront that truth directly. On the contrary, our retreat from Jason back into the idealism of the rural is a regression to a lower order, or "outer veil" of fantasy, which serves to close the traumatic rupture with idealism. The last barrier of fantasy is not beauty or idealism, but, instead the monstrous, exaggerated manifestation of our own obscene pleasure in a figure like Jason, who guards the obscene pleasure in the law through terror. It is no wonder then that the final shot of numerous *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* films is of Jason opening his eyes. In retreating

back into the idyllic countryside, we start the cycle of repression all over again, generating our repressed point of pleasure in the monster.

### **From the Monster to Meth**

The rise of methamphetamine use in the United States, particularly in the rural portion of the country, has coincided historically with the emergence of the “slasher” horror film and the popularity of its “gross out” cousin, the zombie film. While there are numerous allegorical connections one can make with the super villains and zombies and the continuing socio-economic decline of the small town, the intersections between the physical effects of meth use and the zombie/super villain are striking. Citing studies conducted by UCLA doctor Tom Freese, Nick Reding outlines meth’s effects on the brain:

But meth alone, says Freese, ‘goes inside the presynaptic cells to push dopamine out.’ That, he says, ‘makes for more of a flood if you will.’ This ultimately might begin to account for why some neurological researchers see total depletion of neurotransmitters in sectors of the brains of chronic meth users. It’s perhaps no wonder, then, that 1950s-era Methedrine and Benzedrine addicts depicted in the David Lynch movie *Blue Velvet* are associated with anarchy. Moving through the world, and the movie, unable to feel anything but rage, they are the embodiment of late-stage meth addiction, the political expression of the existential scourge and the ban of the work-based American dream. (48)

While Reding mistakenly locates Lynch’s film setting in the 1950s, he is ultimately right to identify in Lynch’s addicts an expression of perpetual rage, incapable of rational engagement with the world. Even more so than Lynch’s twisted criminals, the zombie and the super villain are the brain-cooked expressions of pure rage and anarchy located by Reding in the late stages of meth use. Like slasher films, zombie films and television programs have become wildly popular in the last forty years. From George Romero’s

seminal film *The Night of the Living Dead* (1969) to Frank Darabont's recent television program based on a comic book series *The Walking Dead* (2010), the zombie's emergence coincides with that of methamphetamine's development. Both have been closely associated with rural America – Romero's film and Darabont's series are set primarily in rural locations. The country simultaneously offers sanctuary from the masses of zombies in the urban metropolis and serves as an ideal counterpart to the strange corrupted nature of the zombie. Zombies create a more nature-oriented world by overrunning the sources of modern convenience (electricity, communication services, and commerce), but that natural world is one perverted by their cannibalistic appetites. Like a plague, zombies seemingly drive people from the city and, consequently, out into safe haven of rural America.

Unlike the more clever and loquacious Freddy Krueger, Vorhees, Leatherface, and the zombie are incapable of expressing any fundamentally human emotions. Vorhees and Leatherface are distinct from zombies and meth addicts insofar as they are identified as mentally disabled from birth; Leatherface's disability is implied to stem from incest. Zombies, like late-stage meth addicts, were once human. Not unlike the manner in which meth use burns out one's neurotransmitters, the root cause of "Zombism" is typically a virus that manifests in an intense fever swelling and cooking one's brain (hence the necessity to destroy the zombie's brain to ensure full death). For the late stage meth addict, as Reding notes, "nothing natural – sex, a glass of water, a good meal, anything for which we are *supposed* to be rewarded – feels good. The only thing that does feel good is more meth" (49). Conversely, for the zombie nothing but consumption, primarily of human flesh, drives him/her. For both the zombie and the meth addict, there is no real

spark of subjectivity remaining. The self has been burned out by the virus or addiction. This subjective depletion is the case, as well, for the super villain, but the cause is different – the super villain is ultimately the manifestation of some traumatic act that desubjectivizes him. All that remains for each is pure drive, the endless circulation around a certain thing (drugs and human flesh in this case) that no longer requires the schema of fantasy to explain why the subject is compelled to repeat the irrational, idiotic (and destructive) act. As it is with drive, in late-stage meth use, whatever rationale existed that triggered the initial use (depression, lack of energy, thrill-seeking, etc.), fades into the pure repetitive act of smoking, injecting, or otherwise ingesting the narcotic. Meth is no longer a supplemental *jouissance* that props up the subject's reality, but, instead, meth becomes the subject's only reality.

