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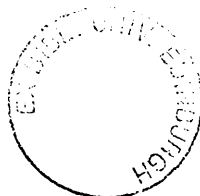
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**CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION:
COMMODITY CULTURE IN FICTION**

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In memory of W. H. Lindner
who always said it was no trip to Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent thinking in critical and cultural theory, this thesis examines the representation of commodity culture in a selected body of nineteenth and twentieth century fiction. In so doing, it explains how the commodity, as capitalism's representational agent, created and sustained a culture of its own in the nineteenth century, and how that culture, still with us today, has persisted and evolved over the course of the twentieth century. It follows the commodity and the cultural forms it generates through their historical development. And it considers how fiction, from realism through modernism and into postmodernism, accommodates and responds both to the commodity's increasingly loud cultural presence and to its colonization of the social imagination and its desires.

The study begins by examining responses to the rise of commodity culture in Victorian social novels before moving on to explore how key issues raised in nineteenth century writing resurface and are reshaped in first early modernist and then postmodernist fiction. The chapters focus, in turn, on Gaskell and the casualties of industrialism, carnivals of consumption in Thackeray, Trollope's 'material girl,' decay in Conrad, and shopping with DeLillo. Together, they argue that the task of assessing commodity culture's impact on identity and agency represents a dominant concern in literary production from the mid-nineteenth century onwards; and that both the commodity and the consumer world through which it circulates find ambivalent expression in the narratives that represent them. Finally, and as its title suggests, the thesis finds that the commodity figures throughout the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a living object of consumer fetish that excites desire yet strangely denies satisfaction.

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(I CAN'T GET NO) SATISFACTION

When I'm watchin' TV
And that man comes on to tell me
How white my shirt can be
But he can't be a man 'cause he don't smoke
The same cigarettes as me
I can't get no, oh no no no
Hey, hey, hey, that's what I say

I can't get no satisfaction
I can't get no satisfaction
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try
I can't get no, I can't get no

—The Rolling Stones (1965)

1. THE WORLD OF COMMODITIES

It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see -commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.

—Guy Debord

1.

What is retail therapy? Why is shopping fun? Where does desire end and ideology begin in a world of mass consumption? Engaging with such questions, this thesis draws on recent thinking in critical and cultural theory to examine the representation of commodity culture in a selected body of nineteenth and twentieth century fiction. In so doing, it explains how the commodity, as capitalism's representational agent, created and sustained a culture of its own in the nineteenth century, and how that culture, still with us today, has persisted and evolved over the course of the twentieth. It follows the commodity and the cultural forms it generates through their historical development. And it considers how fiction, from realism through modernism and into postmodernism, accommodates and responds both to the commodity's increasingly loud cultural presence and to its colonization of the social imagination and its desires.

The study begins by examining responses to the rise of commodity culture in Victorian social novels before moving on to explore how key issues raised in nineteenth century writing resurface and are reshaped in first early modernist and then postmodernist fiction. Focusing in this way on the early days of commodity culture provides an important historical backdrop to today's mass media consumer

world which, in its immediacy and propensity for instant gratification, all too easily erases any sense of a history. To end the discussion in the transitional years of the early twentieth century, however, would mean missing out on the more fantastic forms that the commodity assumes over the course of the twentieth century. Nowhere, as we will see, does the commodity jump through more hoops, perform more tricks, or assume a more garish and made-up appearance than in the fiction of postmodernity.

Accordingly, the thesis divides loosely into two parts: the nineteenth and early twentieth century excursions which form the next four chapters and the late twentieth century excursion which forms the last. Each chapter takes the commodity as its starting point, pairing off key moments in the development of commodity culture with representative texts. So a quick word about the novels considered here. In approaching this study, I faced a choice between making a broad, surveying sweep across almost two centuries of fiction writing, or pinpointing representative texts that bring into focus turning points in commodity culture and its literary representation. So rather than say a little about a lot of writing, I opt to say a lot about a small but strategically selected body of fiction. Because the selected texts crystallize critical moments in the rise and development of commodity culture, the chapters, taken together, approach an account of the whole—at least as far as such a project is possible when dealing with cultural events, trends, and phenomena that receive representation across the full range of cultural production, and that belong to a series of seismic shifts in cultural practice that run from the early nineteenth century through to today.

The first excursion begins roughly in the middle of the nineteenth century, ends shortly after its close, and examines literary responses to commodity culture from its heyday in the Victorian period through to its eventual decay in the transitional years of the early modernist period. The chapters focus respectively on the casualties of industrialism in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), carnivals of consumption in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), constructions of the 'material girl' in Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), and decay in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907).

The late twentieth century excursion jumps straight to consumer culture in postmodernity. In the process, the attention shifts from British to American fiction, and so from the epicenter of commodity culture in the nineteenth century to what has become its central hub today. This excursion takes as its focus shopping with DeLillo in *White Noise* (1985), and addresses the following question along the way. What forms do consumerism and its representation assume in the fiction of late capitalism?

It is important to stress here that the jump into the late twentieth century sets out to offer a contrast to the nineteenth and early twentieth century excursions made all the more vivid by a fold in space and time. In other words, the jump is partly conceived to feel as disorienting as the crazy consumer world where it lands. As a rehearsal for the last chapter, however, the preceding ones all draw parallels between their early visions of commodity culture and a range of late twentieth century ones. These include parallels between Gaskell's industrial novels and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), *Vanity Fair* and Martin Amis' *Money* (1984), *The*

Eustace Diamonds and the ‘Madonna Phenomenon,’ and *The Secret Agent* and the rise of British punk.

Taken together, the chapters on Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, Conrad, and DeLillo advance the argument that the project of representing commodity culture’s impact on identity and agency has remained a dominant concern in literary production from the mid-nineteenth century onwards; and that both the commodity and the consumer world through which it circulates find ambivalent expression in the narratives that represent them. Finally, and as its title suggests, the study finds that the commodity figures throughout the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a living object of consumer fetish that excites desires yet strangely denies satisfaction.

2.

By the mid nineteenth-century, the increasing influence of capitalist economy on everyday life generated in Britain what has come to be known as a ‘commodity culture’ —a culture organized around the production and exchange of material goods. The economic conditions that largely determined this cultural climate owed much to the industrial revolution. Beginning in earnest in the 1760’s and tapering off by the 1840’s, the industrial revolution saw a wide range of scientific, technological, agricultural, political, economic and legislative developments which, working in tandem with industry, wrought major and lasting changes in the fabric of British society. Amid advances in agricultural and machine technology, increased domestic and foreign trade, urban demographic explosions, and political reformation, the very character of Britain, as a mercantile nation,

altered radically. At the center of those changes, what both supported and spurred industry's accelerating expansion, was the emergence of a free or competitive market economy —the gradual substitution of a realized capitalist economic system for the quasi-feudal mercantile practices dating back to medieval times (see McNally 5-42; Cipolla 256-73). By the 1770's the agrarian-based marketplace previously in place had effectively given way to an industrial-based marketplace which traded in a new form of good: the capitalist commodity.

But the full realization of a capitalist economic order, from its embryonic character in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, transformed more than just the face of British economy. It also established a free market, or exchange, society —a society which in its practices, and wittingly or not, adopted capitalism's economic imperatives. Free market economy changed not only modes of production, distribution, and exchange, not only the way in which commerce was conducted and sustained, but also the conduct and sustenance of society itself.

At the very center of this change was capitalism's calling card: the commodity. Produced at unprecedented rates, exchanged in unprecedented numbers, and consumed in unprecedented volumes, commodities soon became the prominent, visible markers of industrial and market expansions in the decades leading up to the nineteenth-century. Commenting on the early days of Victorian commodity culture, Thomas Richards suggests that, by the nineteenth-century, "fundamental imperatives of the capitalist system," such as commodity production and exchange, "became tangled up with certain kinds of cultural forms, which after a time became indistinguishable from economic forms" (1). By the 1850's, he goes on to propose, "the commodity became," as it "has remained," the one "subject of mass culture, the

centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world” (1). At this juncture, in other words, as Britain emerged from the industrial revolution to enter an era of economic expansion that would see it through to the twentieth-century, the commodity so saturated British society that it stood as the nation’s representative, constitutive even of its culture.

London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, a monument to industrial innovation on an international scale, testified to just that. Billed as the ‘Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations,’ what Richards describes as a congress of sorts for a “league of nations” (17), the event hosted representatives of thirty-two nations from as far afield as Africa and Asia. Yet the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park where the exhibition took place “contained, not an army of diplomats and attachés, but an assembly of manufactured goods” (Richards 17), commodities of every conceivable shape and size. That a collection of commodities, however comprehensive and fantastic, sufficed to represent the participating nations—that commodities could, in a way, speak volumes for whole cultures— pointed towards the exhibition’s founding conception—namely, as Richards puts it, “that all human life and cultural endeavour could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles” (17). The visibility and distinction that the Great Exhibition accorded the commodity registered the extent to which material goods had gained cultural currency in nineteenth century Britain. What the Crystal Palace exhibited, in other words, was not just the amassed artifacts of global industrial innovation, but also how far capitalist society had come to assimilate—how deeply it had internalized— those artifacts in its collective imagination. In short, by the time of the Great Exhibition, commodity culture had come into its own.

One response to the rise of capitalism was the forging of a new field of social and economic thinking: political economy. The publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) in many ways marked the first consolidated if somewhat experimental effort to interpret the new forms of wealth which, in the wake of the industrial revolution, made up Britain's economy. Smith steeps his economic analysis in an Enlightenment philosophical tradition which saw political economy as a sub-field of moral philosophy. In fact, Smith tellingly taught political economy, not as a discipline in its own right, but as one of four parts (the others: natural theology, ethics, and rhetoric) which made up his course in moral philosophy at Glasgow University (see Napoleoni 25). And it is precisely Smith's tendency to treat political economy in the context of his thinking on rationalism, virtue, and civil society that explains why critics today generally view *The Wealth of Nations* as one of the final products of the Scottish Enlightenment.

In the course of the nineteenth century *The Wealth of Nations* became what Keith Tribe aptly describes as "the gospel of free trade and economic liberalism," a "textual symbol of British economic supremacy" (23-4), which in the hands of economic naturalists such as Ricardo and Malthus was heralded as the keystone, or first champion, of classical political economy. Smith's blueprint of *laissez-faire* economics laid much of the necessary groundwork for subsequent studies which, in the nineteenth century, arguably culminated in Marx's monumental *Capital* (1867; first English ed. 1887). Though Marx later criticized Smith for his tendency to internalize and 'naturalize' the economic system —what Marx understood as the very antithesis of natural— Smith's model already located the commodity at the center of the capitalist system.

But where Smith's theorization represents an essentially 'agricultural' approach to an essentially 'industrial' phenomenon, an approach later economists have faulted for its neglect of the industrial revolution as much as for its outdated social model (Mokyr 13; Napoleoni 31), Marx's theorization represents a response that was in many ways more in tune with its time. As Marx, responding to a Smithian version of exchange economy, asks in *Capital*, "how long is it since economy discarded the physiocratic illusion that rents grow out of the soil and not out of society?" (93). And where Smith arrives at an essentially optimistic response to economic liberalism, Marx in turn arrives at an often pessimistic and cautionary one. Smith fills his 1776 publication with promising visions of a nation prospering universally under a free market regime. In the 'Introductory Discourse' to *The Wealth of Nations* he goes as far as to propose that the production and consumption of commodities has beneficially "subdued the natural aversion of man from labour, and armed . . . industry with the zeal to undertake, and perseverance to overcome . . . irksome and disagreeable tasks" (15). Marx, almost a century later and so with the added advantage of hindsight, fills his 1867 publication with grim visions of a society alienated and dehumanized through industry's impersonal cogwheels, a world sucked dry by capitalism's insatiable thirst for profit: "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 241). Still, like Smith, Marx centers his analysis of capitalism on the commodity. Unlike Smith, however, Marx takes the commodity well beyond the 'natural' form Smith gives it. Marx abstracts it, categorizes it, systematizes it, and demystifies it —so as to return it an inanimate, dead object, without secrets and 'suitable' for objective study.

Marx's theorization, to counteract the progressive cultural assimilation of capitalist economy, sets out to distance the commodity from its cultural mythology. For Marx, there is no Smithian 'invisible hand' regulating exchange and spontaneously organizing free market society —no celestial, phantasmal, or superstitious explanation for economic order. Rather, there is the dialectic of commodity production and exchange which, through the marketplace, regulates capitalist economy and structures capitalist society. In Marx's hands, the commodity is no longer the trivial, magical thing we find in Smith. It becomes instead a completely rationalized and socialized object, the linchpin of capitalist society.

Though the commodity influenced cultural forms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the middle of the nineteenth century it developed into a cultural form of its own. The discourse of economic exchange became *the* discourse of cultural exchange; and the commodity, as the prime organizer of the capitalist economic system, lent itself to nineteenth-century society as *its* prime organizer. At one level, then, Marx's *Capital* represents both a recognition of this tangle and an effort to distinguish between economic and social activity, though the distinction was becoming increasingly unclear. At another level, *Capital* testifies simply by virtue of its subject to the degree to which the commodity already controlled and consumed those activities.

Another response to the rise of commodity culture, and one which began where Smith and Marx left off, was the Victorian social novel. Nineteenth century social novels similarly pour much of their energy into unraveling the significance of the commodity and the consumer world through which it circulates. That Marx begins his analysis of capitalism with the analysis of the commodity is no accident,

as Georg Lukács proposes somewhat sweepingly in *History and Class Consciousness*: “at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the riddle of commodity-structure” (83). If the commodity lorded such power over nineteenth century political economy, then it is no more likely to be an accident that, in their effort to address capitalism’s impact of society, nineteenth century novelists should similarly address the problems and the riddles of the commodity. In particular, nineteenth century novelists such as Gaskell, Thackeray, and Trollope —to name those considered in detail in this study— all work to uncover the imperatives of nineteenth-century capitalist society, to expose the commodity at work mediating the social world and merging exchange economy with its attendant exchange society. But rather than negotiating a response to capitalism’s significance in economic terms, social novelists negotiate that response in social terms.

In her discussion of the way economic constructions of society figure in nineteenth-century narrative, Elizabeth Ermarth convincingly argues this point. Social novelists, she suggests in *The English Novel in History*, register the “seismic activity” taking place in British commerce and culture “in the material of their art” (135). But economy and society do not enjoy so close and easy a relationship in nineteenth century narrative as they do in the ‘gospels’ of political economy. In contrast, for example, to thinkers such as Smith who conceive the social body in purely economic terms and who conceive the economic system as somehow ‘natural,’ social novelists grapple with questions such as “what if the social entity is not at all ‘natural’” and “what becomes of the economic mechanism then?” (Ermarth

139). Though Marx asks largely the same questions in his critique of economic naturalism in *Capital* (93-4), social novelists go one step further. As Ermarth goes on to argue, they “focus on precisely what Smith” and, I would add, Marx “overlook: the relationships and gaps between systems” (140). In this sense, while social novelists detail and interpret the changes wrought by the rise of capitalism, they also account for the human element in an otherwise dehumanized response to the capitalist condition. And in setting out to solve ‘the commodity riddle,’ as Lukács likes to call it, novelists like Gaskell, Thackeray, and Trollope take the commodity and the world through which it circulates beyond the point where nineteenth century economic thinking leaves them. They move from generality to detail, from anonymity to the intimately private, and from the abstractions of social theory to the realities of social practice. In short, Victorian novelists put the social back into Smith’s economic version of society. They also put the human back into Marx’s often impersonal dissection of the capitalist condition.

For example, Gaskell’s industrial novel *North and South* (1855) gives a version of society caught somewhere between Smith and Marx —that is, a version of society torn between a Smithian rural landscape populated by contented and rewarded artisan laborers, and a Marxian cityscape populated by discontented and unrewarded factory workers. In its geographic and thematic division between the grime and soot of Northern manufacturing cities and the pastoral charms of Southern farming country, the novel emphasizes the discord between dwindling land-based economies on the one hand, and booming city-based economies on the other. As Gaskell writes of Milton, the novel’s manufacturing city, “here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens,

puffing out unparliamentary smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain” (59). Though it says much about the part factories play in the nurturing of an industrial city, Gaskell’s analogy between a factory and a farmyard order of mothering also comments slyly on the contrast between the two. The ‘great oblong factory,’ massive and ‘many-windowed,’ impersonal and unemotive, seems no fretting mother at all. Moreover, the belch of the factory’s smokestacks, which Margaret mistakes for rain clouds, supplants nature. In this brief description Gaskell gives a sense of the displacement that exists between land-based and city-based economies, and their respective allegiances to nature on the one side and industry on the other. And of these two competing models of economy, so the novel makes clear, urban industrialism by far has the upper hand.

Margaret’s journey from the country to the city similarly marks a process of displacement that serves to dispel, returning to Marx’s phrase, the ‘physiocratic illusion’ that capital grows ‘out of the soil and not out of society.’ Significantly, Margaret receives this education in social rather than economic terms, through human experience rather than theoretical conjecture. Marx’s dead capital comes alive in Gaskell’s novel in the form of Milton’s factory owners, though without shaking its vampyric qualities. Here, it is not abstract labor sucked dry by abstract capital, but human laborers sucked dry by their human ‘Masters’ —Gaskell’s ‘undead’ personifications of wealth.

Following up on these thoughts, chapter two looks at commodity culture from the production end of the economic cycle in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, where the consumption of commodities remains conspicuously absent. In

particular, Gaskell's industrial writing explores the reifying influence of the commodity on productive society and the ways in which the industrial condition serves as a matrix for human relations. In both novels, the commodity-world has an alienating and dehumanizing influence on society's productive membership. Gaskell, however, actively resists that influence, investigating ways in which to repair a fractured society. And in exploring the individual's relation to a larger mechanized social body, the novels' journeys of disillusionment simultaneously assess the human casualties of industrialization.

In contrast to Gaskell who details what it takes to make commodity culture, novelists such as Thackeray and Trollope show what it takes to sustain it. To sustain commodity culture, it is necessary to circulate and consume commodities. And it is, in turn, precisely this aspect of commodity culture that occupies both Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* and Trollope in *The Eustace Diamonds*. In both novels, the production of commodities is what is now conspicuously absent. For Thackeray and Trollope, it is the social condition implicated in the exchange and consumption of material goods, rather than the industrial condition associated with their production, that serves as a matrix for human relations.

As capital is a dead entity in Marx's thinking, so too is the commodity a dead object, actuated only in the hands of its guardians (94-5). Even in Smith's account of exchange economy in *The Wealth of Nations*, it is clear that the commodity, though not quite Marx's rationalized object, nonetheless remains an inanimate thing. But in *Vanity Fair* and *The Eustace Diamonds* commodities—like 'dead capital' in Gaskell—come magically alive. They move, circulating and recirculating, through the novels and the language of the novels. What happens to

commodities once they enter society, once they move from the marketplace into the home? How do people acquire them, relate to them, value them, wear them, eat them, look at them, think of them, and even dream of them? These are key questions and motivating concerns for Thackeray and Trollope.

