

# *Late Capitalism Comes to Dublin: “American” Popular Culture in the Novels of Roddy Doyle*

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THERE IS A scene in the Alan Parker film adaptation of Roddy Doyle's novel *The Commitments* when the camera focuses on a particular spot on the wall of the Rabbitte household in Barrytown. In this spot hang the portraits of the household's two presiding cultural heroes, one above the other. The lower is a portrait of Pope John Paul II, while the upper is a portrait of the artist Elvis Presley as a young man. That Elvis would thus seem to take precedence over the Pope as a figure of adulation in the Rabbitte household is in fact not surprising. After all, the head of the household, Jimmy Rabbitte, Sr., is an avid Elvis fan who sings Elvis tunes virtually nonstop (in an imitation of the King's own voice) and who has already been heard earlier in the film to declare that "Elvis is God." As it turns out, this Elvis motif does not appear in the original novel, but Jimmy, Sr.'s adulation of Elvis in the film does nicely reinforce what is perhaps the most striking point made by the novel—the obsession of its Irish characters with American popular culture.

The literary referent here, of course, is that moment in the opening chapter of *Ulysses* when Stephen Dedalus bitterly declares himself the "servant of two masters . . . an English and an Italian" (17). The joint iconographic display of Elvis and the Pope in the Rabbitte household reinscribes this insight almost exactly—except that the British monarch has been replaced by the King of American popular culture. These portraits can thus be read as a sort of mini-allegory of the cultural situation of modern Dublin as a whole, still trapped very much in the gravitational pull of the Catholic Church, but with the former cultural, economic, and political dominance of the British Empire now

gradually being replaced by its newer, bigger, and shinier successor, the global empire of multinational capitalism—especially as represented by the media power of American popular culture. What seems to be at stake then is a sort of tag-team imperialism on the order of that indicated when Leonard Cohen’s “F.” describes the history of French Canada as a sequence of dominations: “The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us” (187).<sup>1</sup>

That Elvis takes precedence of place over the Pope on the walls of the Rabbitte household calls attention to the relatively minor role that Catholicism seems to play in the lives of the various characters in both the film and the book version of *The Commitments*. Contrary to the ubiquitous presence of priests in the work of Joyce, priests appear in *The Commitments* only marginally—and then generally as objects of good-natured derision. Indeed, the only priest in the book is Father Molloy, who makes a sort of cameo appearance, after which the band members joke among themselves with references to Molloy’s possible participation in sodomy with his choir boys (78). This same conversation also makes reference to a recent turn to the folk mass in the local church, a turn no doubt itself influenced by American popular culture. It would seem then that American popular culture has not only supplanted British colonial domination but also thoroughly established its precedence over Catholicism as a cultural force in Ireland.

Granted Doyle’s fiction is not all of Ireland, and it would certainly be a mistake to conclude (as one might from the evidence of the fiction alone) that the Irish Catholic Church is a thoroughly moribund institution with no more political clout in Ireland. Even the Irish broadcast media, locus of so much Irish exposure to American culture, remain strongly informed by Catholic programming. Nevertheless, it is telling that so many of the events of *The Commitments* revolve around multinational popular culture. The plot of the novel is simple: a group of Barrytown youths decide to form a band to perform American soul music, hoping thereby to become rich and famous and to escape the poverty and boredom of their lives in suburban Dublin. They

have some initial success, but ultimately fail when the band breaks up from internal bickering. In short, the plot is that of almost all of the stories of Joyce's *Dubliners*: dreams of adventure and escape collapse amid the stultifying social and cultural climate of Dublin, where Dubliners fight among themselves and seldom succeed in any sort of collective effort. Doyle, however, adds a new element to his depiction of Dublin life in the overwhelming presence of American popular culture, though American culture does make appearances in *Dubliners* stories like "An Encounter."<sup>2</sup> Virtually all of the music performed by Doyle's band (itself called "The Commitments") is American, and it is clear that their dreams of wealth and fame show a strong American influence as well. Their heroes are figures like Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, and (especially) James Brown, and they seek as much as possible to emulate their American heroes. Lead singer Deco Cuffe listens incessantly to Motown music so that he can imitate "James for the growls, Otis for the moans, Smokey for the whines and Marvin for the whole lot put together" (31).<sup>3</sup>