Like Jason Vorhees, meth operates at the dangerous intersection between fantasy and duty, which makes it precisely the quintessential small-town drug. Meth represents a unique distortion of certain indispensable virtues associated with the small town as an ideological object. If the small town is synonymous with hard-working, self-reliant salt of the earth people that are closer to the agrarian roots of the country than their urban counterparts, then meth is the contemporary avenue that makes working hard possible. In other words, these truckers, farmers, factory workers, and small business entrepreneurs (i.e., meth cooks and dealers) may not need anyone to help support them, but they may need a little chemical help to bridge the gap between declining wages, increased overtime, and disintegrating happiness. What makes meth a drug that is simultaneously appealing and deeply unsettling is its obscene reflection of the American cultural

emphasis placed on the virtues of both hard work and self contentment. As Reding claims,

meth was a highly acceptable drug in America, one of the reasons being that it helped what Nathan Lein calls ‘the salt of the earth’ – soldiers, truck drivers, slaughterhouse employees, farmers, auto and construction workers, and laborers – work harder, longer, and more efficiently. It’s one thing for a drug to be associated with sloth, like heroin. But it’s wholly another when a formerly legal and accepted narcotic exists in a one-to-one ratio with the defining ideal of American culture. (54)

Not only does meth allow one to work longer and harder, but also, in its release of dopamine,<sup>12</sup> it “contributes to a feeling that all will be okay, if not exuberantly so” (Reding 47). As a cultural phenomenon, Meth is at the ideological intersection of numerous American values, which take on mythic context in nostalgic recollection. The virtue, or myth, of self-sufficiency, hard-work, and self-contentment, identified with the small town that is the repository of specifically American values, exert pressure on the small-town subject. Of all the surprising and revealing features of Reding’s examination of the small town in *Methland*, perhaps the most revealing is the small town’s assumption of its own nostalgic, fantasmic creation as “ideal ego” for the country. From Mayor Larry Murphy who attempts to rebuild Oelwein from Main Street out to assistant district

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<sup>12</sup> Methamphetamines function in a similar fashion as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, like Prozac or Lexapro, which are used to treat depression and anxiety. From its earliest days, developed first by a Japanese chemist, meth has been used in legal drugs to treat depression, anxiety, weight gain, the common cold, and numerous other ailments. It was widely distributed to Japanese and German soldiers in World War II to counteract combat anxiety, and abused by baseball players in the 1960s and 1970s to deal with the fatigue. In other words, meth has served, at different times and for different people as a kind of wonder drug. What is particularly interesting about its relationship to the contemporary proliferation of anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication is the common purpose they serve, with meth ramping up the intensity. Both are responses to the deep-seeded compulsion and accompanying pressure in modern society to “be happy.” With the innumerable modern conveniences to reduce domestic labor, the ease of travel, and the numerous means of communication to keep us in contact with friends and family, there seems to be no good reason why we shouldn’t just be happy, or, at least, this is the subtle, super-ego imperative that is transmitted through many cultural channels. Most SSRI’s are slow-release that take nearly a month to have an effect, and even then, their effectiveness is not guaranteed; patients may have to try numerous options before locating an effective treatment. With meth, and its unique chemistry, the “feel-good” response to the imperative to be happy is instantaneous.

attorney in Fayette County, Iowa, Nathan Lein, who returns to the small town and small thinking he sought to escape in studying enlightenment philosophy and law, the residents of Oelwein at different points in Reding's book become caught up with a nostalgic conception of what their small town had once been.<sup>13</sup>