With these ideas in mind, chapters three and four look at the representation of commodity culture in first *Vanity Fair* and then *The Eustace Diamonds* to consider how both novels address the influence of the commodity-relation on human agency, the fetishistic functioning of the social order, and the economic construction of identity. In the case of *Vanity Fair*, the discussion concentrates on Thackeray's representation of the pathological consumer and the carnivals of consumption to which that figure belongs. In the case of *The Eustace Diamonds*, the discussion focuses on Trollope's investigation of women's potential to capitalize at a material level on the commodification of feminine identity.

Gushing from factory gates, commodities in Gaskell are hot off the production line. In Thackeray and Trollope, they still flaunt their price tags. In a sense all three novelists, writing in the first triumphal moment of capitalism, trade in the new goods of a commodity culture still in its infancy. By the turn of the century, however, novelists begin to deal in damaged goods. That is, commodities and the consumer world through which they circulate take on an air of decay in the hands of early modernist writers. Chapter five argues that Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907 but set in London in 1894, registers this shift.

As in Thackeray and Trollope, society in Conrad begins at the point where commodities enter into circulation—or at least, at the point where they *should* enter into circulation. For unlike *Vanity Fair* or *The Eustace Diamonds* where goods

change hands incessantly and circulate constantly, commodity traffic in *The Secret Agent* is surprisingly stagnant. Goods in Conrad sit on shelves and collect dust. But this sluggish traffic extends beyond the material world to encompass the novel's social world where political extremism and human agency suffer from an identical and consequent lack of momentum. Though the conditions of decay in Conrad give the novel's anarchists reason to aspire to the violent subversion of capitalist order, they simultaneously give way to an apathy which paradoxically robs them of the will to act.

Together, Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, and Conrad provide enduring images of the commodity's power to remake society molded in its image and tailor-made to its specifications —its power, in short, to reify the world around it. Each novelist conceives social exchange in terms of economic exchange. Each novelist constructs —and in the end deconstructs— identity and its constituent parts in terms derived from the market. These writers register the growing pains of capitalism. They identify the anxieties, the tensions, the conflicts, the choices —all the social problems and dangers— endemic to the rise of consumerism. In so doing, as we will see, they show nineteenth century commodity culture already moving rapidly towards today's mass cultural forms.

3.

Over the course of the twentieth century, commodity culture undergoes many twists and turns. Beginning in the early twentieth century, picking up in the post-war decades, and accelerating dramatically in the 1980's —the golden years of multinational conglomeration and deregulated markets— capitalist society shifted

away from industrial production and towards consumerism as we know it today, away from the making of commodities and towards their mass cultural representation. That is, starting in the first half of the twentieth century and taking off in the second, capitalist economies experienced massive market expansions, such as information technology, the service industry, mass media and the meteoric rise of advertising, which explicitly set out to prioritize consumption above all else—to create consumer demand where none existed before (Jhally 2-3). The last fifty years, in short, have witnessed a massive growth in the power and influence of the commodity over the social imagination and its desires. Such developments, as David Hawkes notes in *Ideology*, took place “alongside the corresponding rise to cultural prominence of the technological media of representation” (2). Through film, radio, television and, slightly later, computers, videos, compact discs, and the internet—through mass media generally—images of commodities have attained an unprecedented pre-eminence in the second half of this century.

In effect, the consuming public of the late twentieth century has been hit, as Hawkes explains, with “an explosion in the number and kinds of images” of commodities bombarding it “with incessant injunctions to purchase” (3). Technological advances in media representation, harnessed in particular by a global advertising industry, have resulted in images of commodities as much as commodities themselves circulating and recirculating through society. These images have supersaturated the late twentieth century consumer world to the point where representations of commodities have become autonomous subjects of consumption and objects of desire in their own right. As a consequence, commodities in postmodernity not only inhabit the material world, but have also colonized the realm

of representation as well. The postmodern era, as Hawkes points out, is “the era of the Image” (3).

Cultural thinkers of the late twentieth century quickly rose to the challenge of interpreting the commodity in its increasingly abstract and disembodied forms. Following Roland Barthes’ innovative writing on the semiotics of consumerism in *Mythologies* (1957), one of the first thinkers to integrate the idea of the ‘image’ fully into an account of late capitalism was Guy Debord. In 1967, Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* in which he works towards an account of ‘the spectacle’ of consumer society. The book is perhaps best described by John Frow in *Time and Commodity Culture* as a series of “discontinuous theses” and “aphoristic statements” that are “neither arguments nor dialogue” but sweeping “authoritative pronouncements” (5). Ron Savage explains in more detail:

[*Society of the Spectacle*] plundered philosophers like Sartre, Lefebvre and Lukács, and urbanists like Lewis Mumford. From his collage of avant-garde art, Marxist theory and existential obnoxiousness, Debord fashioned a language that battered on the subconscious like a negative mantra. *The Society of the Spectacle* is a series of numbered aphorisms, like the *Poesies* of Lautreamont and which Debord, in homage, plagiarizes. (31)

Despite the fact that this mishmash of disparate artistic, philosophical, and political thinking makes for a confusing read, Debord’s book does advance an argument about the ‘spectacle’ of late capitalism —an argument that foregrounds the commodity.

For Debord, the ‘spectacle’ both constitutes and determines late twentieth century consumer society. Though Debord’s idea of the spectacle resists simple definition, it is clear that the spectacle, like his working model of society, proves economic in origin, that it is anchored in a Marxian account of capitalism. Debord’s first thesis makes this immediately evident:

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation. (12)

The phrasing of this thesis invites a deliberate comparison with the first sentence of Marx’s *Capital*: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of *commodities*” (45). Important here is that Debord substitutes the spectacle for the commodity. This suggests, as his subsequent theses go on to elaborate, that the commodity spectacle represents the historical evolution under capitalism, the modern cultural manifestation, of Marx’s ‘classical’ commodity of the nineteenth-century. And though Debord sets out to modernize Marx —to revise and update Marx in the aftermath of post-industrialism— Debord’s spectacle and Marx’s commodity fulfill the much same function.

For Debord, the spectacle of commodities sits at the very center of the social world mediating and regulating all relations, shaping and determining the reality of our everyday lives. The difference between Marx’s ‘classical’ commodity of the nineteenth-century and Debord’s spectacle of the late twentieth is that the spectacle

represents the transformation of the commodity-as-thing into an advanced cultural form: the commodity-as-image. Debord puts it like this: “the spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (24). Following this formulation, Debord attempts to show how consumer society, given sufficient time, has moved towards the sophistication and ultimate completion of what he sees as capitalism’s project —namely, the representation of *all* cultural forms through their basis in the spectacle of goods: “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (29). The problem with this scenario, Debord insists, is that the spectacle becomes the only medium for social relations —a vacuous, abstract medium which increasingly distances the social body from any recoverable human relation. The spectacle instills in consumer society its irrational and compulsive appetite for consumption. It obscures the ‘self.’ But above all, it generates radical forms of everyday alienation. In such terms, Debord sees the commodity through the spectacle as an essentially semiotic phenomenon. Here, as Thomas Richards sums up, “Marx meets Saussure” (13).

Far from settling anything, *The Society of the Spectacle* spurred more debate and raised more questions about social problems and social possibilities under late capitalism. The commodity’s cultural status stood, as it did in Debord’s writing, at the center of the ensuing debates. Following Debord, for example, cultural thinkers like Jean Baudrillard further explored the semiotics of the commodity-form in works like *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), where he proposes that “a critique of general political economy . . . and a theory of symbolic exchange are one and the same thing” (128). In Baudrillard, Debord’s commodity-as-image becomes the commodity-as-sign. The ‘commodity question,’ as Lukács calls it, soon

began to surface in the work of feminist thinkers as well. Most notably, in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977) Luce Irigaray addresses the commodity's symbolic status in Western culture's construction of the feminine. In Irigaray, Marx not only meets Saussure, but Lacan and Freud as well. Baudrillard's commodity-as-sign now becomes Irigaray's commodity-sign-woman: "Participation in society requires that the [female] body submit itself to a specularization . . . that transforms it into a value bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier" (179-8). Putting all this together, the indication is that the commodity in its mass mediated and spectacular forms has become a focal point of cultural representation under late capitalism.

Chapter six argues that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is a case in point. In this parody of the postmodern consumer world, DeLillo offers a comic exposé—to twist Frederic Jameson's phrase—of the cultural *illogic* of late capitalism. Computer-generated voices clog the telephone lines, college professors philosophize about bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles, musicians play live Muzak, and tabloid coupons guarantee life after death. Cruising the suburbs, malls, and supermarkets of contemporary Americana, the novel describes a world of shopping, simulation, and surface engulfed by the white noise of consumerism—by a circumambient buzz of television sets, radio transmissions, computer terminals, electrical appliances, air-conditioning units, garbage disposals, neon lighting, sliding doors, and bar-code scanners. In DeLillo, people shop impulsively and compulsively. Shopping redeems. It recharges the soul. It defers death and reaffirms life. As the novel's visiting lecturer on living icons sums up, "Here we don't die, we shop" (38). In short, *White Noise* explores how the background babble of late

twentieth century consumerism not only affects conscious thought, but also penetrates and shapes unconscious moments. In the process, it works hard to decode the strange and unsettling forms that the commodity and its spectacles assume in the age of mass media. The result, as we will see, is a novel that stages a series of spectacular collisions between consumer culture and postmodernity.

2. OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: MATERIAL CULTURE IN GASKELL'S INDUSTRIAL NOVELS

THE UNDERBELLY AND THE UNDERDOGS

In novels such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847) and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1874-5) commodities and the material world through which they circulate possess little or no history. All the trappings of material culture—all the goods, wares, and trinkets which saturate and even bog down these narratives—materialize out of nowhere and at specific moments in the economic cycle: the moments of exchange and consumption. In *Vanity Fair*, for example, Jos Sedley eats his way across Europe as lavish feasts and other fun-fares of consumption spontaneously appear before him at every stop along the way. In *The Way We Live Now*, Melmotte spontaneously explodes on the London scene with all the material markers of a rich man married to a life of compulsive consumerism. But Trollope leaves Melmotte's history, like the history of his material fortune, deliberately untold. Thackeray sums up the substance and tenor of both novels in this description of his own: "there is a great quantity of eating and drinking . . . smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling " (*Vanity Fair* 33). As Thackeray touches upon here, both novelists deliver visions of nineteenth century commodity culture that are alive with celebrations of consumerism.

But what about the production of commodities and its attendant commodity culture? Where after all do all the goods which pepper these narratives come from? Who makes them? How are they made? And under what social and material

conditions? These are questions both Thackeray and Trollope leave entirely untouched. As the title to *The Way We Live Now* explicitly states in Trollope's case, these are novels of the moment. Moreover, the 'We' of Trollope's title, like the 'Vanity Fair' of Thackeray's, implicates but a specific social stratum: the consumer. These novels do not slip behind the scenes into kitchens or farms or factories or mines to witness all the productive energy that sustains the Jos Sedleys and Melmottes of the world. For such writers, interested as they are in the social dynamic of consumerism, the origin of commodity culture proves less important than its destination; the production of commodities, less important than their exchange and consumption.

The social parodies of Trollope and Thackeray represent one response by Victorian social novelists to the rise of commodity culture (see chapters 3 and 4). Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial writing, however, represents another one entirely—one that takes its view of society from the opposite end of the social (and economic) spectrum. For the industrial novel typically concentrates its narrative on the worker rather than on the consumer. Spearheaded by writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, and responding directly to what Thomas Carlyle proclaimed the "Mechanical Age" (Signs of the Times 34), the industrial novel emerged as a new breed of social novel in the wake of the industrial revolution. It emerged, then, in tandem with Britain's fully industrialized society towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Taking as their subjects the new social experiences of a newly industrialized world, explicitly industrial novels like Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) tell the untold stories of urban existence—namely, those of the working classes, the unemployed masses, and the material hardships of

their domestic lives. In short, they focus on the underbelly and the underdogs of nineteenth century society.

In particular, Gaskell's industrial novels center their attention on the productive activity that makes Victorian commodity culture possible rather than on the habits of consumerism that sustain it. Where *Vanity Fair* and *The Way We Live Now* thrive in the moments and spaces of exchange, Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* dwell in the places and processes of production. But they do so oddly. Gaskell sets both novels in manufacturing cities—in sprawling urban spaces built in the sooty shadows of industry and “deafened,” as she puts it in *Mary Barton* “by the noise of tongues and engines” (3). Yet her novels seldom make it through the factory gates into the inner chambers of industry. Though we hear telltale noises of factory production and witness clouds of industrial smoke choking the city air, we never really see an industrial machinery—human or metal—in motion. We never really experience the bump and grind of daily life on the production line. Still, many of Gaskell's characters are factory workers, people who, in the crudest terms, make commodities. Why, then, is it that we hardly ever see those workers at work, and never actually see the immediate products of that work?

Questioning the industrial label of *Mary Barton*, Jane Spencer provides a likely answer. She points out that *Mary Barton* spends more time in the home than in the factory, concluding that it is “family life in industrial society,” rather than factory life in that society, “that interests Gaskell” (34). The same observation, of course, holds true in *North and South*. In other words, Gaskell seems to be interested not so much in factories as in factory-people; not so much in commodities themselves, as in the social and domestic conditions required to produce them.

This helps to put in context Gaskell's strange claim, made in the preface to *Mary Barton*, to know "nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade" (xxxvi). Critics, from her contemporaries to ours, have offered a range of explanations for this disclaimer which the novel quickly disproves and which her letters, showing that she read widely in the field of political economy, flatly contradict (see Chapple & Pollard). Her novels alone display not only a deep and powerful understanding of theories of trade, but also a deep and powerful grasp of how those theories play out in social practice. Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation for Gaskell's statement is that it serves as an apology of sorts for a woman author stealing into what, in the nineteenth century, was still staked out as masculine territory (Ingham 55). An ongoing intellectual dialogue of technical and theoretical complexity, conducted almost exclusively among men, the budding field of political economy was still seen as a 'man's business' throughout Gaskell's writing career. But whatever the reason for Gaskell's retraction, whether false modesty, irony, apology, or insecurity, it matters little. Gaskell is concerned not with the abstractions of social and economic theory, but with the particulars of social practice and the concrete realities of an abject social experience.

So in calling attention to the problems facing Britain's industrial workers, Gaskell conceives those problems, as Terence Wright argues, in human terms rather than in the "statistical or objective" terms found in the annals of emergent economic and political theory (Wright 21). With characters such as Jem Wilson, John Barton, and Nicholas Higgins, for example, she gives a human face to Adam Smith's faceless laborers. She gives Marx's anonymous workforce human appetites, desires, fears, ambitions. Likewise, with the novels' factory and mill owners such as

Thornton and Carson Sr., Gaskell gives flesh to Marx's skeletal capitalists, names to Engels' nameless bourgeoisie. Yet, inasmuch as Gaskell's industrial writing sets out to interpret and to assess the impact of industrial market economy on its attendant social body, it still takes up the very issues that have consumed economic thought and theory from Adam Smith onwards. Labor and laborers, capital and capitalists, the commodity and the making of commodities are as much central concerns in Gaskell's writing as they are in the gospels of political economy.

So again, what of the social origins of the commodity and, in particular, its attendant cultural practices? Though Victorian writers like Thackeray and Trollope don't engage with these sorts of questions, Gaskell, as this chapter argues, does.

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Whereas Thackeray and Trollope locate their narratives in the thick of nineteenth century commodity culture, Gaskell locates hers on the outside looking in, as this passage from *Mary Barton* touches upon. Here, John Barton steps out at night from Davenport's gloomy cellar to find medicine for his sick and destitute friend:

It is a pretty sight to walk through a street with lighted shops; the gas is so brilliant, the display of goods so much more vividly shown than by day, and of all shops the druggist's looks the most like the tales of our childhood, from Aladdin's garden of enchanted fruits to the charming Rosamond with her purple jar. No such associations had Barton: yet he felt the contrast between the well-filled, well-lighted shops and the dim gloomy cellar, and it made him moody that such contrasts should exist. (70)

To say that such contrasts make Barton ‘moody’ is, of course, an understatement of sorts since his moodiness eventually turns murderous. More important now, however, is that the magical qualities Gaskell attributes to the window displays neither capture nor excite Barton’s imagination. The ‘lighted shops’, in other words, do not fill Barton’s thoughts with consumer fantasies for the very reason that such fantasies, for the novel’s factory workers like Barton, remain just that. But though the dazzle of the window displays fails to trigger fantastic associations in Barton’s mind, that same dazzle does remind him of the impossibility of indulging the very desire it conspires to create —namely, the compulsion to consume. For the ‘lighted shops’, crammed with goods of every sort, are spaces reserved for commodity exchange. They are starting points for consumerism. And as such, they represent a strangely alien world systematically denied to John Barton and the novel’s wider working community. They belong to a world that Barton, like Gaskell’s writing in general, sees through windows but never fully enters.

In his book on commodity culture and Victorian narrative, *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller attaches particular importance to the power of shop windows to excite the imagination. As “transparent media” for the display of consumer goods, he suggests, shop windows became in the imagination of the Victoria public new catalysts “for elaborate fantasies of consumption, sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition” (1-2). The nineteenth century social novel represents, as Miller goes on to argue, a similarly transparent medium, explicitly show-casing for its readership the same kinds of fantasies and anticipated pleasures of ownership. Though this becomes immediately apparent in novels such as *Vanity Fair* (to cite Miller’s

favorite example) it is not exactly the case in Gaskell. In fact, Gaskell's window passage in *Mary Barton*, like the industrial novel more generally, seems to be showcasing something quite different.

As Miller describes it, a shop window's transparency asks its viewer to formulate a social identity as 'consumer' in relation to the goods on display, to recognize its reflection in what could be seen as an almost Lacanian mirror. In Gaskell, however, the process of specular *identification* breaks down. Unable to recognize his reflection, John Barton, when confronted with the window display, cannot formulate an identity as consumer. He cannot *identify* with what he sees in (and through) the window: the goods do not 'speak' to him. The shop window does not become a cultural site teeming with the material signs of consumerism. Rather, for Barton and for the novel as a whole, it becomes an empty sign, a misplaced signifier divorced from meaning and belonging to a cultural discourse that excludes and eludes him.