In the end, the band members attribute their failure to a mismatch between the cultural climate of Ireland and the cultural orientation of their soul music, but they clearly feel that the fault is in Ireland not in the music. And their solution to this problem (they decide to switch to country music because "half the country is fuckin' farmers") merely represents the replacement of one kind of American popular culture by another that is even more American (164). The dominance of American cultural models then seems so complete that Doyle's Dubliners are unable to envision any non-American alternatives.<sup>4</sup> At first glance, then, *The Commitments* would seem to provide a rather straightforward statement about American cultural imperialism. Yet the book is anything but an overt cry of indignation against American cultural domination of Ireland. The band members themselves certainly do not resent American culture, which they regard as a means to escape the paralytic environment of Dublin. Moreover, they clearly believe that they are appropriating American culture for their own purposes rather than being interpellated by it in the mode discussed by Louis Althusser. For example,

they are not averse to “Dublinizing” the lyrics of the songs they sing, substituting local place names to establish a better connection with their Barrytown audience.

In addition, the Motown music that provides the original inspiration for the band is presented not as the dominant culture of American power but as the subaltern culture of American blacks. Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr., the band’s manager, thus explains the appropriateness of soul music by suggesting that Dubliners have much in common with American blacks in their position of marginality to the mainstream of Western culture: “The Irish are the niggers of Europe,” he tells the band. “An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland” (9). Even the country music to which the former Commitments turn at book’s end, quintessentially American (and white) though it may be, has decidedly working-class intonations. Jimmy, Jr., in fact, envisions the band’s music as a working-class political statement from the very beginning: “Not songs abou’ Fianna fuckin’ Fail or annythin’ like tha’. Real politics. . . . Wha’ class are yis? Workin’ class” (8-9). Later, he describes their music as a “double-edged sword,” one side of which is sex, and the other side of which is “revolution” (38-9).

Especially when read against the work of Joyce, Jimmy, Jr.’s appeal to a class-based politics (as opposed to the nationalistic politics so prevalent in modern Irish history) would seem to be a positive development indeed. Jimmy also recalls Joyce when he insists that, in the context of Dublin, sexual liberation and political revolution amount to very much the same thing: “Soul is the rhythm o’ sex. It’s the rhythm o’ the factory too. The workin’ man’s rhythm. Sex an’ factory.” In fact, insists Jimmy, politics and “ridin’” amount to “the same thing” (39).<sup>5</sup> Of course, Jimmy is working less under the influence of Joyce than of the oppositional politics of the American 1960s, source of most of Jimmy’s musical inspiration. Indeed, such rhetoric suggests that American popular culture has played an important shaping role in Jimmy’s political vision, even if that vision does not, on the surface, seem to accord with mainstream American political views, especially in the Reaganite 1980s when Doyle’s book was written.<sup>6</sup>

A close look at Jimmy’s politics, however, shows that they may in fact work very much in the interest of the global hegemony of



American (or at least capitalist) values. Jimmy's equation of sex and subversive politics is a typical theme of the 1960s, based on the neo-Freudian notion (expounded by Wilhelm Reich and others) that if (as Freud suggests in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) the repression of natural sexual desires is a major focus of political domination, then the liberation of sexual impulses should be an effective counter to such domination. But surely this notion has by now been thoroughly discredited, both by historical events and by theoretical moves like the assault on the Freudian repressive hypothesis in the introductory volume of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.<sup>7</sup> For Foucault sexuality is not an expression of natural passion so much as a product of socially conditioned discourses. He suggests that modern society seeks not to repress sexuality, but to administer it and turn sexual energies to its own advantage: "Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another" (48).