If the small town is frequently upheld as a paradigm of virtue to which the rest of the nation should aspire, then that pressure is seemingly redoubled on the small town itself, which has (impossibly) big shoes to fill. Reding's narrative follows the story of roughly six characters, each with different relationships to meth use in Oelwein, Iowa (a town of about six thousand, about the size of my hometown of Shelbyville, Illinois). A doctor, a lawyer, a mayor, and three addicts or manufacturers of meth, these people share a common relationship to small-town virtues, which intersect at the site of the drug. Meth is ultimately a response to the contemporary explosion of the super-ego, which makes a duty of enjoyment and compels enjoyment in duty. While the first three consider meth a scourge that devours what is best about the small town, the latter three consider meth to be merely a path or solution to the problem of realizing certain small-town, middle-class aspirations. All of them seem to share an implicit belief in the importance of hard work as a virtue, which is an integral part of the backbone of the small town's idealistic image. Roland Jarvis is a small-time cook whom Reding meets

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<sup>13</sup> This nostalgic recollection includes a romanticized memory of the town's mafia connections. Once deemed "Little Chicago," Oelwein, as Reding illustrates, is seemingly proud of its connection to organized crime, "It's a piece of the town's cultural tapestry that's at once as obvious as the cornfields and the railroad tracks and as illusory as the fading memories of the rail workers who once rubbed elbows with such American luminaries as Bugsy Malone and Jimmy Hoffa" (121). Both small enough to be "off the grid" and close enough to Chicago to be an easy trip, Oelwein's nickname indicates the kind of revisionist work of nostalgia, which transforms certain unsavory aspects into something romanticized. Even in "the good old days," the criminals were more glamorous, less unsettling, and unobtrusive; they were an important part of the small town ideal. It is no coincidence that meth manufacturers often conceive of themselves as modern day bootleggers or entrepreneurs, who are simply providing for their families and taking advantage of a growth industry (Reding 31).



after Jarvis has blown up his mother's house and melted most of his face and hands (no doubt coming to resemble a horror film monster). Jarvis' story best represents the dynamic relationship between the economic decline of the small town, the political indifference to "flyover country," and the rise of methamphetamines. Jarvis is the quintessential small-town working man, whose modest desires seem to recall some authentic "good old days" that are replaced artificially by meth. As Reding describes him,

Roland Jarvis used to have a good job at Iowa Ham in Oelwein. It was a hard job, 'throwing' hundred-pound pans full of hog hocks into a scalding roaster and pulling them out again, a process he likens to playing hot potato with bags of sand. But he made eighteen dollars an hour, with full union membership and benefits. That would be a lot of money today in Fayette County. In 1990, it was the kind of money about which a high school dropout like Jarvis could only dream. Jarvis had a girlfriend he wanted to marry, so he took double eight-hour shifts at Iowa Ham, trying to put away as much money as possible. On days he worked back-to-back shifts, Jarvis had a trick up his sleeve: high on crank [i.e., meth], with his central nervous system on overdrive and major systems like his digestive tract all but shut down, Jarvis could easily go for sixteen hours without having to eat, drink, use the bathroom, or sleep. (49)

Jarvis's story seems to belong to a time gone by. It is a nostalgic parable about the virtues of hard work, and the spoils, the sense of self-worth and accomplishment emerging from toiling away for love that only the truly persistent understand. What does not fit in the story, of course, is the little supplement, the surplus beyond and antithetical to the idealism that sticks out like a sore thumb, methamphetamines. In Jarvis's story, meth literalizes *jouissance*, the little bit of extra that is the engine driving one's symbolic attachments. However, what is distinct in meth's case is that this little surplus is not necessarily antithetical to the virtues and humble goals of Roland Jarvis's life. While the drug initially seems antithetical to the idealism of the love story, meth ultimately does not threaten Jarvis's "well-ordered" socio-symbolic network. Instead, it designates an

intersection between the virtues of that network and *jouissance*. Crank doesn't undermine his ideal, but, instead, it is what makes it possible. It is no wonder then Reding claims, "meth has been perhaps the only example of a widely consumed illegal narcotic that might be called *vocational*, as opposed to recreational [my emphasis]" (64). In Jarvis's case his "sinthom" is not simply what allows him to sustain his symbolic situation, but it is also what allows him to be upwardly mobile, from high school drop out to middle class husband.