Accordingly, the shop window passage in *Mary Barton* showcases not a consumer fantasy, but its general absence and impossibility within the working-class context of the industrial novel. For it is precisely because Gaskell, in the tradition of nineteenth century industrial writing, places her novels in the margins rather than at the center of industrial market society —because her narrative is not sucked in to the vortex of what Thomas Carlyle famously dubbed the 'cash nexus'— that consumer fantasies remain outside the scope of Barton's imagination and outside the record of the novel's experience. In effect, then, the window passage highlights perhaps the most striking characteristic of Gaskell's particular vision of industrial market society. In *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, the exchange and

consumption of commodities, as elusive luxuries glimpsed only in passing, remain largely and conspicuously absent.

Nowhere, though, does Gaskell bring home this point more poignantly than in her vivid description of the broken working-class homes her novels so frequently visit. In *Mary Barton*, for example, Gaskell goes out of her way to point out that Davenport's back room, polluted with "the moisture from pigsties, and worse abominations," has "not an article of furniture in it" (71). Even Davenport's front rooms have little more to offer by way of material props. When Barton looks around for something to prop up the sick baby's head, he finds that "there was literally nothing but some loose bricks" (68). *North and South* has its own scenes of domestic poverty and crippling material hardship. When Margaret visits Higgins' run-down home, she is welcomed by a "large fire in the grate" that makes "the whole place feel like an oven" (99). Margaret fails to understand that for the Higgins household a generous coal fire, lit as a sign of hospitality, represents a rare indulgence, what Gaskell tellingly terms a "lavishness" (99). That heat as a basic human need actually represents a luxury only serves to express once again, but in slightly different terms, a condition of severe material hardship.

Under-furnished and under-decorated, these domestic spaces remain uncluttered by the products of human industry. In *Capital* Marx famously talks about how wealth in capitalist societies expresses itself as an "immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity" (45). Here, however, there is no stockpiling of goods, nothing really to accumulate. There are no material signs of capitalist wealth in the way that Marx defines it. And interestingly, Barton's home undergoes a transformation in the course of *Mary*

Barton which testifies to just that. To put it simply, it is a transformation that reverses or undoes Marx's process of wealth-accumulation. Out of work and increasingly short of funds, Barton has no choice but to pawn his personal belongings. Piece by piece his home is steadily stripped and emptied of material possessions. Unit by unit, his already modest collection of commodities is gradually depleted.

In short, Gaskell's workers own very little and consume even less. In fact, starvation, what Gaskell's working-class characters call 'clemming', becomes a central and recurring problem in both novels, though particularly in *Mary Barton*. *Mary Barton* begins with a modest, makeshift feast which brings together a small party of working families. And like the bright fire in the Higgins' home, this feast clearly represents another extravagant and prohibitively expensive deviation from normal practice. In Gaskell's writing, these moments of rare indulgence are, as Jane Spencer points out, "poignantly short-lived" (39). Though rare and sporadic, such moments of restrained indulgence serve to throw the 'improvidence' and 'clemming' that plague so much of Gaskell's account of the industrial condition into high relief.

By contrast, when Trollope, in *The Way We Live Now*, takes us into the home of Melmotte, his villain-financier, we are wined and dined in lavish style at sumptuous and exclusive Society dinners. Gaskell's industrial novels, however, take her readers to see an opposite extreme. 'Clemming' families such as the Davenports in *Mary Barton* eat but a 'drop o' gruel' most of the time, and nothing at all the rest of the time. Thackeray, in turn, proves immensely fond of flaunting the procession of exotic dishes which parade through the pages of *Vanity Fair*. But in the general

absence of consumption, *Mary Barton* and *North and South* have no exotic dishes to catalogue and display. Gaskell has no celebratory consumer antics to parade through the pages of her novels.

Taken together, the kinds of barren and broken domestic spaces which characterize the homes of Gaskell's working families show few signs of belonging to a social order married to materialism. Their homes, like the activities that go on inside them, share almost nothing in common with a culture centered around the fast exchange and busy consumption of material goods. This, however, is not to say that Gaskell's working classes do not consume. Certainly, they buy clothes and food and furniture, rent homes, and so on; but their limited access to and restricted participation in consumption is, as Marx points out, more akin "to the consumption of food by a beast of burden," a "necessary condition" or concession for "the reproduction of capital" (572). Nor is this to say that the world of Gaskell's workers is totally divorced or disassociated from that of privileged consumers. Rather, it is somewhat the opposite in the sense that Gaskell's workers, though largely estranged from consumerism, are precisely the people who make consumerism possible in the first place. That is to say, they are the ones who work the factories, who operate the machinery, who manufacture the goods. They make the commodities that make commodity culture possible. But they are not 'buyers' in that culture. In Gaskell, this disenfranchisement registers in the poor material conditions of the workers' domestic spaces.

Mary Barton and *North and South* do nonetheless give sporadic, fleeting glimpses of a material culture in action. Like photographic stills, however, these brief moments are frequently arrested in motion and frozen in time. In a way, they

become narrative pin-ups which off-set Gaskell's scenes of poverty while adding contrast and definition to an overall narrative picture. One such snapshot, and a particularly interesting one, occurs in *North and South* when Margaret and her father reluctantly visit Thornton's house —the house, that is, of a wealthy factory owner—for the first time. In this passage, Gaskell describes the living-room's elaborate decor in a manner chiming so perfectly with its static, still-life qualities that it merits a lengthy quotation:

There was no one in the drawing-room. It seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with so much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the center by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting, or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of . . . the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. Wherever she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction. (112)

The room, as Gaskell presents it, is fossilized; its place in time, seemingly suspended; its atmosphere, one of 'icy, snowy, discomfort.' All in all the room gives

the impression of having been cryogenically preserved. Moreover, the detailed description not only catalogues the clutter of *things* that fill and decorate the room, but also captures the lifeless, inert, and impersonal character of those things. Walter Benjamin's point in *Reflections* about the "soulless luxuriance of the furnishings" (65) in nineteenth century bourgeois homes finds perfect expression in Gaskell's version of this fictional one. The scene similarly fleshes out Marx's point about how capitalist wealth manifests itself in the accumulation of commodities. More striking still is that the room is not simply devoid of human presence, but protected against it. To achieve what the narrator later calls the room's "normal state of bag and covering" (173), Thornton has the furniture 'bagged up', the carpet covered with a 'linen drugget', and every flat surface guarded by 'glass shades'. This is not a living-room, in other words, but a room shielded from the impact of living—a dead space for the ornate display of inanimate objects.

In a way, the combined effect of Thornton's living room—its static, soulless qualities and its cold atmosphere of suspended animation—give it the impression of belonging to a museum exhibit. And it is much in the inquisitive spirit of a museum visit that the novel, preferring to dwell in an altogether different social space, enters Thornton's home. The room, of course, belongs to one of the novel's 'masters' (the name Gaskell gives the novel's factory and mill owners). It belongs to a capitalist and a consumer in the most basic sense of the words. Above all, it represents a world as alienating to Margaret as the lighted shops prove to John Barton. And by taking her narrative however briefly and hesitantly into the privacy and intimacy of this 'other' domestic space, Gaskell effectively takes it to discover what after all accumulated capital buys, to discover what after all an accumulation of

commodities looks like, and to see where after all commodities end up. In so doing, the novel witnesses the final resting place of the commodity and so the end point of consumerism.

As in a museum, Margaret and her father experience this visit as formal spectators. And as in a museum, the shielding of the room's contrived exhibition creates a physical barrier that prevents active participation in the mode of life expressed by the studied arrangement of its 'anthropological' relics. The message delivered here is crystal clear: look, but don't touch. That same message, with its cold and uninviting tone, sums up in precise terms both novels' ambivalent, arm-length relationship with the world of consumers and their habits of consumption.

All in all, then, commodities receive an odd treatment from Gaskell. For the most part, they remain conspicuously absent from a narrative world constructed around their production. Yet even when they do make their occasional though brief narrative appearances in scenes such as the visit to Thornton's home in *North and South*, their presence proves just as jarring as their absence. On the one hand, then, lack of material comfort causes unmistakable and incapacitating discomfort in the homes of Gaskell's workers. In this domestic setting, the commodity stands as an obstacle to achieving sociality. It represents an alien and alienating entity. On the other hand, the stockpiling of material goods in the homes of Gaskell's factory owners provokes another kind of unease. There, commodities are sterile, hostile, unapproachable—even unknowable—objects. And it is precisely as dead objects intended for display and not for use that they also become unmistakable obstacles to material and social comfort. As such, the commodity once again becomes an alien

and alienating entity inflected, here, with a kind of haunting and almost autonomous presence.

So however uncomfortably, the commodity does nonetheless sit at the center of Gaskell's account of the industrial condition. The presence or absence of commodities in the novels' domestic spaces speaks respectively of participation in or exclusion from the exchange relations that animate capitalist society. At one level, and in the vocabulary of the novels' industrial discourse, Gaskell sees that society as divided into two antithetic categories: capitalists and workers. But at another level, and in the vocabulary of the novels' social discourse, those categories can equally be translated into another set of terms. In this context, Gaskell's version of society divides, respectively, into the haves and the have-nots, the insiders and the outsiders of a nineteenth century commodity culture. And at the center of this rift, Gaskell locates the commodity. It is the wedge that splinters and fractures society.

In Gaskell's terms, the kinds of domestic spaces where material goods are collected, placed on display, and privileged over living beings receives a wholly negative treatment precisely for its hostility towards all things human. Significantly, Gaskell's underlying criticism of this domestic space also echoes that of the novels' manufacturing ones. Thornton's house in *North and South* sits immediately adjacent to his factory "whence proceeded the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine" (111). Though the "continual whirl and din" (111) of frenetic factory production contrasts against the calm, lifeless atmosphere inside the house, both the house and the factory share a fundamentally similar trait. The only noises emitted by the factory are the clanking, roaring, and groaning not of

people, but of heavy machinery. Which is to say that the public places where commodities are made *sound* just as hostile to humanity as the private spaces where they are displayed *look* incompatible with human living.

Together, the atmosphere of these social spaces begins to articulate Gaskell's central complaint against the industrial condition where the dehumanization of social space mirrors a dehumanization of the social subject. As Gaskell sees it, the production of a material culture has an alienating influence on society's productive membership, a dehumanizing effect on its human machinery. In the early part of *North and South*, Margaret touches upon this very point when she observes that Thornton behaves in his business dealings "as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing" (153). This sums up in concise terms the operating philosophy that at first drives the novels' manufacturers who not only privilege commerce over humanity but also conceive that humanity in commercial, mechanized, and impersonal terms. In effect, Margaret's observation begins to describe what Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, comes to call the "reified mind" (93) —the state of false consciousness, endemic to capitalism, that involves seeing the social body not as a group of social subjects but as a collection of economic objects (see Lukács 83-5).

Gaskell reformulates this idea in more general terms when, in *Mary Barton*, she comments upon the role of an industrial workforce during an economic slump:

Above all, trade was very slack; cottons could find no market, and goods lay packed and piled in many a warehouse. The mills were merely worked to keep the machinery, human and metal, in some kind of order and readiness for better times. (63)

In the minds of the ‘masters’, workers represent but expendable mechanical parts to be owned and traded, worked or not, depending on fluctuating trends in the commodity market. In their own social experience of the industrial condition, the working classes represent little more than human cogs in the mechanical wheels of a commodity producing system. In effect, human labor now assumes the characteristics of the very commodities it works to produce. In such terms, Gaskell’s comment about human machinery zeroes in on what Marx similarly saw as one of the characteristic effects of industrialism on the modern laborer. The capitalist mode of production, Marx suggests, “distort[s] the worker into a fragment of a man” degraded “to the level of an appendage of a machine” (367). They “convert the labourer,” as he also puts it, “into a crippled monstrosity” (365). This in turn echoes Carlyle’s even earlier complaint in *Signs of the Times* (1829) that, under industrialism, “men are gawn mechanical in head and in heart” (37). In Lukács’ terms, what Gaskell, Marx, and Carlyle are describing —each in their own way— is reification in its most flagrant form: a human function acquires the “character of a thing” (83) and in so doing “reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation” (92) on the collective social body.

Lukács may assure of this much, but his critique of capitalism and its ideological forms, in the self-revelatory rhetoric of dialectical Marxism, never proceeds beyond an abstract account of the commodity’s impact on modernity. In fact, his own language in *History and Class Consciousness* seems as dehumanized and dehumanizing as the phenomenon of reification he denounces. If reification, as

Lukács claims, lays bare ‘in all its starkness’ the commodity’s dehumanizing influence on the social body, what exactly does that look like? Though Lukács’ discussion stops just short of the answer, Gaskell’s own treatment begins with it in the sense that her account of the commodity’s impact looks not at social theory but at social experience under commodity culture —at capitalism’s early case histories.

More precisely, in the context of Gaskell’s industrial writing the commodity’s influence on the world around it leads to the creation of places such as Thornton’s graveyard of a living room where commodities stand as the trophies of capital (dead labor). The space represents an expression, an almost mirror-like reflection, of the reified mind. This distortion of the social relation similarly generates such dehumanized and dehumanizing spaces as Davenport’s squalid cellar in *Mary Barton*, to take but one example among many. In this passage, the narrator describes Davenport on his sick-bed:

He lay on straw, so damp and mouldy no dog would have chosen it in preference to the flags; over it was piece of sacking, coming next to his worn skeleton of a body when the delirious husband saw drink, he snatched at it with animal instinct, with a selfishness he had never shown in health. (69)

Here, the human subject is reduced to the category of a sub-human thing. Not even a dog would choose to lie on the moldy straw Davenport uses as a bed; and his selfish thirst is more animal than human, more primeval than ‘civilized.’ What Gaskell depicts in this scene, in other words, is the transformation of the industrial worker into the cracked shell of a human being. In the figure of this worn skeletal mass,

Gaskell supplies her own and far more crippled version of Marx's 'crippled monstrosity.'

Mary Barton and *North and South* give further voice to commodity culture's reifying effects in the language her characters use to talk about social problems. When, for example, John Barton discusses social inequality with his friend Wilson, he immediately turns, albeit clumsily, to the vocabulary of political economy:

. . . they'n getten capital an we'n getten none. I say, our labour's our capital, and we ought to draw interest on that. They get interest on their capital somehow a' this time, while ours is lying idle, else how could they live as they do? (73)

Barton's take on capitalist economics may be a little misdirected, but his complaint, stemming from his personal social experience, intuitively hits the target. Though he cannot understand why the working classes are unable to *capitalize* on their labor, Barton's question is the right one —and one that Lukács does answer in his discussion of reification and its place in the consciousness of the 'proletariat': "a man's own activity, his own labor becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man" (Lukács 87). To simplify, under capitalist economic regimes, laborers no longer own their own labor. That is, insofar as productivity becomes a product itself, it no longer belongs to the worker but to the owner of that work —to the capital behind the labor. As a result, capital controls the human labor that controls the human laborer and not the other way around, as Barton feels all too keenly here.

It is significant as well that Barton's comments come during a spell of economic depression. His labor, what he perceives in his own simple logic as *his* capital, is lying as idle as the factory where he once worked. For industrial workers like Barton, income is inextricably dependent on active production. What puzzles Barton, however, is that the manufacturers continue to make profits even when they have stopped making commodities. Their capital, in other words, continues to grow independently of production. So when he observes that the manufacturers "get interest on their capital somehow a' this time, while ours is lying idle," Barton touches upon one of capitalism's most fantastic phenomena: the capacity of money to beget more money all on its own. Marx is equally struck by this seemingly magical event of "money generating money" (609). And though he explains it fully, if tediously, in his account of interest-bearing capital, Marx is pushed to the limits of his descriptive powers in order to do justice to the fantastic ability of capital, multiplying cyclically in a kind of a-sexual reproduction, to come seemingly alive. Switching metaphors every few lines when discussing this "magic of money" (103), he talks about the economic behavior of capital as perverse, mystifying, metamorphic and even fetishized, referring to the manner in which religious cults attribute supernatural powers to inanimate objects (see 608-9).

For Gaskell's workers in general and John Barton in particular, the autonomous growth of capital similarly presents itself as a mysterious and perverse occurrence. Capital, though a dead entity, acquires life-like autonomy. It seems to grow and breathe, contracting and expanding with the rhythms of invisible market forces. By contrast, as Barton painfully discovers, human labor represents a dead entity waiting for an infusion of capital to reanimate it. In Barton's case, that

infusion of capital fails to come in time. After losing his job in the third chapter he is unable to find work, and his labor sits by idly for the duration of the novel. And just as his labor enters this state of suspended animation, so too does Barton. He turns to opium under the weight of his despair. As his habit worsens he becomes a zombie of sorts. On auto pilot, he moves increasingly robotically through the novel in a state of numbness.

By vulgarly adopting the vocabulary of political economy when discussing social inequality, Barton converts social problems into economic ones. In so doing, he conceives the manufacturer and the worker only in terms of their economic functions —the functions, that is, which fix their place in the capitalist order. In other words, Barton transposes the economic properties of the commodity and its related forms onto human subjects. He limits and reduces social identity to an economic construct. Barton, of course, is not alone in this. In *North and South*, John Higgins' recurring conversations with Margaret about various social issues constantly turn into *ad hoc* lessons on political economy which sound no different than Barton's own tirades. Thornton, too, is equally fond of turning his conversations with Margaret into heated diatribes which conveniently extol his own theories of trade. For characters such as Barton, Higgins, and Thornton —that is, for Gaskell's factory owners and workers alike— everything has a tendency to boil down to a question of political economy. Sooner or later each of these characters winds up thinking about social identity and its constituent parts as strictly economic constructions.

Marx remarks that in capitalist society, “the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personifications of the economic relations that exists

between them” (95). This certainly seems to be the case in Gaskell’s industrial writing where industrial conditions serve as a matrix for human relations. Here, the social stage is transformed into a narrative platform for the playing out of economic roles. Characters accordingly become the personifications *par excellence* of their economic functions within the capitalist system to the degree that commodities, rather than the people behind them, appear to animate the social body. Human subjectivity is transformed into an objectivity that eclipses the social relation between people. In the process, economic things —from material commodities themselves to their more abstract components such as capital and labor— become endowed with a strange life of their own.

Though her writing carefully details the commodity’s reifying influence on productive society, Gaskell resists that influence. *Mary Barton* and *North and South* waste little time identifying industrialization’s dehumanizing and alienating effects and quickly move on to investigating ways in which to restore humanity and so reconcile a fractured society. Above all, Gaskell works to negotiate alternatives to the economization and mechanization of the social relation. That is, she works to renegotiate an identity for the social subject that exceeds the scope of a strictly economic definition. Lukács insists that reification is the “necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society” (197). Gaskell, however, refuses to accept that there are no alternatives, or even that this reality is a necessary one. Her writing searches for loopholes in the capitalist system and its monopoly on the social imagination.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s first act of resistance against the industrial condition comes as a political one. A delegation of workmen (Barton among them)

drawn from across Britain's industrial belt is formed with the idea of sending the men, armed with a petition, down to London to make their plight known to Parliament. What the delegation wants is the political representation that has so far been denied to them. Above all, they want the economic reform and social change they believe the political process has the power deliver. But when the delegation marches through London on its way to Parliament, the police violently break it up, ostensibly for "frightening the horses" and "molesting the ladies and gentleman going to her Majesty's drawing-room" (116). In the end, the government refuses to hear the delegation's testimony or even accept its petition.