Transgressive sexuality then may actually work to the advantage of official power, especially as it draws energies away from more genuinely oppositional political activities. Indeed, the equation of sex and revolution is clearly identified in *The Commitments* as politically ineffectual. For one thing, sexual tensions in the band (which includes three women) are a major source of the dissension that eventually tears the band apart. For another, the specter of co-optation, so vexing to the left in recent years, rises up when it becomes clear that Jimmy's emphasis on both sex and politics amounts to little more than an attempt to play the market. Sex, after all, sells. As Jimmy, Jr., puts it, "The market's huge" (8). And working-class culture sells as well. "Who buys the most records?" he reminds the band. "The workin' class" (9). Jimmy's rejection of the Irish nationalist tradition of Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil (however problematic that tradition might be) in a favor of a political agenda consisting of nothing more than a celebration of soul music and free sexuality is emblematic of his lack of any real political vision, especially as he also rejects party politics of any kind. According to Jimmy, organizations like Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, and the Workers' Party all lack soul, a quality which he claims resides only in the "Dublin

people" (40). But this nebulous identification with the soul and the sexuality of the "people," in conjunction with a disavowal of party politics, makes it clear that Jimmy and the Commitments have no real political agenda at all and that there would be no mechanism to carry out such an agenda even if it existed.

Jimmy's identification with American blacks is problematic as well, though the connection he draws is very much in line with recent scholarly studies like Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race*, which details the close historical parallels between racist treatment of blacks in America and the figuration by the British of the Irish as an inferior and primitive people. Interestingly, Allen also notes that Irish immigrants in America, regarded as whites and therefore freed of the stigma of racial inferiority that they had suffered under British rule, have historically tended themselves to adopt racist attitudes toward American blacks. Some of this phenomenon can be seen in *The Commitments* as well. Jimmy himself, despite his apotheosis of black American culture, persists in referring to African Americans as "blackies," while another member of the group employs one of the all-time greatest hits of racialist stereotypes when he suggests that Jimmy's attempt to link soul music and sexuality is more appropriate for "the blackies" than for the Irish, because "they've got bigger gooters than us" (38).

In short, even the most seemingly transgressive political gestures made by Doyle's Dubliners have no real charge and involve little more than an acting out of motifs derived from multinational popular culture, a fact which assures that their "transgressions" can be safely and easily contained within the status quo. That the Dubliners themselves seem entirely happy with the notion that most of their ideas seem to come from multinational popular culture can thus be taken as a sign not that the multinational cultural presence in Ireland is innocuous (or even beneficial), but that multinational cultural domination is so thorough as to be accepted willingly and even considered natural. After all, the solicitation of the willing cooperation of the dominated classes is precisely the point of cultural domination, in the grand tradition (diagnosed by Gramsci and others) of the hegemonic strategies of bourgeois culture as a whole.

All of Doyle's fictions point in one way or another to the importance of American popular culture in modern Dublin. The characters of *The Snapper* spend a great deal of their leisure time watching television programming that is dominated by American products like MTV; the major action of *The Van* involves the efforts of Jimmy, Sr., and his friend Bimbo to start up their own fast food business, hoping to compete directly with existing fish-and-chip shops, but also hoping to outstrip American fast-food chains such as McDonald's and Burger King; and the boys of the recent Booker Prize-winning *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* spend much of their time watching American Westerns and playing Cowboys and Indians. Indeed, Doyle's work as a whole calls attention to the global spread of American popular culture in a striking way, but the very prominence of this culture in the work of an Irish writer also suggests that "American popular culture" is something of a misnomer and that what is really involved is the popular culture of multinational capitalism. Multinational capital, meanwhile, is a complex hydra-headed beast that knows no particular loyalty to any one nation, and America is in many ways caught as much in its web as are Ireland and the former Third World. Thus, the current worldwide dominance of American popular culture does not necessarily place individual Americans in an empowered position relative to the rest of the world, though Americans certainly reap more benefits from capitalism than do the vast majority of the world's citizens. As a result, Americans have at least as much reason as the rest of the world to be concerned about the power of American popular culture.