Jarvis' story is not unique in *Methland*, and it speaks to the numerous ways in which meth is situated in terms of idealistic, upward social mobility. As Reding astutely notes, "much of meth's danger lies in the drug's long history of usefulness to the sociocultural and socioeconomic concepts American society holds dear, many of which stem from the pursuit of wealth through hard work" (178). Ultimately, meth provides an answer for the unique and insatiable demand of the "super ego," which seems to exert increasing pressure on contemporary American society. While the common understanding of the super ego links it to the restriction of pleasure for the sake of accomplishing one's duty, the relationship between pleasure and repression is more complicated. As Žižek claims:

the very renunciation of pleasures brings about a paradoxical surplus of enjoyment, an 'enjoyment in pain,' in displeasure, baptized by Lacan *jouissance*, the 'impossible'/traumatic/painful enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle. If we read these two theoretical gestures together, the conclusion which imposes itself, of course, is that Law, in its most radical dimension, is the 'superego,' i.e., an injunction to enjoyment with which it is impossible to comply. (*EYS!* 182)

What the superego demands, then, is not just the sacrifice of pleasure for the sake of doing one's duty, which ultimately leads to an endless debt of guilt: the more we sacrifice, the more we testify to our own guilt, the more we sacrifice, *ad infinitum*. More

specifically, the superego demands that we also enjoy our duty of sacrifice itself. Not only are we required to surrender *jouissance* to the Law, but we are compelled to enjoy the very process of renunciation and the duty itself. The more normal orientation towards the law is obsessional neurosis. The neurotic steals little bits of *jouissance* from the Law through minor transgressions outlined within the implicit framework of fantasy – i.e., I speed on the highway, I smoke cigarettes even though my spouse forbids it, or I steal paper clips from work. In the world of the superego, enjoyment is not spontaneous or a possible choice on the part of the subject, but, instead, it is compulsory. One encounters this more and more in our contemporary society in the conflation of work and pleasure; that is, our leisure activities are increasingly structured like work. The escalating popularity of endurance sports, particularly the participation in grueling, painful events that require months of disciplined training like the marathon or Ironman triathlons, are indicative of the ever more indeterminate line between pleasure and work. Moreover, the proliferation of anti-depressant and anti-anxiety pharmaceuticals serves as a response to the “superegoic” demand that we *should* be happy: happiness is no longer a pursuit by choice, but, instead, happiness is a sense of duty. An interesting intersection emerges between these two contemporary phenomena insofar as mental health officials frequently “prescribe” exercise before going the pharmaceutical route to treat depression. Whereas mental health was once treated with extended “holidays,” work, in the form of leisure “training,” is prescribed as a response to the ubiquitous demand that we enjoy our lives at all times. What do you need to be happy? More work, but, more specifically, work in the form of training that is predicated on locating pleasure in pain.

Meth, in functioning like “Prozac on steroids,” provides a viable response to the insatiable demands of the superego. Flushing the mind with dopamine, meth answers the compulsion to be happy with a “shot glass” full of “feel good.” By circumventing those things that inhibit work (eating, sleeping, and boredom), crank allows the tweaker to be productive. Like Jason Vorhees, who exposes a disturbing pleasure in the act of repression itself, the meth addict comes entirely too close to realizing an unsettling enjoyment directly; meth facilitates the *jouissance* demanded by the superego to enjoy our duty. Consequently, meth brings us too close to the idealistic underpinnings of our society, which transform into some deeply unsettling, perverted form when they are directly embodied. Like the monster in the horror film that closes the distance between ideal small town and some obscene *jouissance* underpinning it, the meth addict, when examined closely like Reding does in *Methland*, transforms from a simple drug addict to something much more disturbing. What is so unsettling about the tweaker, driven by the dual compulsion to work and be happy, is that he is disturbingly familiar; as Reding claims, “these people are us” (93). Covered in sores from the battery acid lifting, teeth-rotted out of his jaw, and being ultimately incapable of an emotion besides rage, the late-stage meth addict is the “desubjectivized living-dead” specter that has accomplished a kind of traversal of fantasy. More specifically, the meth addict represents the collapse of *jouissance* (in duty) and the uniquely American fantasy of the small town. Not unlike zombies, these monstrous addicts are bodily manifestations of the traumatic process of approaching fantasy too closely. Ultimately, when we come too close to our idealistic underpinnings, we arrive at their obscene counterpart, which exposes a deeper-seeded pleasure that is too unsettling to tolerate. The rotting, living-dead corpse of the meth