The working classes in Gaskell may well be the unheard masses of industrial society, but not for lack of speaking out. Rather, it is more a case of the political establishment turning a deaf ear to their pleas. Parliament refuses to acknowledge the workers' petition precisely so that it can continue to ignore what it wants to ignore. As Gaskell presents it, polity does not govern national economy but, rather, the reverse. Here, the economic needs of a capitalist order set the political agenda. Maximizing capitalist profit positively requires, or so the novel would have it, a reified class of labor. And this is precisely why Parliament refuses to award the working classes political representation. Its refusal to acknowledge the petition, in other words, is above all a strategy for ensuring, as Hilary Schor points out in *Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, that the workers remain "cut off from the structures that invent . . . profits" (17). To do away with the very social condition that underwrites the profitability and viability of the industrial marketplace would be economic suicide for those—the government included—who stand to gain from it.

Lukács observes that capitalism creates and indeed necessitates “a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonizing with its own structure” (95). Barton’s trip to London with the workers’ delegation proves a painful discovery of just how far politics colludes with economic liberalism. “As long as I live,” Barton says upon his return, “our rejection that day will bide in my heart; and as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us” (117). At one level, *Mary Barton’s* brief excursion into the political arena proves a complete failure. At another level, however, that excursion successfully demonstrates the point Gaskell wants to drive home. Political structures of this kind offer no solution to this crisis of representation. Politics fail to rescue productive society from its exile at the margins of material culture.

North and South does not even bother to give politics a chance. With the exception of a few vague references to Chartism and the odd mention of a radical newspaper, the novel steers altogether clear of explicitly political territory. Instead, it takes its complaints to where *Mary Barton* ventures next—directly to the manufacturer. The first act of resistance in *North and South* comes as an industrial strike. By striking, the workers attempt to work out their grievances within the context of industrial relations, to put market forces to work for them. The trade disputes featured in both novels accordingly represent efforts to work out a problem—namely, the inhumanity of the industrial condition—in the economic terms that created the problem in the first place. ‘Labor’ confronts ‘capital’. A mutinous commodity attacks its guardian.

It is precisely as a mutinous act performed not by people but by *things* that the novels’ masters perceive the strikes. When, in *Mary Barton*, a deputation of

strikers arrive for an interview with the manufacturers, not one of the manufacturers around the table thinks “of treating the workmen as brethren or friends” (213). No one thinks of treating the strikers as anything but the economic entities and functions they represent in the capitalist system. Similarly, in *North and South*, when the strikers swarm Thornton’s factory and lay siege on his adjacent house, Margaret pleads with Thornton to speak to his workmen “as if they were human beings” (177). Reinstatement as human beings, restitution of full and equal social membership, rescue from the peripheries of the material world, these are what the strikers set out to negotiate with the manufacturers. They do not succeed, however.

The strikes in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* never manage to reinstate the worker’s humanity precisely because the act of striking takes the shape of an economic dialogue. Striking requires that both sides of the dispute impersonate their economic roles. In effect, when ‘labor’ exploits its place and function in the industrial order, it reinforces, rather than subverts, the economic construction and experience of identity. By striking, labor can succeed in disrupting the smooth running of industrial order, but it cannot succeed in rescuing the subject from the margins of the material world. It cannot, in this way, extract the subject from its immersion in the production of material culture. Simply put, in her strike scenarios, Gaskell makes it clear that her characters never exit the economic stage —though they do break a lot of scenery.

Barton’s act of murder presents a similar problem. The killing of Carson Jr. (the son of a factory owner) has nothing to do with the person, but everything to do with what he *represents* in economic terms. The murder is an inhumane act of retribution against the manufacturers for their inhumane treatment of the workers. It

represents 'labor' symbolically lashing out and killing the 'capital' that controls it: "To intimidate a class of men, known only to those below them as desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages . . . this was the light in which Barton viewed his deed" (432). The act of murder is conceived as a means to invert an established power structure. The consumer and not the worker now becomes commodity culture's fatal casualty. Planned in unison by the striking workers though executed by Barton alone, the murder conspiracy is an immediate product of the reified mind taken to a lethal extreme. It is the brainchild of what Barton later calls "perverted reasoning" (432). Yet, the act of murder itself solves none of the novel's social problems. In fact, it just makes them worse. After the killing, Barton's feelings of alienation and despair, dislocation and exile, become more pronounced than ever.

It is no accident that in the search for alternatives to the commodification of social life, all of these social acts —petitioning, striking, murdering— backfire. Though these acts represent protests against both the industrial condition and the capitalist system behind it, they nonetheless reinforce the problems they set out to solve. They all work within the context and the confines of an economic discourse and its intrinsic value-system. For Gaskell, these kinds of social acts ultimately represent futile knee-jerk reactions against capitalism's recuperative force.

In the end, it is not through action but through education that Gaskell's novels manage to break away from the commodity-relation. Only in the re-education of the 'reified mind' do we see any kind of reconciliation between the consuming members of society and their productive counterparts. That re-education, what Coral Lansbury aptly calls "civilizing capitalism" (95), occurs in *Mary Barton*

and *North and South* in the substitution of a Christian value-system for an economic one. In other words, it is only when the 'reified mind' meets the Christian mind that any 'progress' is made.

In *North and South*, for example, Margaret uses her influence over Thornton to win him over to the ideals of Christian charity and brotherhood. Under her influence, he finally agrees to improve the working conditions of his employees—something all the striking and political lobbying fails to do. It helps, of course, that Margaret won't marry him until he comes around to her way of thinking, and his final acceptance of Margaret's conditions could be seen more cynically as a form of sexual blackmail. Still, at the end of the novel, Thornton does change his tune considerably when he claims that "money is not what *I* strive for" (333). Tellingly, Mr. Hale calls this Thornton's "new catechism" (333): a cocktail of capitalist and Christian ideologies.

In *Mary Barton*, Carson ultimately forgives Barton for murdering his son in a chapter revealingly titled 'Forgive Us Our Trespasses'. In this episode, Barton's admission of guilt has all the overtones of a religious confession. And it is, moreover, to seek "absolution" (432) that Barton confesses to Carson in the first place. The social crime is transformed into a religious sin that Carson now has the power to forgive. In that transformation, Barton's understanding of his violent act changes considerably: "now he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother" (432). He now recognizes that he has killed a person rather than an impersonal personification—or human representation—of an economic function. The dead 'thing' regains its human status. Even Carson loses his object appearance once Barton translates his social crime into religious terms:

The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being from another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man. (431)

Carson's humanity is restored. Barton no longer sees him as his 'employer', his 'enemy', or even his 'oppressor', but simply as a broken old man. It is similarly significant that Barton dies shortly afterwards in Carson's arms, while the latter says a pray for his forgiveness. In that moment of *spiritual* reconciliation, Mary forgets "all that had divided her father and Mr Carson" (438). Social and economic barriers fall away in the spiritually binding texture of this religious moment.

Gaskell's reconciliation of characters such as Barton and Thornton with their opposite numbers through a spirit of Christian brotherhood has its own problems. Granted, Thornton promises to behave better towards his employees and recognizes the validity of their demands; and Barton ultimately sees his murderous act as the product of 'perverse reasoning'. Still, this leaves the larger social landscape of industrialism untouched and unchanged. Though the minds of a few factory owners and a few factory workers change, social structure and organization remain exactly the same. In other words, though Gaskell solves social problems at an individual level, the larger, more structural ones continue to happen. In an essay on Dickens, George Orwell has this to say about *Hard Times*: "its tendency if anything is pro-capitalist, because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious" (84). Gaskell's industrial novels are equally guilty

of this charge. The power to effect social change at individual levels comes under the jurisdiction of the novels' capitalists.

What Gaskell delivers as an alternative to the blind acceptance of the industrial condition is an internal shift in allegiances and not an external paradigm shift. At the dead center of commodity culture, Gaskell wants to locate God rather than the commodity. She wants, in this sense, to champion an almost Smithian, pre-industrial view of market society. The 'invisible hand' at the center of *things* remains invisible instead of assuming as Marx would have it the material form of the commodity. For Gaskell, it is not the economic relation itself that automatically corrupts social relations, but the spiritual void behind it. Give capitalism a Christian conscience and all the guilt that comes with it, and suddenly commodity culture becomes user-friendly. Gaskell's final narrative picture, however, still shows the commodity making and remaking society in its own image and tuned to its desires. The outsiders are still on the outside looking in. The down and outs remain down and out.

EPILOGUE: FROM GASKELL TO TRAINSPOTTING

Gaskell's industrial writing speaks of a desire to interpret, assess, and, above all, represent the underbelly and the underdogs of commodity culture. Still with us today, that desire has persisted and evolved alongside the very cultural condition that Gaskell documents in its early forms. It is a desire, I want to suggest in closing, that motivates such unlikely contemporary novels as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*.

First published in 1993, Welsh's controversial debut novel is ostensibly a book about the ups and down —though mostly the downs— of heroin addiction.

The novel, together with its film adaptation, quickly gained cult status in Britain for its stark and frank account of life as an addict in Edinburgh's urban slums. What sets *Trainspotting* apart from earlier cult novels about drug addiction such as William Burroughs' *Junky* (1953) is not so much the heroin angle, but the Edinburgh angle. That is, Welsh is by no means the first to write bluntly and recklessly about addiction. American writers have been doing it profitably for decades, and, back in Britain, De Quincey had already done it over 150 years earlier with his own debut novel, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Nor is Welsh the first to write in phonetic Scots and indulge in site-specific slang, though he is among the first contemporary Scottish writers to capitalize on it. But with *Trainspotting*, Welsh is one of the first to treat the subject of drug addiction explicitly in the context of the slum and bum culture of Edinburgh's decaying urban spaces.

It is precisely the novel's choice and treatment of this social context that sets it apart, however dubiously, from earlier 'heroin' novels. Whereas in Burroughs' *Junky*, for example, heroin becomes a compulsive obsession that wipes out any possibility of a wider social commentary, it becomes in *Trainspotting* a symptom of a deeper cultural crisis facing the post-industrial, urban world. Heroin becomes an expression of the despair and dejection facing the alienated casualties of post-industrial capitalist society —namely, the unemployed and the unemployable, “the junkies, wideboys and psychos who ride down the elevator of opportunity,” as the book's cover blurb puts it.

It is, significantly, for telling the untold story of an abject social condition (the down-and-out addict) in a specific social site (Scotland's decaying urban spaces) that the style of Welsh's writing has been dubbed 'urban realism' by many

of its contemporary reviewers and critics. And under this label, the novel has often been held up as a new archetype for 'counter-cultural' writing. It nonetheless remains in doubt whether Welsh ultimately achieves a counter-cultural narrative or even succeeds in delivering urban realism. But those are questions for another time and place. Still, it is worth noting that *Trainspotting* privileges the 'urban' over 'realism' in the sense that Welsh seems more interested in the urban as a context for text than in realism as a narrative strategy.

Important here is the idea that urban realism —particularly one that takes society's alienated members as its subject— points fiction in a new direction. Far from a new phenomenon, I want to suggest, Welsh's take on urban realism shares fundamental similarities with much earlier fiction. In particular, it shares fundamental similarities with the nineteenth century industrial novel. Just as *Mary Barton* and *North and South* tell their own untold stories of urban existence, so too does *Trainspotting*.

What I am getting at is that the nineteenth century industrial novel prefigures twentieth century urban realism by the likes of Welsh, just as De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* prefigures twentieth century 'confessional addict' narratives like Burroughs' *Junky*. Nineteenth century writers like Gaskell and late twentieth century ones like Welsh share the same interest in the overlooked casualties of capitalist society, just as Welsh and De Quincey share a common obsession with the properties of opiates and their derivatives. Moreover, the current trend of urban realism in contemporary Scottish writing and the Victorian tradition of industrial writing approach society and its malaise from a similar perspective and with a similar focus. Ultimately they arrive at similar social critiques.

Whereas Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* do this in the context of the newly industrialized culture of early Victorian Britain, *Trainspotting* does it in the context of a post-industrial urban culture. Gaskell's is the 'Mechanical Age.' It is the first age of the machine, the free market, and the metropolis; the age of industry, early capitalism, and a nascent commodity culture. By contrast, Welsh's is the information age; the age of communication technology, mass media, mega-markets, and the mega-metropolis. It is the commodity culture of late capitalism and the post-industrial era—Guy Debord's society of the spectacle at its worst.

In the nineteenth century, Marx made what has become the all too familiar claim that religion is the opium of the people. Now, in the late twentieth century, Welsh shows how opiates have become the religion of a young people whom society has written off and who, more to the point, have written themselves off. In a rare moment of lucidity and sobriety, Mark Renton, the novel's narrator, gives this astute self-diagnosis that perfectly echoes Barton's complaint in *Mary Barton*:

So it goes back tae ma alienation from society Such a state of affairs induces depression on ma part, aw the anger gets turned in. That's what depression is, they say. However, the depression also results in demotivation. A void grows within ye. Junk fills the void, and also helps us tae satisfy ma need tae destroy masel, the anger turned in bit again. (186)

Yet, for all this insight, the novel never gets far beyond the diagnosis of a symptom. Junk, like booze, for the most part remains a crude plot device to animate Welsh's lackadaisical and self-indulgent characters. And despite its social critique, the novel explores no alternatives and negotiates no new possibilities. *Trainspotting* leaves us

with the chilling thought that the self-destructive momentum of accelerated urban decay, like the alienation and despair from which it stems, is all but unstoppable. In the end, *Trainspotting* shows little imagination —though it does show, with gratuitous attention to gory detail, one side of contemporary urban experience that seldom makes it into print.

However ineffectually, *Trainspotting* does diagnose the same traumas of alienation, depression, demotivation, despair, violence, and self-destruction that Gaskell's industrial novels find endemic to commodity culture nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier. And if we read contemporary fiction like *Trainspotting* alongside Gaskell, we begin to see that, although its symptoms may have changed substantially, the cultural problematic has not.

3. THACKERAY'S GOURMAND: CARNIVALS OF CONSUMPTION IN *VANITY FAIR*

THE 'CELEBRATION' OF CONSUMERISM

In Gaskell's industrial writing, society stops at the point where commodities enter into circulation. In nineteenth century social satires like Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), however, society only begins there. As we saw in the last chapter, Gaskell's *North and South* and *Mary Barton* loiter on the fringe of the material world where commodities represent mysterious and unknowable entities, and where their exchange and consumption remain largely exotic and alien social practices. By contrast, Thackeray places *Vanity Fair* at the dead center of the material world. Which is to say that Thackeray locates the novel's account of nineteenth century society in a world organized around the circulation and consumption of material things —a world where object and subject qualities are freely exchanged and mutually informative; where commodities, rather than the people behind them, generate desire and excite imagination. In short, *Vanity Fair* shows how, through the commodity's corrosive effects on society, people can become slaves to consumerism —to the 'perverse' and vainglorious worship of materiality and the material.

To begin, Thackeray's narration exhibits a fascination with the more spectacular and performative aspects of commodity culture. Whereas Gaskell presents commodity culture as a subdued, stagnant and dispirited affair, Thackeray's account is overpowered by the busy noises and bustling celebrations of

consumerism —as this description of the Elephant hotel in Pimpernel, the novel’s preposterous festival city and iniquitous gambling haven, clearly shows:

In consequence of the *fêtes* the house was full of company, the tables in the street were already surrounded by persons smoking and drinking the national small-beer, the public rooms were in a cloud of smoke, and Mr Jos having, in his pompous way, and with his clumsy German, made inquiries for the person of whom he was in search, was directed to the very top of the house, above the first-floor rooms where some traveling peddlers had lived, and were exhibiting their jewelry and brocades, above the second-floor apartments occupied by the *état major* of the gambling firm; above the third-floor rooms, tenanted by the band of renowned Bohemian vaulters and tumblers; and so on to the little cabins of the roof, where, among students, bagmen, small tradesmen, and country-folk, come in for the festival, Becky has found a little nest. . . (754-5)

The celebrations here practically transform the hotel into an amalgamation of a three-ring circus and a covered bazaar, a kind of outdoor fun-fair brought incongruously indoors. The atmosphere and appearance of the building are completely overrun by the spectacle of the *fêtes*, alive with chaos and charged with energy. Yet, there is a wild Bohemian liberty about the place —a touch of seediness in its shady mix of charlatans, street performers, and small-time profiteers, and a tone of vulgarity in its “general buzz and hum” (755)— that sits uncomfortably with Thackeray. For all its apparent jollity, the description of the celebrations at the Elephant Hotel hints though the eclectic list of morally ambiguous characters at an unease over the nature of the event. Although it surfaces here in one of the novel’s

more clownish moments and in the context of the flagrantly farcical world of Pumpernickel, it is a discomfort that runs throughout the whole of Thackeray's representation of society.

In 'Behind the Curtain,' the prologue to *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray brings this dimension into focus when he sums up the substance and tenor of his novel with a self-conscious recognition of its performativity:

As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place. There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling: there are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the look-out, quacks . . . bawling in front of their booths, and yokels looking up at the tinsel dancers and poor old rough tumblers, while the light-fingered folk are operating upon their pockets from behind. Yes, this is VANITY FAIR: not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy. (33)

Although the comic element in this passage —this farcical and even trivial parody of social order— tends to belie its own importance, the passage nonetheless makes a significant point. While characteristically “exposing his own illusion,” as Juliet McMaster notes (*Thackeray* 22), Thackeray issues clear directions not only on how to read the novel's representation of society, but also on how to understand the novel's attitude towards that representation.

It is significant that, like the scene at the Elephant Hotel, the prologue to *Vanity Fair* possesses an unmistakably carnivalesque air. In it, Thackeray invites us

to think about his novel not so much as narrative, but more as performance. He posits himself not as author or narrator, but as stage manager. Characters also become 'players' in the double sense of the word, functioning equally as actors and revelers in the performance. The performance and its players, moreover, belong to the public-square world of the fair —to a raucous, celebratory experience that is at once physical (eating, drinking, smoking), communal (fighting, dancing), jocular (laughing, fiddling), licentious (jilting, making love), burlesque (rough old tumblers, tinselled dancers), and even underhanded and corrupt (cheats, pick-pockets, quacks). We are greeted, in other words, with all the key ingredients that constitute the carnival world in Bakhtinian thinking, including “the strong element of play,” the collapse of “the distinction between actors and spectators,” and the emphasis on the material and the bodily (Bakhtin 7-19). Similarly, Thackeray also confronts us with all the usual suspects that populate the carnival in Bakhtin's model: the rogue, the clown, and the fool, to cite a few of the archetypal fixtures, all figure prominently. In effect, Thackeray's foreword to *Vanity Fair* asks us to understand society in the novel as carnivalesque performance, spectacle, exhibition.