On the other hand, Paddy Clarke's family in 1960s Dublin also watches nightly news reports of the American military involvement in Vietnam, thus providing a reminder that the global power of multinational popular culture is backed up by an awesome military force that is principally American. This motif plays a central role in Doyle's play *Brownbread*, the events of which are triggered when a group of bored Dublin youth (inspired, predictably, by their exposure to American crime dramas) kidnap a Catholic bishop. At first glance, then, the play seems to suggest that multinational popular culture has taken precedence over Catholicism as a cultural force in Ireland. However,

things become more complicated when it turns out that Bishop Treacy is an American citizen, a fact which causes American President Ronald Reagan to send the Marines to invade Dublin in order to rescue the Bishop and to make a firm statement that America will not tolerate having its citizens treated with such disrespect.<sup>8</sup> This fundamentally comic (if sinister) scenario allows Doyle to have some fun with Reagan (admittedly an easy target) and with American bravado in general. In particular, the parallel between the adolescent posturings of the kidnappers and those of the Americans is rather clear—as it should be, given that both have acquired their attitudes from the same popular culture. Even in the face of overwhelming force, the boys (whose idea of toughness comes from Clint Eastwood) cannot simply let the bishop go or they will lose face with their schoolmates; meanwhile, the Americans (no doubt also fans of Eastwood) bungle the rescue but, having invaded, cannot retreat without a victory lest they lose face internationally—especially given that the whole event is being carried on live television.

Undone by television, the Americans are, as it were, hoist on their own petard, a theme that is reinforced when an American combat helicopter seeking to rescue the bishop crashes (killing its seventeen-man crew and destroying the Barrytown Community Centre) after becoming entangled in a television antenna. Indeed, the American invasion of Dublin turns out to be a disaster both for the Dubliners and the Americans themselves, a phenomenon that one is tempted to read as a comic reinscription of the American imperial adventure in Vietnam, à la Marx's reminder in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of Hegel's dictum that the tragedies of history tend to be repeated later as farces. Meanwhile, such potential resonances make the treatment of American popular culture in *Brownbread* ultimately more complex than it might first appear—an interpretive clue to which might be contained in the fact that the play opens to the sound of Bo Diddley singing "You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover." On the one hand, virtually every move made by the three kidnappers is choreographed by American popular culture: the boys constantly enact scenes from MTV music videos, while *Miami Vice* provides them with a model for the appropriate behavior of

kidnappers. On the other hand, the kidnapping, which works directly to the detriment of American power and prestige, is triggered by multinational popular culture. Meanwhile, the play is laced with allusions to American television and music (for example, most of the play's major sections begin and end to the accompaniment of popular American songs), yet Americans—represented mainly by the pompous but incompetent Reagan, with his endless string of chauvinistic clichés, and the comically inept Lt. Bukowski, with his ludicrous military bureaucratese—come off very badly in the play. The Americans thus invade Dublin not in the mode of a well-oiled military machine, but as a sort of high-tech collection of Keystone Cops, working not with the confidence of power, but with nervousness and Cold-War paranoia. They arrest the mother of one of the kidnappers as a potential Communist, and they scour the neighborhood for subversive elements that might be involved in some sort of anti-American conspiracy. Bukowski and his men search carefully for “negroid personnel among the indigenous population” and for “A-rabs” and “middle-eastern personnel,” but are only able to come up with one male Asian who looks “all kind o’ sinister an’ Chinese” (60-61).

*Brownbread* is a comic farce but, as the deaths of the Americans in the helicopter show, there is a decidedly serious side to this unlikely standoff between three misfit Dublin lads and the full force of American military might. Most obviously, *Brownbread* makes the point that multinational imperialism, however economic and cultural in its everyday operations, is backed up by an American military force of unprecedented dimensions in case of emergency. And when this force shows up, people generally die, even if those people are the Americans themselves. Meanwhile, Doyle's Dubliners (hoping the Americans will spend a lot of money while in Dublin) welcome the invading Marines with open arms (somewhat in an echo of the “gratefully oppressed” Dubliners of Joyce's story “After the Race”). Doyle thus suggests the efficacy with which the American cultural invasion of Ireland has paved the way for this military one, creating beforehand a positive perception of Americans and (especially) of American wealth. Even the destruction of the community centre causes no

real outrage in Dublin, especially as the Dubliners are assured that the Americans will replace the destroyed building with a bigger and better one. But this American philanthropy is just as overdone as the original invasion: agitation by various Irish-American groups results in offers to build a total of 27 new community centres, causing fears that the community itself may have to be levelled to make room for them.