addict is the endgame of the superego's obscene demand to enjoy one's duty. What is so disturbing about the meth addict is not his pleasure in the drug, but, instead, the realization that he is the ultimate embodiment what the superego demands of us. Concomitantly, the meth addict is disturbing because he emerges from what Reding calls the "cradle of our national creation myth," that is, from the ideological source of fantasy for the nation, the small town (183). If we locate our more cherished national virtues (hard work, self-reliance, and their relationship with happiness) in the small town, then it is no mistake that we see the fully realized, thoroughly perverse form of these virtues return in the figure of the tweaker. The meth addict is the embodiment of the small-town fantasy. Like Jason, the meth addict is the manifestation of the pleasure of duty taken to its ultimate limits, which unveils a truth in our more "noble" fantasies that we would rather not acknowledge.

### **Life in Death**

Sun Volt "*Methamphetamine*"

*I took a night shift another nickel on the dime, try to play it straight and make it different  
this time, still waiting to meet the next ex-wife  
It's either watching these gauges for Monsanto, or a bar-back job for the casino, the  
Army won't want me after what this body's been through*

*Would you take me back North Carolina? Would you take me back Arkansas?  
Blissful days still there to remember, methamphetamine was the final straw*

*I had a killer job in a backup band playin' guitar in Branson  
Two shows a night brought the money to chase down sin  
Now it's another weekend and I'm lonely at home, late night TV evangelist drone, I'm  
healthy now but I really don't know if I'll ever be free*

*Would you take me back North Carolina? Would you take me back Arkansas?  
Blissful days still there to remember, methamphetamine was the final straw*

At different points in time since the transformation of the country from a primarily rural nation in the early twentieth century to an urban one, the small town's ideological purpose has changed. What the proliferation of more unsettling depictions of the small town, particularly in horror films like *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* illustrate is a shift in what is at stake in terms of fantasy and enjoyment in the small town as an ideological concept. The overwhelmingly nostalgic tone of earlier representations of the small town, where some semblance of home is lamentably lost in the historical developments of modernity, gives way to a new type of nostalgia, which is evident in its embryonic form in *The Stranger* and *The Night of the Hunter*. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the "country" becomes a darker place, which ultimately emphasizes the melancholic conception of what it once was. Reding's conception of the small town seems to be indebted to a notion of small town life that was already gone before the economic decline of the late 1970s and 1980s that ultimately served as the *coup de grace* for the working-class backbone of the rural United States. In other words, *Methland*, while set in the real small town of Oelwein, Iowa, is as grounded in the nostalgic recollection of the small town as the fictional Crystal Lake, Illinois in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*; the horror of the monster is in his emergence from within what seem like harmonious, idealistic conditions. Like the residents of Oelwein themselves who crusaded to salvage a small-town life that was half-grounded in childhood recollection and half-grounded in fantasy,<sup>14</sup> Reding seems to

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<sup>14</sup> A testament to the power of ideological fantasy, Mayor Larry Murphy's rehabilitation project in Oelwein was surprisingly effective, and it is no coincidence that it began with resurrecting indispensable, iconic Main Street. Reding subtly indicates the imaginary's influence on this project, "shortly after Christmas 2006, Oelwein's Main Street looked like a movie-set version of its former self. Phase II of Mayor Murphy's revitalization was complete. The street ... was neatly paved ... refurbished streetlamps were hung with wreaths and wrapped in red velvety ribbons" (167). Reding paints a picture that conjures Bedford Falls, New York, the small town setting of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Not only was Murphy able to revitalize Main Street through public works projects, he brought in new business along Main Street, and was able to pull Oelwein out of the mutually destructive meth and economic tailspin.

oscillate between the nostalgic conception of the small town and an acknowledgment that meth is ultimately an indication of a darker heritage of the nation's rural areas; as he notes, "the rural United States has for decades had higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse than the nation's urban areas. If addiction has a face, says Clay (Dr. Hallberg), it is the face of depression" (76). If in the first half of the twentieth century the small town is recalled as an ideal lost home, as it never really was, then in the latter half that nostalgia is challenged by something Reding calls, "more sinister." Ironically, this sinister emergence too often works to underpin that nostalgic recollection of the small town, perhaps even more than did the straight-forward idealization of the place in the early half of the century.