Thackeray's attitude towards this carnival scene, however, remains decidedly inimical. All the celebratory efforts —all the noise, energy, and motion— conspire to cover up an underlying unease and dissatisfaction with the proceedings. As he “looks into the Fair,” Thackeray admits to a feeling of “profound melancholy” (33). This 'Fair' offers but the appearance and sounds of merriment. It goes through superficial and artificial motions of festivity. It even appears to have nothing more to celebrate than an empty ritual of celebration itself. As such, Thackeray's vision of the carnival as a forced and contrived event immediately turns both cynical and

skeptical. To put it somewhat differently, we get the distinct impression that the laughter here is canned.

In this sense, Thackeray's 'event' offers none of the affirmative potential that Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, discerns in the wider cultural phenomenon of the carnival. Thackeray's vision rasps in particular against Bakhtin's idea of the carnival as a place of spontaneous social regeneration and spiritual renewal infused, as Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson also see it, with "positive and value-generating force" (437). In one of *Vanity Fair's* many allegorical digressions over the state of Vanity Fair, Thackeray again relapses into explicitly carnivalesque imagery. Here, the 'Fair' is anything but a place of renewal and regeneration; the celebration, anything but celebratory:

Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of caps and bells? This dear friends and companions is my amiable object —to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private. (290)

As presented in this passage, the carnival experience depletes human energy, exhausts social force, and threatens to leave its participants and spectators alike in a state of alienation and depression. Even the 'grinning and tumbling, and jingling of caps and bells' figure as empty, tedious gestures. If Bakhtin's account borders on being that of a "carnavalesque utopia," as Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson aptly put it (439), then Thackeray's vision can be said to border more on the side of a

carnavalesque dystopia. More to the point, it represents, as the title *Vanity Fair* itself suggests, a decidedly hedonistic and self-serving enterprise.

The reason for Thackeray's adverse representation of the carnivalesque (which accordingly shares little of Bakhtin's general optimism) lies in the specific nature of what is being performed, exhibited, and above all consumed in the novel itself —namely, the new material world of an emergent commodity culture. With this in mind, it is not at all surprising that Thackeray's take on the carnivalesque tacks away from Bakhtin's. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, we should remember, develops his thinking and articulates his theories primarily in the context of Rabelais' work and so in that of a medieval folk culture. Rabelais' is a society that still subscribes heavily to feudal mercantilism. It has yet to encounter capitalism or its industrial products. The commodity —capitalism's calling card— has yet to explode on the scene and swamp the social world as it does in the nineteenth century. It has yet to become, in Thomas Richards' words, "the one subject of mass culture, the centrepiece of everyday life" (1) in the wake of the industrial revolution. So what sets Thackeray's treatment of the carnival apart from Rabelais' (and so also Bakhtin's) is that in *Vanity Fair* the carnival now meets the commodity.

In *Vanity Fair*, in other words, Rabelais' carnival world is transformed into Thackeray's world of commodities where the act of celebration now doubles as an enactment of consumerism. The commodity and its culture of consumption are precisely what Thackeray puts on parade to phantasmagoric effect in *Vanity Fair*. As we will see, the commodity's mediation of society gives rise to its own self-indulgent and self-serving forms of carnival. The commodity generates spectacles of its own making which place both itself and its consumers on full display for

sensational public consumption. In such terms, and to borrow a phrase from Joseph Litvak, the ‘Vanity Fair’ of the novel can be understood to constitute at once the “marketplace and spectacle” of nineteenth century commodity culture (231).

Yet the mediation of society through the exchange and consumption of commodities, like the anticipated pleasures and fantasies of their possession, leaves the social body oddly unfulfilled in Thackeray's writing. As Andrew Miller similarly concludes in his discussion of Thackeray in *Novels Behind Glass*, “objects of desire,” when acquired in *Vanity Fair*, prove surprisingly “unsatisfactory” (49). Refuge in materiality and the material, so *Vanity Fair* proposes, brings no reward at all. Thackeray articulates as much in the novel's prologue, where the ambivalent representation of the carnivalesque figures in large part as a metaphoric indictment of nineteenth century commodity culture and its human relations; and where all the noise and excitement of the ‘Fair’ fail to compensate for a palpable malaise over the nature of the event itself.

Following these thoughts, this chapter concentrates its discussion on the character of Jos Sedley, Thackeray's carnivalesque embodiment of gourmandise, to explore the argument that the novel expresses acute anxieties over the commodity's unnerving power to seduce and mesmerize the social imagination. Informing this argument is the idea running through the whole of this thesis —namely, that the commodity can be understood not as a dead object belonging to a vacant cultural space but instead as a category for cultural analysis alive with crisis, conflict, tension, debate and possibility. The discussion that follows, in other words, continues to see the commodity as a register of desire —as an almost semiotic medium thick with the cultural *signs* of consumerism. The result is an account of

Thackeray's representation of commodity culture that proceeds to veer away from Bakhtin towards Marx, Lukács, and Baudrillard in order to open up the notion of a dystopian carnival to other theoretical inflections.

On a separate note, it is important to stress here that the near exclusive focus on Jos Sedley and his relationship with commodities is not conceived to obscure or dismiss all the other figures of consumer seduction populating *Vanity Fair*. Rather, the idea is simply to zero in on one of Thackeray's most explicit and outrageous articulations of consumer seduction —one, moreover, that has received far less critical attention than the more obvious candidate found in Becky Sharp. As an embodiment of mercenary female duplicity, Becky Sharp is only one among other key figures such as old Dobbin or young Crawley who clearly merits a place in the argument alongside Thackeray's gourmand.

COMMODITIES ON PARADE

In Thackeray's writing, where society figures as a form of capitalist exhibition, the commodity accordingly takes center stage. In many ways, it directs the performance, even constitutes the 'show.' Thackeray touches upon this early on in *Vanity Fair*. When the destitute Becky Sharp first arrives at Amelia's house after leaving school, Amelia instantly shows off every material thing she possesses. Thackeray takes time out to catalogue some of the objects of value:

You may be sure that she showed Rebecca over every room of the house, and everything in every one of her drawers; and her books, and her piano, and her dresses, and all her necklaces, brooches, laces, and gimcracks. (53)

In Gaskell's writing, the material world remains largely off limits. Brief glimpses into the homes of her novels' capitalists, for example, show commodities tucked discretely and austere away under dusty sheets, as in the case of Thornton's graveyard of a living room in *North and South*. But in Thackeray's writing, commodities almost jump off the page to be fondled, touched, tasted, circulated, consumed, or lavishly gazed upon with any combination of admiration, envy, greed, or desire. Thackeray overloads his narrative with elaborate and minutely detailed descriptions of material goods of all shapes and sizes. So much so, in fact, that *Vanity Fair* is not only steeped in the thick of *things*, but also, as a bulky physical object in its own right, made thick in part by the narrative stockpiling of those things. Above all, then, in Thackeray's account of a material culture in full swing, commodities figure as objects of gratuitous display and conspicuous consumption.

Thackeray brings this dimension into clear focus in his representation and treatment of Jos Sedley, the novel's "great, lazy gourmand" (363) and a figure who can be seen with Bakhtin in mind as an amalgamation of various carnival fixtures including the clown and the fool. When, for example, the novel first introduces the heavily ornamented figure of the gourmand, we are confronted by this flashy sight:

A very stout, puffy man, in buckskins and Hessian boots, with several immense neckcloths, that rose almost to his nose, with a red-striped waistcoat and an apple-green coat with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces (it was the morning costume of a dandy or blood of those days), was reading the paper by the fire when the two girls entered, and bounced off his armchair, and blushed excessively, and hid his entire face almost in his neck-cloths at this apparition. (55)

This sizing-up of Jos Sedley is particularly interesting for what it does not size up. That is, the description focuses not so much on the person it proposes to introduce but, rather, on the catalogue of material ornaments that adorn him. Those ornaments saturate the language of this passage to the point where they eclipse the sight of the human presence behind them.

As such, Thackeray effectively asks us to take this inventory of material objects as an intimate statement about the person who owns them and, in this case, displays them. The careful description of those objects becomes pivotal to the reading of Jos Sedley's character. Taken together, the objects decorating this human figure speak volumes about that figure's attitude towards the material world. In particular, we get a clear sense that, draped luxuriously and neck deep in luxury goods, Jos revels in the vanities, comforts, and pleasures of material indulgence. His reaction to the entrance of Becky and Amelia further comments on the degree to which he embraces the perceived solaces of materialism. Uneasy about their intrusion into the room, he literally barricades himself behind his lavish ornaments, retreating still further into the recesses of the material world. In so doing, Jos shows himself more than willing to allow commodities to upstage his presence—to screen him, speak for him, even represent him. It is as if, by retreating into materiality, Thackeray's flagrant materialist places himself under an almost Derridean state of erasure. The commodity's 'presence' defers and displaces that of the 'thing' it now represents.

Throughout *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray exhibits a keen interest in the gourmand's embracement of materialism, his self-effacing 'escape' into the world

of things. In this bulky description, and one which mirrors Jos' own physical bulk, Thackeray again remarks on his dandy's intense and seemingly irrational fixation with both commodities and the practice of consuming commodities:

He was lazy, peevish, and a bon-vivant His bulk caused Joseph much anxious thought and alarm; now and then he would make a desperate attempt to get rid of his superabundant fat; but his indolence and love of good living speedily got the better of these endeavours at reform, and he found himself again at his three meals a day. He never was well dressed; but he took huge pains to adorn his big person, and passed many hours daily in this occupation. His valet made a fortune out of his wardrobe; his toilet-table was covered with as many pomatums and essences as ever were employed by an old beauty. . . Like most fat men, he *would* have his clothes made too tight, and took care they should be of the most brilliant colours and youthful cut . . . In the afternoon he would issue forth to take a drive with nobody in the Park; and then would come back to dress again and go dine with nobody at the Piazza Coffee House. He was as vain as a girl. . . (59-60).

This passage fleshes out a complex portrait of a die-hard consumer. It begins, however, by diagnosing a compulsive eating disorder: Jos simply cannot resist over-eating and in this 'binge and purge' scenario bingeing has by far the upper hand. Moreover, the grotesque image of 'superabundant fat' further testifies in conspicuous and superlative terms to Jos' insatiable appetite for self-indulgence. Thackeray's description of gluttony in this passage shows just how forcefully acts of consumption dominate Jos' actions. It testifies to his total, inescapable surrender to gratification. And above all it illustrates, as the novel reconfirms time and again in

scenes such as the drunken punch-bowl incident at Vauxhall Gardens (91-4), his complete inability to control, limit or even inhibit the compulsion to consume.

Thackeray, however, makes it clear that food is not the only object of this almost libidinal drive. Rather, the psychology of the compulsive eater equally describes the gourmand's attitude towards commodities more generally. That is, in the immediate context of nineteenth century commodity culture, it equally and more importantly profiles the psychology of a compulsive consumer. Thackeray highlights as much when he takes us into one of the most intimate of intimate spaces—the boudoir—to witness Jos' obsession with the material adornment of his figure, his expensive clothing habit, and his excessive use of beauty products. Moreover, the image Thackeray also provides of the fat body tightly squeezed into elaborate and fashionable costumes brings these various forms of material indulgence together into an amalgamated expression of unrestrained—even *unrestrainable*—consumerism.

In effect, this image of the gourmand also gives a certain resonance to Baudrillard's claim in *Consumer Society* that today's mass cultural tendency "towards conspicuous consumption" derives from "the great capitalist dinosaurs" of the nineteenth century and their more rudimentary, but no less conspicuous, habits of consumption (91). More importantly, that same image also gives resonance to the more general point Baudrillard makes about the way that commodity consumption functions in consumer society as a coercive force over the will of individuals. In a word, the commodity exerts an inordinately powerful influence here over the mind. It captures the imagination. It commands unconscious thought. It feeds fantasies. It drives desire.

Accordingly, what Thackeray diagnoses in and through the character of his gourmand is an acute case of what Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, calls the 'reified mind.' In *Capital*, Marx describes its effects when he sets out to rationalize the seemingly irrational relationships that crop up between people and their material things. As Marx sees it, the commodity's all-embracing mediation of capitalist society creates a powerful illusion at the level of consciousness itself, what he presents as a sort of mass hallucination. This he calls the "fetishism of commodities," and in the simplest terms, it consists of the human investment of inanimate things with a life-like agency and autonomy of their own, with a perceived subjectivity they cannot possibly possess in any rational order of things (82-3). Jean-Paul Sartre offers a far more visceral expression of the commodity's fetish character in *Nausea* (1938). In this trademark novel of existential angst, the central character, Antoine Roquentin, is plagued by a nauseating feeling that material things have come uncannily alive:

Objects should not touch, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it's unbearable. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals.
(22)

For Marx, the result of such fetishistic illusions, or 'metamorphoses' as he sometimes calls them, is not only that commodities seem to come magically alive as Roquentin feels all too keenly in *Nausea*, but also that "the definite social relation" between people now assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 82-3). Following Marx, Lukács goes on to suggest in *History and Class*

Consciousness that this fetishism of commodities saturates all aspects of life in capitalist society (197), that it constitutes what Baudrillard in *Consumer Society* comes to call “everyday” ideology (35). In Lukács’ thinking, the commodity’s daily mediation of society has the knock-on effect of dislocating the social body from its own human agency. It usurps the subject of its own subjectivity.

In such terms, Thackeray’s profile of the gourmand in *Vanity Fair* offers its own caricatured—even carnivalesque—version of Marx’s delusional fetishist, what becomes Lukács’ ideologically conquered subject. Lukács talks at length about how the reified subject learns “to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (91). In Jos Sedley we find someone who not only learns to satisfy all needs *with* commodities, but also appears to have no needs beyond those already cultivated and addressed *by* commodities. His wholesale devotion to materialism, moreover, has all the alienating and dehumanizing effects that Lukács finds symptomatic of reification—of the commodity’s ideological purchase on human consciousness.

That is, in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, Jos acquires and even sets out to acquire the appearance and qualities of the very things he exchanges and consumes. So much so, as we have already seen, that he goes out of his way to subordinate his physical form to those of commodities themselves—an effect that is not lost, for instance, on his mercenary servant, Isodor, who only ever sees and thinks of his employer in terms of his material possessions. What is more, the abundance and proximity of those fancy goods play havoc with Isodor’s over-active

imagination, tantalizing him with vivid but impossible fantasies of ownership in which the force of his desire blinds him to Jos' inconvenient existence:

As he helped Jos through his toilsome and complicated daily toilette, this faithful servant would calculate what he should do with the very articles with which he was decorating his master's person. He would make a present of the silver essence-bottles and toilet nicknacks to a young lady of whom he was fond; and keep the English cutlery and the large ruby pin for himself. It would look very smart upon one of the frilled shirts, which, with the gold-laced cap and the frogged frock-coat, that might be easily cut down to suit his shape, and the Captain's gold-headed cane, and the great double ring with the rubies, which he would have made into a pair of beautiful earrings, he calculated would make a perfect Adonis of himself, and render Mademoiselle Reine an easy prey. 'How I long for sleeve-buttons; and the Captain's boots with brass spurs, in the next room, *corbleu!* what an effect they will make in the *Alleé Verte!*' So while Monsieur Isodor with bodily fingers was holding on to his master's nose, and shaving the lower part of Jos's face, his imagination was rambling along the Green Avenue, dressed in a frogged coat and lace. . . (358-9)

Commenting on this passage, Andrew Miller calls attention to the "implicit violence" of Isodor's longing (17). As Miller points out, the careless way the servant holds a razor to his employer's throat while daydreaming of appropriating his possessions hints ominously at the potential danger of the situation. Indeed, this fantasy of domestic insurrection dismantles and redistributes Jos' stockpile of commodities as if he were somehow dead and out of the way already. More relevant still is the way Jos' fetishistic worship of materiality and the material shows itself to

be contagious: not only is Jos subsumed in the servant's fantasies by the mesmerizing presence of his master's glamorous things, but those same things also end up monopolizing the servant's imagination as well. As in Sartre's *Nausea*, it is as if these objects are reaching out and touching people —though here to intoxicating rather than nauseating effect.

Yet, however intoxicating, Jos' die-hard pursuit of conspicuous consumption, from behind this barricade of commodities, does have the immediate consequence of estranging him from the larger social body:

Before he went to India he was too young to partake of the delightful pleasures of a man about town, and plunged into them on his return with considerable assiduity. He drove his horses in the park; he dined at fashionable taverns . . . he frequented theatres, as the mode was in those days, or made his appearance at the opera, laboriously dressed in tights and a cock hat But he was as lonely here as in his jungle at Boggley Wollah. He scarcely know a single soul in the metropolis, and were it not for his doctor, and the society of his blue-pill, and his liver complaint, he must have died of loneliness. (59)

Full and zealous participation in the public performances of commodity culture gives way in Thackeray to an acute sense of dislocation from society as powerful as any experienced in colonial exile. That Jos nurses a medical complaint of highly suspect authenticity in order to achieve some degree of social interaction similarly comments on the severity of this isolation. Thackeray again hammers home the point when he goes on to show Jos' daily routine of riding about "with nobody" in the park and dining "with nobody" in a café (60). By embracing the material world, then, Jos essentially severs himself from direct human contact. He fetishistically

invests inanimate things with the power and agency to represent him. And he shows himself unwilling or at least unable to enter into social relations without the mediating intervention of commodities.

It precisely this alienating relegation of the subject to the sub-human category of a material thing—this subjection to the commodity’s dictatorial custody over the imagination and its desires—that exposes “in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity-relation” (82)—or so Lukács assures us in the heat of theorization. But Lukács, as the previous chapter on Gaskell argues, stops just short of showing exactly what dehumanization and its ensuing states of alienation look like. True to its abstract Marxian outlook, Lukács’ account of both commodities and the social dynamic they create remains strictly in the conceptual realm of hard-core political economy and hard-boiled social theory. In the tradition of the nineteenth century social novel, however, Thackeray’s writing—like Gaskell’s writing in the context of industrialism—takes over where the discourses of political economy and social theory leave off. It, too, supplies a face and a body to append to Lukács’ anonymous and ghostly human subject.