The consequences of American culture in the play clearly exceed their apparent function as an ideological prop for American power. After all, the whole embarrassing episode occurs because the boys have been watching too much television—to mention the fact that television literally downs the American helicopter. Meanwhile, the Americans are ultimately made to look ridiculous on live television when the boys insult Reagan; then the bishop (about to be released after claiming—for the benefit of the media—that he had not actually been kidnapped) goes on the air to lambast the Americans for bungling his rescue, declaring that he will burn his passport. As the play ends, the three bovarystic kidnappers (with the music of Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs playing in the background) begin to wonder what they can do for their next adventure—almost as if the entire experience had been nothing more than an episode in the crime-adventure series they are accustomed to watching on television.

All of Doyle's work is centrally informed by echoes of American popular culture, but none of those echoes can be interpreted as a simple case of direct American domination of Ireland. About the only American sport that Jimmy, Sr., enjoys watching is professional wrestling—and that only because for once it makes him feel superior to Americans: "He always ended up feeling glad he lived in Ireland after he'd watched it" (149). Meanwhile, American culture is sometimes conflated in Doyle's work with British and other "Western" culture. For example, Doyle's frequent allusions to popular music include references to The Beatles and Elton John, to Irish artists like Sinéad O'Connor and U2 in addition to Elvis and Motown, and Doyle generally makes little overt distinction between British and American—or even Irish—popular culture. The suggestion

here that popular culture is a global, rather than national, phenomenon resonates with a number of recent theoretical discussions of cultural imperialism. One thinks, for example, of John Tomlinson's argument that cultural imperialism needs to be seen as an instance not of some national cultures dominating others, but of the simultaneous worldwide spread of capitalism and modernity. Reviewing a number of "discourses" of cultural imperialism, Tomlinson concludes that all of them

can be interpreted in terms of a different configuration of global power that is a feature of these "new times." This configuration replaces the distribution of global power that we know as "imperialism," which characterised the modern period up to, say, the 1960s. What replaces "imperialism" is "globalisation." (175)

Tomlinson's concept of "globalisation" derives from the work of a number of theorists of cultural imperialism, including Fredric Jameson's explorations of postmodernism as the "cultural logic" of "late capitalism." Following Ernest Mandel, Jameson argues that late capitalism is the third historical stage of capitalist development, following the stage of classic capitalism as delineated by Marx and the stage of imperialism as delineated by Lenin. Late capitalism is fundamentally informed by the business operations of large multinational conglomerates whose resources (and loyalties) transcend the boundaries of any single nation. In addition, the features of late capitalism include

the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationships (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale.  
(*Postmodernism* xix)

Moreover, Jameson argues that late capitalism is characterized by a collapse of the traditional distinction between base and superstructure, resulting in a situation in which the economic characteristics of late capitalist society are virtually synonymous with the characteristics of late capitalist culture, that is, postmodernism. Therefore, to Jameson, anything one says about postmodernist

culture is simultaneously a political comment about late capitalism, and vice versa.