Be it political discourse, television programming, films, or literature, the fascination with the small town seems somehow to always be indebted to a fundamental fantasy grounded out in the country, dating back to Jeffersonian Agrarianism. Even if the story ultimately seeks to undermine or depart from that initial idealism, seeks to disprove that "Main Street U.S.A." is the "Real America," that idealism is the baseline assumption that anchors the small town's relationship to a certain fantasmic space. Reding is right to identify the emergence of meth as the quintessential contemporary small-town story. It is the newest variation on the old story of the small town's death, which is ultimately a testament to how it persists in spite of this death or, more precisely, because of its death. Unlike other unsavory stories regarding the small town, such as its inherent insularity, banality or potentially discriminatory politics, meth is unique in the sense that it

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What resonates in Reding's description is the term "movie-set," which links the reconstruction of Oelwein to a kind of ideal-ego culled from Capra-esque nostalgia. The point here is not just that the fantasy of the ideal small town persists despite significant historical, social, political, and economic change, but that it has a profound impact on the constitution of the contemporary small town.

undermines the small-town fantasy from within. If we frequently turn our gaze to the small town for lessons in hard-work, duty, and community, then the image of meth functions as the horrific realization of those ideals. Like the monster that directly embodies the unsettling, super-ego pleasure in executing the law, meth is the realization of the superego's unconditional demand that we do our duty and be happy. Meth is the pathway to unmediated *jouissance*, which is evident in its unique ability to flush out all the "feel good" chemicals in our brain. The lost "home," the *jouissance* given up to be mediated by fantasy and the symbolic that desire perpetually seeks in every surrogate object, is rediscovered in meth. Like drive, meth is the motor that propels the tweaker; the meth addict is happy and productive, presumably in the initial stages of meth use. Like any immediate interaction with *jouissance*, the result is the transformation from "subject" to the "desubjectivized living dead, which is evident in how meth replaces all other "rewards" with a drive for more of the drug. Ultimately, meth abuse causes a rotting from the inside out, with major organs eventually shutting down and the complete frying of neurotransmitters, leaving the meth addict starkly reminiscent of a zombie from one of Romero's films. The meth addict approaches the drive lurking beneath the ideal fantasy of the small town too closely (by doing what it demands), and, ultimately, the fantasy falls away leaving nothing but the unconditional demand of drive (more!).

Consequently, the most disturbing aspect of meth is not that it contaminates the ideal small town, but, instead, that meth is the direct manifestation of contaminating small-town idealism taken to its extreme limit. In the rotting body of the meth addict we see the rotting small town of America, our "cradle" of idealism. His missing teeth are the boarded up windows of failed businesses on Main Street; the mom and pop corner



drugstore replaced by the mom and pop meth lab; his rotting flesh the decaying factory or vacated farmhouse that once sustained the delicate financial balance of the small town. And his late stage depression and rage are shared by his fellow citizens who are plagued by the same inability to believe no longer in the possibility of meeting the demands of the superego; be happy, be productive! Once we have passed over into Methland with the meth addict, like the speaker in the Sun Volt song, we can never “go back” to the repository of our nostalgia to relive those “blissful days.” However, meth becomes the last line of defense for idealism. More specifically, meth generates a melancholic longing for the lost home of the small town through its horrifying confrontation with fantasy taken to its utter limit and then beyond. Trapped between the illusive quality of desire and the horror of repetitive drive, the speaker in “Methamphetamine” illustrates the subtle shift in perspective that suddenly unveils fantasy, the result of directly confronting one’s enjoyment, for what it really is. Wondering if he “will ever be free,” the speaker acknowledges what fantasy works overtime to conceal, that we are imprisoned by our enjoyment. What better metaphor for this kind of enjoyment, which both drives and imprisons us, than the ideological and material home of the small town? In the movement from myth to meth, the small town wears numerous fantasmic, ideological masks. Only with the tweaker does the distance between the mask (fantasy) and the face collapse to reveal a contamination inherent in romantic notion of the small town. Even the monster had the decency to spare the small town from the horror of its own idealism.

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