More exactly, in Thackeray’s representation of society which looks at the social body and its imagination through the lens of consumerism, the commodity’s reifying influence generates visibly disfigured forms like that of the novel’s gourmand, this “stout, puffy” figure (55) rolling indolently in “superabundant fat” (59). As Thackeray makes a point of stressing in extreme terms, Jos’ material nepotism has the effect of warping both his body and the appearance of his body almost beyond rational recognition. It over-inflates and disfigures his form to almost

inhuman dimensions. This is slyly suggested, for example, in the novel's farcical image of Jos hunting tigers astride an Indian elephant (71). Although on one level the image of Jos on his elephant offers an absurd icon for the British Empire, on another level it comments sardonically on the gourmand's elephantine dimensions by affiliating the lumbering beast with its loafing human burden.

More to the point, the grotesque distortion of the human figure, brought on by Jos' pathological habits of consumption and expressed in a wide variety of images throughout the novel, can be seen to represent a physical assertion of the ideological distortion Lukács finds so distinctive of the reified mind. It gives Lukács' immaterial social being its own materiality; his disembodied social body a new-found corporeality. In other words, it personalizes what Lukács so meticulously and methodically depersonalizes in the clinical language of historical materialism.

The consumption of commodities has an additional side-effect in *Vanity Fair* that further emphasizes its tendency towards the distortion of the social subject, and that similarly personalizes the impersonal visions of Marxian theorization. That is, the exchange and consumption of commodities do more in Thackeray's account than simply deform the gourmand: they emasculate him as well. In his self-deluding efforts to counteract the disfiguring effects of his over-indulgence, for example, Jos tellingly keeps a private stash of make-up: "his toilet-table was covered with as many pomatums and essences as ever were employed by an old beauty" (59). In the same passage, Thackeray goes on to state the case even more plainly when he asserts that, in his nepotism, Jos is "as vain as a girl" (60). Here and throughout the novel, Thackeray inflects his descriptions of both the gourmand and his material things with feminized and feminizing language.

This emasculation of the novel's profligate consumer has spurred many critics to speculate in competitively imaginative terms over the question of Jos Sedley's ambiguous sexuality. Joseph Litvak, for one, is particularly outspoken on the topic. In an article on sophistication and sexuality in *Vanity Fair*, he describes Jos as "a sadly obtuse style queen" and effeminate "travesty of sophistication" who raises anxieties over fashionable consumption's "homosexualizing potential" (224). What I want to suggest is that Thackeray's feminization not only of the gourmand himself, but of his material possessions and habits of consumption as well, delivers an oblique but nonetheless cutting critique of those who, in pursuing instant gratification as a total way of life, take the mantras of materialism too far.

The question of whether or not Jos' effeminacy offers enough evidence for 'outing' him as Litvak cautiously does is one that I want to avoid here. For now, it is enough to recognize that Jos' sexuality remains ambiguous at best throughout the novel. Still, Jos' effeminacy alone suggests some association with homosexuality and so with what, in the dominant sexual politics of the nineteenth century, represents a form of deviance and debauchery. For, however indeterminately, Thackeray does draw on the epistemology of the Victorian closet, to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's catch phrase, in order to imply a certain departure from accepted Victorian constructions of gender. And it is precisely with what amounts, in the cultural discourses of the nineteenth century, to a delinquent form of anti-social transgression that Thackeray aligns Jos' compulsive and narcissistic pursuit of material gratification. Accordingly, the 'homosexualizing potential' of Jos' marriage to materialism stresses the asociality implicated in his self-serving and decadent ethic of consumption. And it equally shows how the feminized and

feminizing commodity, as a fetishized object standing in for the emasculated human presence, can become the kind of alienating obstacle to sociality envisioned by thinkers like Marx and Lukács.

In *Capital*, Marx writes forcefully about how capitalist modes of production transform the worker “into a crippled monstrosity” (365), into the exact kind of skeletal and zombie-like figures we see haunting the dead social spaces of Gaskell’s industrial novels. But as Thackeray’s treatment of the gourmand illustrates, *Vanity Fair* arrives at a substantially different expression of the dehumanization and crippling of the subject—though one that similarly attests to traumas of alienation, dislocation, and disorientation. Not unlike Marx, Gaskell focuses her writing on the social and economic disenfranchisement—as much as the physical and psychological break-down—of a mechanized industrial work force. The social conditions generated by the production of commodities are precisely what lead to the creation of Gaskell’s crippled human forms. In *Mary Barton*, for example, the severe material deprivation that invariably plagues Gaskell’s factory workers leaves Davenport sick, starving, and reduced to a cracked shell of a human being: “he lay on straw so damp and moldy no dog would have chosen it . . . over it was a piece of sacking, coming next to his worn skeleton of a body” (69). By contrast, Thackeray’s representation of commodity culture shows how capitalist modes of exchange and consumption can lead in turn to their own forms of mutilated subjects. For Gaskell’s inhumanly emaciated and materially deprived worker, *Vanity Fair* offers the grotesquely corpulent and materially depraved consumer—a symbolically castrated counterpart to Marx’s crippled monstrosity of a worker.

Still, it is no coincidence that the emasculated and materially deprived figure of Jos Sedley nonetheless provides its own caricatured expression of Marx's commodity fetishist. Neither is it an accident that, more generally, Thackeray's account of pathological consumers in *Vanity Fair* echoes Marxian thinking on the idolatrous behavior and delusional tendencies associated with commodity culture's dominant ideological conditions. For in its representation of the process of consumption, Thackeray's writing zeroes in on a phenomenon that not only consumes nineteenth century social fiction, but also preoccupies the discourses of political economy and social theory from Adam Smith onwards.

Namely, Thackeray responds in *Vanity Fair* to the commodity's supersaturation of the social world in the nineteenth century, to its increasing primacy in daily life following the meteoric rise of capitalism. This, I take it, is what Andrew Miller means when he suggests, somewhat cryptically, that *Vanity Fair* "imagines the fetishistic reduction of the material environment to commodities" (9). Like many economic and social thinkers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and like Marx in particular—Thackeray's writing registers the commodity's uncanny ability to remake the social body in its own distorting image. That is, it registers the commodity's growing power to redirect the desires and colonize the thoughts of its consuming public.

In registering this trend, Thackeray works overtime to present the commodity, possessed of an almost erotic seductiveness, as an enchanted object capable of spawning irresistible consumer appetites. Jos Sedley's fetishized relationship with the material world may be one of the novel's most explicit and obvious articulations of consumer seduction and enchantment, but the gourmand is

far from exceptional in his wholesale surrender to materialism. To take another example among many others, George Osborne is likewise waylaid by the material world's intoxicating allure. In his campaign to seduce Amelia, for instance, Osborne resolves to purchase her a gift, but is himself seduced by a desirable article in a shop window:

'I should like to make her a little present,' Osborne said to his friend in confidence And I daresay he would have bought something very nice for Amelia; only getting off the coach in Fleet Street, he was attracted by a handsome shirt-pin in a jeweler's window, which he could not resist; and having paid for that, had very little money to spare for indulging any further exercise of kindness. (158)

As Thackeray emphasizes, Osborne completely caves in to the window display's open invitation to consume —surrenders himself to its orchestrated scenario of seduction. In short, we once more witness the commodity actively ambushing the imagination, reaching out disarmingly and 'touching' the mesmerized and intoxicated consumer.

Baudrillard comments on exactly this process of entrapment in his discussion of shop-windows in *Consumer Society*:

Tracking along the shop-windows, with their *calculated riot of colour* . . . this hesitation-waltz of shopping is the Kanak dance in which goods are exalted before being exchanged. Objects and products are offered there in a glorious *mise-en-scène*, a sacrilizing ostentation. . . This symbolic giving, aped by the objects themselves on their stage-set, this symbolic, silent exchange between the

proffered object and the gaze, is clearly an invitation to real, economic exchange inside the shop. (166)

Although what Baudrillard has in mind is more today's neon world of the mega-mall, we can see the dynamic that he identifies already operating in Thackeray's much earlier writing. In Osborne's 'hesitation-waltz' before the shop-window, the merchandise is exalted, much as Baudrillard would have it, in a spontaneous exchange between the object and the gaze. In this almost Lacanian moment of specular identification and symbolic exchange, Osborne's initial desire to gratify Amelia is instantly redirected into a desire to gratify himself. The shirt-pin's conspicuous display in the shop-window —its 'glorious *mise-en-scène*' and 'sacrilizing ostentation'— triggers an appetite for consumption that overpowers even the sexual desire first motivating Thackeray's hijacked shopper.

So like Jos Sedley's own scenarios of material debauchery or even his servant Isodor's vivid and potentially violent fantasies of ownership, Osborne's episode of impulse buying similarly illustrates how, in *Vanity Fair*, capitulation to the commodity's seductive force induces narcissistic and self-serving forms of activity. It again articulates the novel's underlying conception of the commodity as material culture's agent of corruption.

Taken together, the novel's many scenarios of consumer seduction and many scenes of material indulgence crystallize the way that Thackeray receives and represents the commodity and its powerful presence in nineteenth century society. In *Vanity Fair*, the commodity no longer resembles the mundane and functional object we find, for example, in the world of utilitarian commerce envisioned by

Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith sees commodities, through an Enlightenment philosophy of reason, as essentially inert and passive bodies —“dead letters” or “supplies” only “animated and actuated by the spirit of demand” (2), as Thomas Richards aptly puts it in his reading of Smith. But in Thackeray’s writing, commodities no longer look or behave anything like Smith’s dead, dull entities.

Rather, the commodity in Thackeray becomes a sensuous, exciting, and fantastical object —a useless novelty and whimsical vanity that the novel parades about, inciting spontaneous and almost orgiastic frenzies of desire. In *Vanity Fair*, in other words, the commodity no longer just caters to human desires, but now it creates them as well. It appears possessed of an autonomous agency. It becomes an inviting dream-symbol for fantasies of material indulgence. It represents a spectacular object placed on show before the reified and reifying gaze of its consuming public.

Moreover, the novel’s scenarios of consumer seduction and material indulgence also crystallize the way that the commodity in Thackeray turns everyday consumer practice into a form of spectacle. For in effect, it is as much the spectacle of commodities as the commodity itself that Thackeray’s novel so gratuitously exhibits and so feverishly consumes. And in this respect *Vanity Fair* shows nineteenth century commodity culture, with its rabid lust for instant gratification and fervent embracement of conspicuous consumption, already moving towards today’s mass cultural forms —forms, as the epilogue goes on to discuss, that feature

everywhere in the consumer mania so graphically depicted in recent novels like Martin Amis' *Money* (1984).

EPILOGUE: THE MONEY CONSPIRACY

The previous chapter ends by arguing that the nineteenth century industrial novel prefigures the bleak visions of late twentieth century urban novels such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*; and that Gaskell's desire to represent the underbelly and the underdogs of commodity culture is also a desire that motivates Welsh's self-proclaimed 'counter-cultural' take on the post-industrial condition. What I want to suggest here is that Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* similarly engages in a project of cultural representation that still drives fiction today, motivating such popular novels as Martin Amis' *Money* (1984).

Money is an irreverent spoof on consumer culture in postmodernity, on what Frederic Jameson otherwise calls the cultural logic of late capitalism, and what the novel simply calls 'the money conspiracy.' In the character of John Self, the novel's corpulent, grotesque, depraved, porn freak, fast-food junkie of a narrator, Amis delivers a powerful if disturbing portrait of the pathological consumer in today's retail world, a sort of modern-day counterpart to Thackeray's grotesque gourmand:

I play the space games and the fruit machine. I feel like a robot, playing a rival robot, for a price But if they had a hole in the wall here, I think I'd put money into it. I go somewhere else and eat junk food and drink junk wine. I hit the betting shop and lose dough

perched on a stool. I wander through the newsagents and check out the chicks in the magazines. I go home and lie down and then it all starts again. (155-6)

Self finds value only in the hedonistic rituals and spectacles of materialism. He finds pleasure only in the speedy consumption and greedy possession of material goods. In effect, Amis' take on 'the money conspiracy' closely resembles Guy Debord's own vision of post-industrial consumer society where "it is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see —commodities are now *all* that there is to see" (29). Obsessively driven and insatiable, Self indiscriminately consumes cigarettes, booze, women, cars, food, pornography —anything and everything— with reckless and nihilistic abandon. So much so, in fact, that the serialized consumption of commodities through the medium of money (how much and how fast) *is* the extent of the story in *Money*. Commodities here are all that there is to see.

So unsurprisingly, money sits at the thematic center of this novel and the manic consumer behavior it records. It quickly becomes the commodity to beat all commodities —not just an expression of value in the abstract but also an exchangeable good in its own right, what Self identifies as an open ticket for instant admission into the realm of mass consumption. More importantly, money moulds Self in its own image. It hijacks his thoughts, enslaves his desires, orchestrates his dreams, motivates and directs his actions. As David Hawkes similarly notes, "it is as if money had entered into Self's soul, expelling any pristine personality, and re-shaping him according to its own requirements" (2). Accordingly, the name 'Self'

itself gains particular significance in Amis' novel. *Money* explores what happens when money and the material indulgence it buys replace so as to constitute the self. The result? Self spirals viciously out of control. Driven at every level by the need to consume, his life becomes increasingly vacuous and disjointed, dangerously over-indulgent and recklessly self-destructive.

Like Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, in other words, Amis' *Money* shows a narrative fascination with the spectacular faces and dimensions of consumer culture —though now in the context of late capitalism. Still, *Money* similarly gives parodic yet ambivalent representation to the material world in its most outrageous forms. It also expresses concerns over the ways in which the commodity exerts a stranglehold over the imagination. *Money*, like *Vanity Fair*, sees consumerism as an almost narcotic and addictive practice that corrodes the fabric of society, as an implacable obstacle to achieving sociality. And like Thackeray, Amis similarly articulates the idea that the wholesale surrender to materialism brings no reward at all. In short, the effects and side-effects of the commodity and its attendant spectacles are as much driving forces in Amis' wild and lewd representation of consumer culture in the late twentieth century as they are in Thackeray's much earlier representation of that same culture in its early forms.

What I am getting at of course is that, like Gaskell and *Trainspotting*, Thackeray's writing prefigures and even seems to anticipate the world of Amis' 'money conspiracy.' Amis' seedy and pornographic kaleidoscope of "fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs" (67) bears a corrupt but uncanny resemblance to Thackeray's more jocular picture of "eating and drinking . . . smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and

fiddling” (33). In fact, Amis’ character of John Self would probably feel right at home in Thackeray’s novel. David Hawkes argues that *Money* shows disturbingly how “the future belongs to people like Self” (2), and I could not agree more. Yet, when we place nineteenth century novels like *Vanity Fair* next to late twentieth century ones like *Money*, we also see that, from its very inception, commodity culture and its carnivals of consumption have always belonged to people like Self.

4. TROLLOPE'S 'MATERIAL GIRL': GENDER AND CAPITALISM IN *THE EUSTACE DIAMONDS*

PROLOGUE: THE MADONNA PHENOMENON

This chapter takes the 'Madonna phenomenon' as its point of departure to suggest that, far from unique to postmodernity, the kind of strategic experimentation with feminine identity we find in Madonna's *Material Girl* song already engaged cultural production in the nineteenth century. Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), the prologue argues, is a case in point. Like Madonna's song, Trollope's novel of mercenary female duplicity examines, challenges, and manipulates commodity culture's economic constructions of the feminine. It assesses the consequences of exploiting those constructions in the self-serving pursuit of material gratification. And it investigates women's potential to capitalize at a material level on the commodification of feminine identity and its constituent parts. The result is that, like Madonna's music in its late twentieth century context, Trollope's writing similarly projects images of women that struggle between reinventing and reinscribing the feminine as it is conceived in and through commodity culture.

In her recent book, *Postfeminisms*, Ann Brooks argues that many current feminist debates over popular culture's potential as a site of "political and representational contestation" can be seen to coalesce "around Madonna as a popular cultural icon" (162). That is, from the moment she first exploded on the international music scene in the early 1980's with her chart-topping debut album, Madonna has positioned herself centrally and controversially at the cultural

intersection between sexual politics and consumerism —at the intersection, in other words, of what represents a strategic site for feminism’s ongoing intervention into the arena of cultural politics.

As such, both Madonna herself and the body of her work have attracted intense scrutiny from feminist thinkers. But as Ann Brooks rightly points out, “the relationship between Madonna’s representational politics and feminist theory is a complicated one” (149). It is a relationship that is problematized in large part by the way Madonna has appeared simultaneously to subvert and revive dominant patriarchal constructions of feminine identity and sexuality in a mass media consumer world. And it is precisely because Madonna, as an iconic figure, projects images of herself that fluctuate wildly and ambiguously between reinventing and reinscribing the feminine that the question of whether Madonna’s *oeuvre* can be interpreted confidently, as John Fiske does in *Television Culture*, in terms of a consistent “feminist ideology-critique” (275) remains hotly debated. Still, it is clear that over the years Madonna’s material has consistently contested and transgressed sexual, social and political boundaries, even if her representational politics resist stable alignment with those of recent feminist theory.

The way that Madonna positions herself centrally yet controversially at the cultural intersection between sexual politics and consumerism is exemplified by one of her earliest hit singles, *Material Girl*, from the *Like a Virgin* album (1984). The song itself is a highly stylized and seemingly innocuous pop tune. For the most part, its simple, circular melody is beaten out robotically by a synthesizer. The melody’s heavy repetition and robotic rhythm in turn complement the apparent simplicity and almost anthem-like repetition of the lyrics themselves which, reminiscent in many

ways of Cyndi Lauper's distinctive singing in *Girls Just Want To Have Fun*,

Madonna performs in a high-pitched teeny-bopper voice:

Some boys kiss me, some boys hug me
I think they're OK.
If they don't give me proper credit
I just walk away.

They can beg and they can plead
But they can't see the light (that's right)
'Cause the boy with the cold hard cash
Is always Mr. Right. 'Cause we are. . .

Living in a material world
And I am a material girl.
You know that we are
Living in a material world
And I am a material girl.

Some boys romance, some boys slow dance
That's all right with me.
If they can't raise my interest then
I have to let them be.

Some boys try and some boys lie but
I don't let them play (no way)
Only boys who save their pennies
Make my rainy day. 'Cause everyone is. . .

Living in a material world
And I am a material girl.
You know that we are
Living in a material world
And I am a material girl.

(Madonna, from the lyrics to *Material Girl*)

At one level, the song seems to be embracing women's place in the consumer culture of late capitalism. It appears to celebrate the consumer power that women exercise in today's material world, while recognizing and affirming the way in which that power essentially extends from the commodification of feminine identity and sexuality. In particular, the chorus —“You know that we are living in a material world and I am a material girl”— offers an embracement of consumer culture's materialist ethos. Lines such as “the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mr. Right” and “if they don't give me proper credit I just walk away” in turn attest to the song's mercenary sexual complexion. They plainly reveal a calculated complicity with the values and practices of materialism.