Doyle's treatment of "American" popular culture as a global phenomenon certainly seems to bear out Jameson's thesis, and it is easy to locate resonances from American popular culture in literature from all over the world. Indeed, writers from Haruki Murakami to Frank Moorhouse to Salman Rushdie to M. G. Vassanji draw a major portion of their material from American popular culture, even as they are often critical of the effects of that culture on Japan or Australia or India or Africa. Indeed, the very fact that the ubiquitous presence of multinational popular culture in Doyle's Dublin seems, at least to Doyle's characters themselves, so entirely unremarkable would seem to bear out Jameson's thesis that postmodernism is becoming a worldwide cultural dominant. Meanwhile, Jameson is only one of many critics of postmodernist culture who have argued that a fundamental feature of postmodernist texts is "the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (2). For example, Jameson here repeats almost exactly the closing of the "great divide" between "high" and popular culture that Andreas Huyssen has described as the central phenomenon that distinguishes postmodernist texts from modernist ones. Jameson, however, does not share Huyssen's belief that the acceptance of postmodernism is a democratic and politically progressive development. Instead, Jameson believes that postmodernist texts are simply more fully implicated in their historical context, thereby losing some of the critical distance that modernist culture maintained from the social mainstream.

On the other hand, whether or not texts have a powerful critical force is surely at least as much a matter of the reader's reaction as of any inherent property of the text. Marxist critique, for example, can often make its most powerful points about the evils of capitalism by reading the most bourgeois (or even reactionary) of texts. In the hands of a skillful Marxist critic, it may well be that Wyndham Lewis does more than Brecht can to reveal capitalism's ways to man. Doyle's texts certainly offer a number of opportunities for critical commentary on cultural imperialism



in Dublin even if they do not express open outrage at multinational cultural imperialism. In addition to the striking dominance of multinational popular culture in Doyle's Dublin, there are also the reminders of American military power in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Brownbread*. Moreover, in *The Van* Doyle offers an extremely important interpretive key when he shifts his focus from the cultural sphere to the economic one.

For one thing, the ease with which this shift can be made seems to bear out Jameson's thesis of a collapse in the distance between the cultural and economic spheres in late capitalism. For another, this new focus on capitalism itself rather than on American music and television can be taken to suggest that all that American cultural material in Dublin (and around the world) functions as part of a complex strategy for the worldwide spread of capitalism—both because the Culture Industry is itself big business and because popular culture helps to prepare an ideological climate hospitable to the growth of capitalism. Many aspects of *The Van*, however, suggest a dark side to capitalist expansion in Dublin. The plot movement of the book is essentially the same as that of *The Commitments*: the main characters (stimulated by American models) develop glorious dreams of wealth and success, only to have those dreams collapse within the context of Dublin reality. Meanwhile, a major motivation for the business is the upcoming Christmas season: both Jimmy, Sr., and Bimbo need extra money in order to purchase Christmas gifts like the new expensive computer games that have recently come to Dublin's stores. This motif of commodification floats through the text in other ways as well, as in the continual suggestions by the male characters that sophisticated and sexy women (envisioned as performing like machines during sex) only go for men with money. And if capitalist ideology thus contributes to the already serious alienation between the genders in Dublin, it also causes a rift between the fast friends Jimmy, Sr., and Bimbo, who grow increasingly alienated from one another as business pressures mount. In particular, Bimbo has supplied most of the capital for the business, a fact that leads him more and more to treat his "partner" Jimmy, Sr., as hired labour. Capital thus rears its ugly head, introducing a new class structure into their relationship

which almost destroys the friendship, though ultimately it is the business that is abandoned.

*The Van* can thus be taken to suggest the complicity of American popular culture in the worldwide spread of capitalism, somewhat in the mode described by Marxist critics of cultural imperialism like Herbert Schiller, or like the identification by Dorfman and Mattelart of Disney cartoons as dominative carriers of the ideology of American capitalism. Especially from the point of view of Ireland and other former parts of the British Empire, one is tempted to see the global presence of American culture (and American capital) as a direct inheritor of the legacy of British imperialism. And there are certainly ways in which this model of a relatively smooth passing of the imperial baton (somewhere around the end of World War II) from the British to the Americans is justified. One even wonders just how much of the decline of British global hegemony in the twentieth century can be attributed to the growing prestige of American culture. It was, no doubt, much more difficult for the British to impress their colonial subjects (or, for that matter, the working classes in England) with the grandeur of British culture when a more seductive (if perhaps somewhat vulgar) American culture was constantly looking over their shoulders.<sup>9</sup>

Anyone who has ever read Edward Said on Orientalism and then watched the exploits of the brave, clean-cut American Orientalist scholar Indiana Jones as he calmly goes about the work of obliterating, in the course of one two-hour film, literally thousands of comically stupid and irrational Arabs or Asians can attest to a certain continuity between the ideology of American popular culture at the end of this century and that of European imperialism at the end of the last. For this and other reasons Americans cannot afford to regard the British imperial project of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a quaint relic of the past with no relevance to the global politics of the present. America, too, is an imperial power, if in more subtle and less visible ways than were the British. Moreover, a recognition of the powerful role of culture in the establishment and administration of the British Empire suggests that the British and American versions of imperialism may have more in common than is immediately obvious.

Ultimately, however, the treatment of American popular culture in Doyle's fiction corresponds more to the "late capitalism" of Mandel and Jameson than to the cultural domination decried by Schiller. The influence of American popular culture in Doyle's books amounts to far more than a simple case of Americans imposing their wills on Irishmen, and it is certainly true that Americans are exposed to a more prolific barrage of American popular culture than anyone else, just as a major portion of the pro-imperial propaganda of nineteenth-century Britain was directed at the domestic population in England. Thomas Pynchon's recent novel *Vineland* makes this point quite vividly in its depiction of a contemporary dystopian America in which freedom is a mere illusion and the lives of individuals are in fact powerfully determined by invisible—and thus all the more sinister—forces of social control. Pynchon's figuration of a secretly authoritarian America shows up most conventionally in his description of a massive system for political incarceration that the US government began to build in response to the revolutionary energies of the 1960s. But by the year 1984, in which Pynchon's book is suggestively set, the televisions of *Vineland* bombard the American populace with a stream of images so effective at attitude control that surveillance and coercion of the kind described by Orwell become unnecessary. The plan to establish a system of political "re-education" camps is cancelled as obsolete, because popular culture and other mechanisms at work in society (Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatuses") are so effective in molding the youth of America into obedient citizens that there are no serious political undesirables left for the camps to process. What is left in Pynchon's America of 1984 is a conformist nation of virtual zombies, a population of "drug-free Americans, all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie" (222).

Pynchon's concern has to do with the powerful interpellating effect of American popular culture (especially television) on the domestic population in America. *Vineland*, in fact, suggests a sort of conspiracy theory built on the terrible potential of popular

culture as a tool of social control by the powers that be in American society. This model is not new. In particular, it recalls familiar (if now somewhat dated) criticisms of popular culture by observers like Horkheimer and Adorno, who warn of the mind-numbing potential of a Culture Industry whose output is strictly controlled by large corporate communications giants in whose interest it presumably is to preserve the political status quo. But, as Jameson points out, the Adornian Culture Industry concept, however suggestive it might once have been, is rather quaint and clunky in the era of "high-tech" global capitalist culture. In point of fact, it is not clear nowadays whether the handful of multinational corporations that constitute the Culture Industry runs American popular culture in even the most figurative of senses. It may, in fact, be more the case that a Frankensteinian American popular culture runs the Culture Industry. After all, the boardrooms of those corporations do not constitute an Olympian height from which highly paid corporate executives can look down on the workings of popular culture, coolly deciding which buttons to push in order to increase their profit margins. The denizens of those boardrooms are themselves already subject to interpellation by popular culture and the ideology it conveys.

Of course, if multinational popular culture is really so powerful, then it must not be quite as empty and mindless as its critics sometimes charge. Such a culture must, in fact, be highly sophisticated; it must also contain a great deal of energy that might potentially be appropriated (along the lines of the cultural "poaching" described by critics like Michel de Certeau) as a resource for resistance. In its simplest form, such resistance might involve intentionally perverse readings that go against the apparent ideological grain: if popular culture seems primarily to offer subjective positions for passive and uncritical consumers, then there is a subversive potential in any attempt to read such culture in an actively oppositional way, seeking out its ideological seams and fissures and intentionally converting its predictable formulas into Brechtian alienation effects. Meanwhile, works like Pynchon's *Vineland* can use popular culture as a principal resource for the construction of a critique of popular culture. Doyle's work perhaps combines these two perspectives: less obvi-

ously critical of popular culture than Pynchon's *Vineland*, novels like *The Commitments* nonetheless offer more obvious opportunities for transgressive readings than does popular culture itself.