Such a reading of the song is further strengthened if we take into account its accompanying music video. Right down to the choreography, scenery, wardrobe,

make-up, platinum-blond hair and diamond jewelry, Madonna's video re-enacts Marilyn Monroe's signature performance of the tellingly titled song *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend* in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) —an unapologetically sexist screen adaptation of Anita Loos' 1925 novel about how to 'bag' a millionaire. Drawing upon reference points so firmly fixed in the popular imagination, the video's intertextuality openly invites us to align the figure of Madonna, as an embodiment of the 'material girl,' with that of Marilyn Monroe, and so with one of the twentieth century's most celebrated and commercialized sex icons.



Madonna as Marilyn Monroe in the *Material Girl* video

Though she does not break radically with established constructions of the feminine in *Material Girl*, Madonna does not entirely endorse those constructions either. Rather, highlighting the artificiality of such constructions, she advocates their manipulation and exploitation as a powerful and pragmatic way to realize material desires. That is, Madonna posits the 'material girl' not as a stable identity, but as a pliable and superficial one that plays on the artifice and superficiality implicated in the ethos of materialism itself. The music video alone suggests as much in the way that it co-opts the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe from the film of *Gentlemen*

Prefer Blondes and playfully reworks that image according to the needs of Madonna's own performance.

Commenting in 1961 on the reception of the novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in the Soviet Union, Anita Loos provides a helpful way to understand just how Madonna reworks that image. The book, Loos delights to report, "was embraced by the Soviet authorities as evidence of the exploitation of helpless female blondes by predatory magnates of the Capitalistic System" (13). Ironically perhaps, this interpretation is very much the one that informs Hollywood's film adaptation of the novel and, in particular, the whole of its treatment of Marilyn Monroe's character. In its rewriting of Monroe's performance, however, Madonna's video confronts us instead with a predatory female blonde exploiting what now become helpless magnates of the 'Capitalistic System.'

Above all, then, Madonna's representation of the 'material girl' is a calculated performance on every level. It is a series of projected images, surfaces, and masks of the patriarchal feminine as conceptualized by popular culture yet also manipulated by Madonna. In short, Madonna's apparent celebration of women's place in the material world is more a celebration of women's potential to exploit their own exploitation —the potential to capitalize at a material level on their own process of commodification.

Simon During argues that Madonna's work ultimately aligns itself with the "needs of capital" (18). Yet it does so, During adds, by drawing on consumer culture's "iconography of sexuality" as a strategy for producing an immensely profitable "representational industry" around Madonna herself (18). *Material Girl* is one of the earliest displays of this aspect of Madonna's work —and one, moreover,

that has come to define her public image. With the release of her debut album, the entertainment industry quickly hit on 'The Material Girl' as a fitting nickname for the budding star. The nickname has stuck with her ever since, illustrating the extent to which popular culture and its media of representation associate Madonna with the song's materialist message. It is hardly surprising, however, since Madonna has built and sustained her professional career, much like Marilyn Monroe before her, by conspicuously and ruthlessly exploiting her own commercial exploitation.

To this end, Madonna ultimately allows both her body and her image to be recuperated back into the very categories that her work (especially in her later career) paradoxically challenges. In other words, and as Ann Brooks rightly points out, "at the same time as claiming subversion and transgression," Madonna "is also promotional of market forces" (148). This side of the 'Madonna phenomenon' understandably frustrates feminist critics who find it difficult to decide whether Madonna ultimately upholds or undermines a feminist platform —who find it difficult to decide whether or not the 'Material Girl' ultimately sells out to the forces of domination. Though the issue can and has been argued convincingly both ways (see Brooks 152-5), Madonna makes it impossible to resolve definitively. This tension between the various and seemingly discrepant faces of Madonna may well account in large part for why she so powerfully captivates feminist thinkers in particular and the popular imagination in general.

Still, it is clear that, however problematic and enigmatic a figure for feminist critique, Madonna the 'Material Girl' does possess an extraordinarily astute understanding of the systems of meaning and power in which she operates. Madonna has successfully used that understanding to immeasurable financial

success, making her an almost limitlessly powerful consumer free to realize any and all material desires. At the same time, and whether we like it or not, she has also achieved an entrenched position of popularity at the very heart of popular culture that has allowed her, through her iconic status, to exert a strong influence over cultural representations and conceptualizations of the feminine. But above all, Madonna has challenged and pushed back the boundaries of what it means to be a woman in today's consumer world, as well as the boundaries of what women can achieve in that world.

As a cultural event, the 'Madonna phenomenon' is inconceivable outside the context of a late twentieth century media culture. But the representational project itself that emerges from songs like *Material Girl* is one that, to return to my opening point, already engages social novelists of the nineteenth century. More specifically, as this chapter goes on to discuss, it is a project that visibly dominates Trollope's writing in *The Eustace Diamonds*. Like Madonna's song, the novel highlights the interplay between sexual politics and consumerism. It appears simultaneously to subvert and revive the dominant sexual politics of a capitalist order. And it ultimately allows its representation of the feminine to be recuperated back into the very categories that the novel itself paradoxically calls into question.

As such, Trollope complicates feminist readings of his novel much as Madonna problematizes feminist recuperations of her work. In particular, as this chapter also goes on to discuss, Trollope's representation of the feminine never radically breaks from—or even negotiates viable alternatives to—the paradigm of capitalist order. If anything, Trollope reconfirms that order's tyrannous recuperative power, raising questions about whether or not his writing can be seen, to redirect

John Fiske's point about Madonna, in terms of an 'ideology-critique.' In this respect, Trollope also raises questions about how far his novel's representation of the feminine becomes complicit, to redirect Simon During's charge against Madonna, with the 'needs of capital.'

In the basic terms outlined so far both Madonna in *Material Girl* and Trollope in *The Eustace Diamonds* can be seen to engage in *loosely* analogous representational projects. Even so, there are major and fundamental differences between what Madonna the Generation X pop star and Trollope the stalwart Victorian "novel machine," as Walter Kendrick famously dubs him (4), actually deliver in the material of their art—differences, that is, which register the particular cultural climate to which each artist responds. This is an important point to stress, even if it is an obvious one.

The material girl story that Madonna relates in her song and in many ways plays out in her public life is one of success, reward, popularity and pleasure. Above all, Madonna's is a narrative of empowerment where women now assume a role as forceful, competitive and conspicuous 'players' in a consumer society. But this is a distinctly late twentieth century narrative. The nineteenth century version we encounter in *The Eustace Diamonds* is altogether less triumphant and optimistic. It reads and looks nothing like Madonna's late twentieth century narrative of empowerment. Instead, Trollope's version of the material girl story is one of frustration, censure, infamy, and even criminality—a narrative of disempowerment where women's attempts to become 'players,' to seize control and exercise power in the thick of a nineteenth century consumer world, backfire completely.

Trollope's novel, of course, documents a much earlier moment in the

historical trajectory of consumer culture and its sexual politics than Madonna's music. It responds to a society only recently confronted by the commodity's seductive presence at the dead center of the material world, by its hegemonic hold over the social imagination and its desires. It belongs, in brief, to the nineteenth century's newly emergent culture of consumption. In *The Eustace Diamonds*, Trollope shows how, in the nineteenth century, that culture has yet to legitimate or even begin to recognize the types of claim to power that female figures like Madonna so freely and successfully assert today.

DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

The parallels between Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) are plain to see. Both novelists locate their writing in the thick of a nineteenth century commodity culture. Both highlight the vanity, narcissism, and self-indulgence implicated in that culture's ethic of consumption. And both explore the intensity of the material desires and force of the consumer fantasies inspired by the commodity. In *The Eustace Diamonds*, in other words, Trollope revisits many of the thematic concerns and key issues that motivate Thackeray's earlier novel.

Far from being unconscious of such parallels, however, Trollope is in fact acutely aware of the way his novel, particularly in its narrative fascination with mercenary female duplicity, appears to poach and rework vintage Thackerayan material. Trollope admits as much in his *Autobiography* (1883), confessing that, when writing *The Eustace Diamonds*, "the idea constantly presented itself . . . that Lizzie," the novel's dubious heroine, "was but a second Becky Sharpe [sic]" (344).

He then goes on, somewhat curiously, to defend his creativity: “in planning the character I had not thought of this, and I believe that Lizzie would have been just as she is though Becky Sharpe [sic] had never been described” (344). Whether or not we accept this claim about the integrity of Trollope’s creative process —and we have only a defensive author’s word on it— it quickly becomes clear as we read *The Eustace Diamonds* that Trollope did have Thackeray very much in mind when actually sitting down to write the novel.

Trollope confirms this point early on in *The Eustace Diamonds* when he describes the character of Lizzie in terms of an “opulent and aristocratic Becky Sharp” (1: 19). In this moment of deliberate intertextuality, but one among many that explicitly reference *Vanity Fair*, Trollope openly posits the figure of Lizzie Eustace as a reincarnated version of Thackeray’s own dubious heroine —as another female embodiment of the ruthless and corrupt materialist. More important for now, however, is that, by aligning his novel’s central female figure with her opposite number in Thackeray, Trollope also invites us more generally to read *The Eustace Diamonds* alongside *Vanity Fair* and the consumer world it puts so conspicuously on parade.

Doing just that in his discussion of Trollope in *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller argues that, in comparison to *Vanity Fair*, “the representation of material culture” in *The Eustace Diamonds* is “extraordinarily thin” (160). In particular, Miller finds that “where Thackeray clutters his novel with descriptions of goods, Trollope takes the material for granted” (160), looking instead at “the social activity stimulated by goods” (161). Miller, it seems to me, has it right up to a point.

Granted, Trollope does not surrender entire chunks of his novel to cataloguing the physical minutiae of material objects to the exhausting extent that Thackeray does in *Vanity Fair*. In fact, as Miller points out, *The Eustace Diamonds* is “austerely furnished” (160) on the whole, and even the titular diamonds themselves make only rare and fleeting narrative appearances. But the overall austerity and evanescence of the material props in *The Eustace Diamonds* do not necessarily make Trollope’s representation of material culture ‘extraordinarily thin.’ Nor do they necessarily mean that Trollope’s writing simply takes the material world ‘for granted.’

Rather, Trollope’s disinterest in the narrative stockpiling of commodities directs us instead towards those aspects of material culture that do engage his imagination and that do receive full and elaborate treatment. That is, Trollope shows little interest in transforming his novel, as Thackeray does, into a crowded warehouse for the gratuitous exhibition of goods, but he does become deeply engrossed, as Miller rightly maintains, in the social activity and energy generated by commodities. In particular, Trollope looks more fully than Thackeray at the commodity’s impact on constructions of feminine identity and agency, and at the effects of those constructions on social conditions and sexual politics under capitalist order. In so doing, Trollope delivers an account of the commodity’s growing influence over the Victorian social body and its imagination as piercing and discriminating—as sensitive and alert to emerging social concerns—as that offered by Thackeray’s more phantasmagoric vision.

Accordingly, when commodities do make their rare and short-lived narrative appearances in *The Eustace Diamonds*, those moments can be taken not as evidence of the way Trollope otherwise neglects or overlooks the material world, as Miller

would have it, but instead as deliberate springboards that allow Trollope to pursue the novel's more pressing and practical concerns about the social thoughts, energy, and activity that commodities have the power to excite. Moreover, when the material world does actually materialize in Trollope's novel, those key moments also serve to ground and locate the narrative in a social environment organized around the exchange and consumption of commodities.

It is, significantly, with precisely just such a moment that Trollope begins *The Eustace Diamonds*. In the novel's first paragraph, we are offered this short but nonetheless revealing sight of a pubescent Lizzie Eustace gaudily decked out in a luxurious clutter of jewelry:

. . . when she was little more than a child, [Lizzie] went about everywhere with jewels on her fingers, and red gems hanging around her neck, and yellow gems pendent from her ears, and white gems shining in her black hair. (1: 2)

Reminiscent in many ways of how Thackeray introduces the character of Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair* with an image of the gourmand buried neck deep in lavish goods, Trollope's first description of Lizzie Eustace is similarly saturated with material ornaments to the point where they eclipse the sight of the human presence behind them. In this passage, Trollope invites a reading of Lizzie's character through a reading of the commodities that adorn her. He asks his readers, much as Thackeray does when he first confronts us with his novel's gourmand, to take a catalogue of material objects as a defining statement about the person who owns them and, more to the point, displays them.

In this case, the image Trollope provides of a young girl garishly decorated in extravagant ornamental vanities of adult female fashion comments eloquently on Lizzie's relationship with the material world. It attests to her precocious enthrallment with the glamorous and glittery face of consumption. It shows Lizzie, in her formative years, already embracing the values and practices of materialism. And it speaks of a mind engaged prematurely —almost instinctively— in the idolatrous worship of the commodity in its opulent and ostentatious forms.

In short, this first image of Lizzie Eustace explicitly establishes her, to borrow Madonna's phrase, as a material girl living in a material world. The image offers a tell-tale physical assertion, in other words, of what Lukács would confidently diagnose as a reified state of consciousness. The jewels on display overpower the appearance of Lizzie's body, effectively revealing just how forcefully these particular commodities consume the imagination and dominate the desires of the human figure obscured behind them.

Moreover, that same image also shows how Lizzie's enamourment with conspicuous consumption expresses itself above all as a covetous love-affair with jewelry. Diamonds, as Marilyn Monroe might say, are this girl's best friend. It is no accident of course that Trollope singles out jewelry as the principal object of his material girl's consumer fetish. Not only do jewels represent a deliberately flagrant expression of material wealth, but they also possess a long and deeply embedded cultural history of evoking sexuality. Accordingly, jewels partly assume the function in Trollope's writing, as William Cohen similarly sees it, of "a metonymic representation of female sexuality" (239). In such terms, Trollope's image of a young girl heavily decked out in jewelry further suggests that Lizzie's precocious

consumer instinct is also “coterminous,” as Cohen goes on to propose, with a certain “sexual precocity” (239). With this idea in mind, the way Lizzie promiscuously exposes her jewels in public also inflects that act with an element of sexual promiscuity.

Though I want to avoid overstating the significance of what, after all, is a very short passage, I do want to stay for just a moment longer with this image Trollope offers of Lizzie as a young girl. By aligning and identifying the figure of Lizzie so closely with her jewels in the opening paragraph of the novel, Trollope raises the subject that goes on to consume the bulk of *The Eustace Diamonds*. Namely, Trollope begins to show how Lizzie’s identity and status as a material girl are intimately and inextricably entwined with those of the jewels to which she surrenders her body and mind. More precisely, he begins to articulate the idea that the commodity under capitalist social conditions can figure as both a representation of and a repository for women’s identity and sexuality. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray makes the now familiar argument that, in social and sexual relations under capitalist order, women traditionally assume the status and function of a commodity (105). It is, in short, this exact idea that informs and animates Trollope’s account of nineteenth century commodity culture in *The Eustace Diamonds*.

Though obliquely, the title of Trollope’s novel already hints at the idea. At the level of plot, *The Eustace Diamonds* is ostensibly a novel about the scheming and dishonest character of Lizzie Eustace and her efforts to retain the Eustace diamonds she falsely acquires. Taken literally, however, Trollope’s title suggests otherwise. The diamond necklace is what (and not who) receives star billing on the

book's cover —so that a commodity explicitly fronts for a novel about the woman who tenuously owns it. The high degree of exposure that Trollope's choice of title grants to an inanimate material object accordingly suggests that Lizzie's story is in fact contained in and represented by the story of the diamond necklace itself. It suggests that the history of this particular commodity informs and even determines that of its possessor. And it even suggests, to put it in Irigaray's terms, that the novel itself relegates Lizzie to the status and function of a commodity.

Far from misleading in the way that it depersonalizes and displaces its human subject, Trollope's choice of title is entirely fitting. For it quickly becomes clear when reading *The Eustace Diamonds* that it is only by following the history of the diamond necklace itself —the legal debates, public scandals and criminal plots which surround this highly valued commodity— that the novel tracks Lizzie's own narrative importance. Trollope makes this clear from the beginning. We get a strong sense, for example, that Trollope offers a cursory history of Lizzie's brief marriage to Florian Eustace in the first chapter of the novel only as a way to explain the more pressing question of how she comes illegitimately to acquire the Eustace family diamonds —as a way, in short, to arrive at the critical statement that “she bore beneath her bosom” the coveted “fruit of her husband's love” (1:10). And once Trollope conveniently kills off Florian Eustace to relaunch the young widow as an available asset in the Victorian marriage market, the fate of the jewels becomes so deeply enmeshed with Lizzie's own fate that, as the novel's title already intimates, the story of the one tells the story of the other.

Trollope communicates as much in the telling passage where Lizzie, now fishing for a husband, wears the Eustace Diamonds to Lady Glencora's ball. This

occasion marks the first and last time that the necklace physically appears in public —the first and last time that Lizzie openly parades her controversial jewels before the public’s reified and reifying gaze:

Lady Glencora’s rooms were already very full when Lizzie entered them, but she was without a gentleman, and room was made for her to pass quickly up the stairs. The diamonds had been recognised by many before she had reached the drawing room; —not that these very diamonds were known, or that there was a special memory of that necklace; —but the subject had been so generally discussed, that the blaze of the stones immediately brought it to the minds of men and women. ‘There she is, with Eustace’s twenty thousand pounds round her neck,’ said Laurence Fitzgibbon to his friend Barrington Erle. ‘And there is Lord Fawn going to look after them,’ replied the other.
(1: 158)

In this passage, Trollope recycles the same type of image that he earlier employs to establish Lizzie as the novel’s material girl. Once again, Lizzie’s physical appearance is overshadowed, displaced, and even depersonalized by the heavy presence of the material ornaments that decorate her body. As Trollope carefully points out, it is the ‘blaze of the stones,’ and not the radiance of the woman, that attracts public scrutiny and occupies the public mind. More revealing still is Fitzgibbon’s comment to Barrington Erle: “There she is with Eustace’s twenty thousand pounds round her neck . . . And there is Lord Fawn going to look after them” (1: 158). Rather than the woman herself, then, the substantial economic value of the stones (grossly exaggerated by the onlooker) is what sparks the scene’s only dialogue. That dialogue in turn conveniently calls attention to Fawn’s real

motivation for approaching Lizzie. He is chasing not the woman, but her jewels —what Fitzgibbon intuitively understands as a material expression of capital in the abstract.

This passage is key to Trollope's vision of commodity culture in *The Eustace Diamonds* at a number of different levels. To begin, it crystallizes the way that Trollope sees the commodity as a body invested with the surrogate power to represent and mediate between people —what Marx presents in *Capital* as a fetishized object (82-3). Throughout his description of Lady Glencora's ball, for example, Trollope goes out of his way to emphasize just how completely Lizzie's diamonds monopolize the thoughts of the assembled guests. Upon Lizzie's entrance to the scene, Trollope stresses that all "eyes" in the room "were turned upon the diamonds" (1: 159). Distracted and even mesmerized by the blinding presence of the jewels, the public sees Lizzie almost exclusively in terms of the embodiment of capital strapped provocatively —even erotically— around her neck. The result, so Trollope makes clear, is that this embodiment of capital motivates and mediates all thought, discourse, and activity at the ballroom event. In the public eye, the commodity now functions as Lizzie's agent of social representation. It now constitutes her public face.