In the case of Roddy Doyle's Ireland, multinational popular culture is a foreign force the power of which has ominous implications for the Irish population. But resistance to the main messages of multinational popular culture is important even for citizens of the metropolitan centres from which this culture emanates. American popular culture, which took on so many of its current characteristics in direct response to the ideological climate of the Cold War (which required that American culture and society be represented in certain predictable ways), now rolls on according to its own internal logic, even when the Cold War that spawned it has presumably come to a close. And this juggernaut seems to be gaining momentum worldwide: the unprecedented global hegemony of multinational popular culture is perhaps the single most important defining phenomenon of international politics at the end of the twentieth century. America is at the very centre of that phenomenon, and it is the American military that provides the most important coercive backup to the global hegemony of capitalist culture. It is thus doubly important for Americans to be aware of this phenomenon so that they can oppose both their own cultural colonization and the blind exercise of American power in the support of interests that are not even their own.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in the surreal ending sequence of *Beautiful Losers*, a figure composed partly of "F." and partly of the nameless narrator of the first part of the book seems about to trigger a revolution, but is then safely transformed into a "Ray Charles movie," perhaps suggesting the final triumph of American popular culture (242). Cohen's own career as a novelist, poet, and successful popular singer and songwriter itself represents an extremely interesting confluence of literature and popular culture.
- <sup>2</sup> Moreover, America already loomed large in the politics of turn-of-the-century Irish Nationalism. The large numbers of Irish immigrants living in America often participated in pro-Nationalist political organizations such as Clan na Gael and provided substantial support, both financial and moral, to the Nationalist cause back in Ireland. No doubt the close links between Irish Nationalists in Ireland and Irish immigrants in America played an important role in making Ireland receptive to American cultural influences.

- 3 Doyle's fictional elaboration of the importance of American culture on the contemporary Irish scene seems accurate. See, for example, Fintan O'Toole's recent work for commentaries on many of the phenomena reflected in Doyle's fiction, including the centrality of American influences on Irish culture in recent decades. Incidentally, the back of O'Toole's study of Shakespeare, *No More Heroes*, bears a blurb written by Doyle, showing that Doyle is aware of the work of O'Toole, who occasionally refers to Doyle's work as well.
- 4 One source of disharmony in the group has to do with the interest of the saxophone player Dean Fay in a different kind of music, American jazz—which trumpet player Joey The Lips Fagan rejects as intellectual and “anti-people,” congratulating the Russians for having banned it (125-26). Of course, Fagan's anti-intellectualism is itself typically American.
- 5 Compare MacCabe's argument that “Joyce's politics were largely determined by attitudes to sexuality,” and that Joyce located his hopes for political emancipation largely in liberation from the restrictions placed on sexual desire by the Catholic Church and by the bourgeois morality of the British Empire (160).
- 6 Jimmy does, incidentally, show a possible Reagan-Thatcher twist to his philosophy when he argues that (*pace* the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll thematics of the 1960s counter-culture) a band playing the “people's music” has a political obligation to oppose the use of drugs (74).
- 7 See the discussion of this motif in Booker's “America and Its Discontents.”
- 8 Compare Joyce's continual suggestions that the Catholic Church and the British Empire (ostensible enemies) worked hand in hand to assure the continued subjugation of the Irish people.
- 9 British officialdom was highly conscious of this problem. In 1926, the British Cabinet Office issued a statement expressing concern that “so very large a proportion of the films shown throughout the Empire should present modes of life and forms of conduct which are not typically British” (qtd. in Jarvie 211). By 1927, the *Daily Express* was complaining that the dominance of American popular culture was making the youth of Britain “temporary American citizens” (de Grazia 53).

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