What Trollope is essentially showcasing is commodity culture's fetishistic tendency. More precisely, in scenes such as this one, Trollope exhibits a distortion of vision in which the commodity appears to erase all trace of the human presence that animates it. In classical Marxian thinking, such a distortion of vision forms the essence of capitalism's definitive ideological illusion: the social relation between people *looks* like a relation mediated by things. It is an illusion, as Lukács most

notably argues in *History and Class Consciousness*, that proves so “all embracing” (83) as to prevent us from ever detecting it actively at work on either our own minds or the minds of others. Or so at least the theory goes.

Slavoj Žižek, however, proposes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that in practice the ideological illusion or “fantasy” (30) at the root of “the so-called fetishism of commodities” (31) is not necessarily so insidiously deceptive as the classical Marxian recipe for reification likes to insist. As Žižek compellingly points out with an eye for practicality, “on an everyday level, individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things” (31). For Žižek, “the problem” is instead that “in the social activity itself, in what they are *doing*,” individuals are “*acting* as if nobody exists behind the relation between things” (31). What individuals overlook, he goes on to explain, “is not the reality” but “the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity” (32), so “they know very well how things really are, but they are doing it as if they did not know” (32). In *Capital*, Marx presents the collective social body as a largely helpless and unwitting victim of the mass hallucination that grows out of the “fetish character of commodities” (85). Žižek’s reading of social practice under capitalist order restores the individual with the potential for self-awareness. It is a reading that refreshingly credits the social subject with the basic capacity and power to *think*.

More to the point, in Žižek’s account, the collective social body no longer figures as the helpless and unwitting victim of false consciousness we encounter in the work of thinkers like Marx and Lukács. In his sci-fi novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), William Gibson presciently defines cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination” (12). Though Gibson is of course talking about something completely different in

Neuromancer, the idea itself of a ‘consensual hallucination’ nonetheless offers a helpful way to understand what David Hawkes concisely describes as Zizek’s notion of a “practical fetishism” (176). That is, Zizek does not dismiss the existence or impact of an ideological illusion in which the relation between people *looks* like a relation between things, but he does contend that individuals are “fetishists in practice, not in theory” (31). For Zizek, it is more the case that we consent to share in the fetishistic hallucination as a practical way to participate in capitalist society’s everyday theater of consumption.

Still, whether capitalist society’s fetishistic activity derives from the kind of insidiously deceptive illusion proposed by thinkers like Marx and Lukács or whether it derives instead from the kind of consensual hallucination proposed by Zizek, the visible effect of that fantasy on social practice nevertheless remains the same. In Zizek’s thinking, the distortion of vision that emerges from the consensual hallucination continues, as it does in classical Marxian thinking, to figure as capitalism’s dominant form of false consciousness —only now the social body becomes deeply and knowingly complicit in the production of its own ideological condition.

In its own way, Trollope’s representation of nineteenth century social practice in *The Eustace Diamonds* offers another articulation of a ‘practical fetishism’ as outlined by Zizek. In particular, the novel’s account of Lady Glencora’s ball —of this direct and charged encounter between the public, Lizzie, and her jewels— highlights the way Trollope more generally conceives social practice under capitalist order in terms far closer to Zizek’s than Marx’s. Despite the

fact that, throughout the novel's ballroom episode, the public gossips about and stares at Lizzie's diamond necklace almost as if Lizzie herself were not even there, it still knows very well that a human subject exists behind the commodity on parade. As Trollope takes time out to explain, it is only because the guests do after all remain acutely aware of Lizzie's physical presence that they resist the desire literally "to press round to look at the necklace" (1: 159). The public, in other words, is *acting*—and convincingly so— as if the presence of the diamond necklace were an autonomous event in and of itself. In Žižek's terms, it consents to share in an ideological illusion in order to participate in a particular kind of consumer activity. In this case, that activity consists of *visually* consuming the spectacle of Lizzie's exposed jewels.

In her landmark study of consumer culture, *Just Looking*, Rachel Bowlby helps to explain how just such a process works. Discussing the rise of the modern department store in the late nineteenth century, Bowlby talks at length about how the inviting spectacle of its window displays helped to transform consumption from an activity grounded in need to one motivated by fantasy and desire (2-8). In particular, she argues that within this shift in consumer practice the trend of window-shopping—the ritual of 'just looking' at the merchandise on display—acquired a newfound importance by feeding society's increasingly elaborate and sophisticated fantasies of material indulgence. For Bowlby, then, 'just looking' is anything but the innocuous activity it pretends to be. Rather, it becomes an integral part of capitalism's larger theater of consumption, a commodity that is itself consumed by the gaze of its fantasizing audience (Bowlby 6). The idea that 'just looking' can become a form of active consumption—that the gaze can transform a

spectacle of displayed goods into a commodity to be consumed in its own right—finds resonance in Trollope’s writing.

Lady Glencora’s ball is no department store window, but the activity that goes on there would not be out of place in front of one. In the public eye, Lizzie is essentially reduced to the function of a shop window mannequin, a human prop of sorts for the modeling of an inanimate object. More importantly, the public’s pretense of ‘just looking’ at Lizzie’s neck is anything but the innocent recreation it affects to be. Here, as in Bowlby’s account of window-shopping, the gaze similarly enables a form of active, if visual, consumption motivated not so much by need as by desire. It enables a process of commodification that both inspires and caters to fantasies of material indulgence. It transforms the activity of *looking* at Lizzie’s jewels into an experience that is itself consumed.

At the same time, however, Trollope’s account of the ballroom event also shows that the novel’s material girl is no unsuspecting or accidental victim of the public’s reifying gaze —of its affinity, in so many words, for ‘window shopping.’ The resolution to wear the diamonds in public at Lady Glencora’s ball is no snap decision or whimsical indulgence on Lizzie’s part, but instead a carefully thought-out and meticulously executed plan. That plan, moreover, forms an integral part of Lizzie’s overall strategy to snare Lord Fawn as a husband:

She went, knowing that she would meet Lord Fawn, and she did wear the diamonds. It was the first time that they had been around her neck since the occasion in respect to which Sir Florian had placed them in her hands, and it had not been without much screwing up of her courage that she had resolved to appear on this occasion

with the much-talked-of ornament upon her person. (1: 157)

As this passage outlines in brief, Lizzie is acutely aware that her notorious possession of the Eustace diamonds is a prolific source of gossip. She knows full well that her appearance with the 'much-talked-of ornament upon her person' will attract intense scrutiny, that the ornament in question will almost certainly eclipse her in the public's myopic field of vision. But this, as Trollope intimates, is the entire point of the exercise.

Though it takes 'much screwing up of her courage,' Lizzie consciously uses the diamonds as a form of bait to attract a potential husband, what Andrew Miller neatly describes as "an instrument in her erotic negotiations" (165). To this end, and in a pattern of behavior dating back to her precocious childhood, Lizzie willfully surrenders her body and the appearance of her body to the custody of an extravagant and exotic material thing. She knowingly makes herself an easy and obvious target for the public's reifying gaze. And she gambles recklessly on the power of a consumer desire directed at a commodity teeming with sexual allusion to stimulate a corresponding desire for her. In sum, she banks on the power of material culture's consensual hallucination to blur all distinction between her own identity and that of her diamond necklace—to allow yet another promiscuous exhibition of her jewels to make an implicit statement about her own value and availability as a ready good up 'for sale' on the market.

Accordingly, though she may well 'suffer' in Lukács' terms from a reified state of consciousness, Trollope's material girl is nonetheless capable of seeing through the fetishistic illusion, of discerning the supporting architecture of

capitalism's definitive state of false consciousness. Like Žižek, then, Trollope still credits the ideologically conquered subject with the capacity for self-awareness and the ability to think. In Trollope, the material girl figures as a similarly knowing and even calculating accomplice in the creation of her own ideological condition. So too does she become a willing conspirator in the wider production of material culture's consensual hallucination. On the topic of commodity fetishism, Marx makes the axiomatic claim in *Capital* that "we are not aware of it, nevertheless we do it" (85). In Trollope, however, it is instead the case that, as in Žižek's account of the 'ideological fantasy,' Lizzie knows she is doing it, but does it anyway. More exactly, she not only opts to 'buy' quite literally into the fetishistic fantasy, but she actively and energetically helps to create that fantasy in the first place.

So although the diamonds do become and remain Lizzie's agent of social representation in *The Eustace Diamonds*, it is a development that Trollope's material girl deliberately solicits and, more to the point, even engineers. In his book on advertising and spectacle in Victorian culture, Thomas Richards suggests that London's Great Exhibition of 1851 "had been engineered to instill admiration"—and, I would add, to stimulate desire—"through a massive phenomenal assault on the senses of the consumer" (35). Though on a much smaller scale, Lizzie's exhibition of her jewels is engineered to produce exactly the same effect. And it sets out to do so, moreover, through a similarly aggressive phenomenal assault on the senses of the 'consumer.'

To this end, Lizzie constructs and projects a public image of herself that openly invites society to see and understand her, as Trollope delightfully puts it, in terms of "a woman of whom it might almost be said that she ought to wear

diamonds” (1: 159), as someone “made to sparkle, to be bright with outside garniture, —to shine and glitter and be rich in apparel” (1: 159). Once again, Lizzie expressly advertises her enthrallment with the glamorous and glittery face of consumption. She publicly broadcasts the superficial and narcissistic pleasures she takes from sparkling with ‘outside garniture.’ As a consequence, Lizzie makes it that much easier for the reified social body to see her, through its distorted vision, exclusively in terms of the sensational material object that overlays her figure. But above all, she sends out a strong signal that this is exactly how she wants to be seen —and that, at this moment and in her own distorted vision, this is even how she sees herself.

In this respect, Trollope’s account of the commodity and its ability to usurp identity and human agency is again reminiscent of Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. For example, Thackeray’s representation of the compulsive consumer shows the character of Jos Sedley, as the previous chapter discusses, more than willing to allow commodities to upstage his presence —to screen him, speak for him, and even represent him. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray’s gourmand repeatedly barricades himself behind his substantial stockpile of lavish and luxuriant goods. He constantly resists entering into social relations with other people without the comforting buffer of the commodity’s mediating presence. In *The Eustace Diamonds*, Trollope’s representation of the material girl shows the character of Lizzie Eustace actively engaged in much the same process —only now for altogether different reasons and to a radically different effect.

Like Thackeray’s gourmand, Trollope’s material girl similarly places herself

under an almost Derridean state of erasure in which the commodity's presence defers that of the human subject it now represents. In *Vanity Fair*, however, Jos Sedley's self-effacing surrender to the commodity's custody largely represents a form of escapism, a sort of psychological defense-mechanism. Persecuted by feelings of social inadequacy and sexual insecurity, Jos regularly retreats into the recesses of the material world to avoid direct human contact. But in *The Eustace Diamonds*, Trollope's material girl does not hide evasively or even retreat passively behind her goods. Nor does she use the commodity as a protective coating to insulate herself against social and sexual relations.

Rather, Lizzie surrenders her identity and agency to the commodity's custody precisely as a way to enter into relations with a reified social body caught up, like her, in fetishistic fantasies of conspicuous consumption. In particular, however, Lizzie sees in the diamonds' power to speak and act on her behalf an opportunity to maximize her public visibility and artificially inflate her own value as an object of desire. In short, she uses the commodity's fetish character to hijack the public imagination and, in so doing, exploitatively play on its material and sexual desires. The effect is that, as a representation of its displaced human subject, the diamond necklace becomes a sexualized and feminized object under the public's intoxicated gaze.

Trollope, however, works overtime throughout *The Eustace Diamonds* to complicate and potentially problematize this mutually informative relationship between Lizzie and her jewels. In particular, Trollope uses the novel's heated debate over the diamonds' uncertain legal status not just to call into question the legitimacy of Lizzie's possession of them, but also and more importantly to test their validity as

a repository for her identity and sexuality. It is a debate, in other words, that implicitly calls into question the legitimacy of Lizzie's transformation of the commodity into her agent of social representation, and so into a sexualized and feminized object.

Lizzie's refusal to give up the diamonds at the request of the Eustace estate is, of course, what sets the novel's legal drama into motion. By hanging on so stubbornly to her 'inherited' property (to use a generous term) Lizzie unknowingly gives Mr. Camperdown, the Eustace family lawyer, his mission in life —namely, to retrieve the jewels at any cost and, in the process, “‘jump upon’ that Lady” with the full force of the law (1: 36). As Camperdown passionately explains to John Eustace early on in the novel, the diamond necklace —or, rather, the capital embedded within it— is a prize worth fighting for:

£10,000, my dear John! God bless my soul! it's a magnificent dowry for a daughter, —an ample provision for a younger son. And she is allowed to filch it, as other widows filch china cups, and a silver teaspoon or two! It's quite a common thing, but I never heard of such a haul as this. (1: 40)

Along with providing a motive for Camperdown's personal vendetta in this passage, Trollope also highlights the way that the novel's legal discussions constantly slip into a discourse that criminalizes both Lizzie and the jewels. Camperdown refers to Lizzie's possession of the diamonds as 'filching' and to the diamonds themselves as her 'haul.'

Camperdown's greatest fear is that Lizzie might sell the diamonds before he

succeeds in laying his own hands on them. As he is acutely aware, such a course of action would not only ‘rob’ the Eustace family estate of a valuable asset, but also render what he vehemently sees as the plundered goods all but irretrievable. Accordingly, the Camperdown campaign focuses all of its energy on soliciting a legal opinion that declares the diamond necklace to be an “heirloom” —that is, a non-commodity and, as such, an object outlawed from the capitalist marketplace. As Mr. Dove, the novel’s resident legal expert, explains somewhat circuitously:

Heirlooms have become so, not that the future owners of them may be assured of so much wealth, —but that the son or grandson or descendent may enjoy the satisfaction which is derived from saying, my father or my grandfather or my ancestor sat in the chair, or looked as he now looks in that picture, or was graced by wearing on his breast that very ornament which you now see lying beneath the glass. Crown jewels are heirlooms in the same way, as representing not the possession of the sovereign, but the time-honoured dignity of the Crown. The Law . . . has in this matter bowed gracefully to the spirit of chivalry and has lent its aid to romance; —but it certainly did not do so to enable the discordant heirs of a rich man to settle a simple dirty question of money. . . (1: 258-59)

For an object to qualify as an heirloom in the way described here, that object *must*, as Dove stresses, either be physically immutable or guaranteed to have been “maintained in its original form” (1: 258). More importantly, we learn from Dove that if an object does qualify as an heirloom then the law absolutely prohibits it from being sold, whatever its value. It *must* instead remain within the family concerned, passing dutifully from one generation to the next in a system of primogeniture

dating back to a feudal, pre-capitalist order —what Dove sentimentally describes as a system “devised with the picturesque idea of maintaining chivalric associations” (1: 258). Extracted and barred from the commodity marketplace, an heirloom is therefore wholly exempt from exchange relations. It represents a strictly patrimonial property, and so a symbolically masculine object. As such, were the diamonds to qualify as an heirloom, Lizzie would not only be banned from hocking them on the market, but she would also be prohibited, as a woman, from possessing them at all. They would then pass back into the Eustace family estate.

The catch, however, is that if a material good inherited by a woman does not meet the criteria of an heirloom it then becomes “paraphernalia” (1: 229) —that is, loose property. Under the eyes of the law, as Dove goes on to explain, paraphernalia belong in and to the world of commodity exchange. In other words, they belong to what Dove disdainfully describes as capitalism’s ‘dirty’ world of money. No longer subject therefore to the system of primogeniture with all its male symbolic inflections, paraphernalia become emasculated goods free to circulate and recirculate promiscuously through the commodity marketplace. They represent a feminized form of property. They become symbolically feminized objects. As such, were the diamonds to qualify as paraphernalia, Lizzie would be free not just to own them, but also to dispose of them at will to the highest bidder.

The legal question, then, proposes first to answer an economic one. Is the diamond necklace really a commodity? Do its physical attributes make it fit for circulation in the capitalist system of exchange? Is it a symbolically masculine object or a symbolically feminine one? To Camperdown’s extreme horror, Mr. Dove decides that the diamond necklace does not constitute an heirloom —chiefly,

because like “a string of pearls” it is “not only alterable, but constantly altered” in its setting (1: 258), and as such it is unfit to function as a timeless and durable symbol of the patrimonial process. But the necklace *is* fit for the commodity marketplace. Its value lies in the material expression of capital embedded in the stones themselves, and so “subsists,” as William Cohen helpfully puts it, “in its potential for exchange” (241). The necklace therefore falls into the category of paraphernalia. It becomes an emasculated object, a feminine form of property, a freely tradable good in the capitalist system of exchange—a commodity.

There is of course a lot more at stake in this appraisal of the diamonds than simply resolving the legal status of a disputed object. That is, Trollope’s repetitive use of the diamonds throughout *The Eustace Diamonds* as a repository for Lizzie’s identity and sexuality invites us to read this appraisal as an implicit statement about Lizzie’s own place and role in society, about her own status and value as an object of desire under the public gaze. The strongly gendered terms that frame the legal question further invite just such a reading of the novel’s property dispute.

Accordingly, it is particularly significant that the legal debate not only establishes the diamonds to be a commodity after all, but that it also conceives commodities themselves as essentially feminized objects. In effect, the legal debate confirms the commodity’s suitability to function under material culture as an embodiment of the feminine. It suggests that Lizzie’s status in society is exactly that of a commodity in the marketplace—that women’s value in capitalist society, like that of any commodity, lies precisely in the potential for exchange. It accordingly reinforces Lizzie’s symbolic association with the diamonds in her capacity as an object of desire in the Victorian marriage market. And it even legitimizes her

symbolic claims over them as an expression of her potential value in that market.

But although the legal debate shows that Lizzie's use of the diamonds as her agent of social representation in the marriage market is very much in tune with the needs of a capitalist social order predicated on the exchange and consumption of 'female goods,' it also brings into focus how that same society resists validating alternative identities for women. Because the diamonds do not belong to the heirloom model of property which would bar and protect them from exchange relations, and because the paraphernalia model in turn states that the commodity exists precisely and solely for the purpose of exchange, the legal debate implicitly asserts that Lizzie herself similarly possesses zero value outside the marketplace, that she has no escape from it, and that she has no legitimate power to enter it as a consumer in her own right. It suggests in broader terms that commodity culture's economic construction of the feminine allows no role for women other than that of disenfranchised—even dehumanized—objects of exchange.

The legal debate, however, engages with this idea in theoretical terms only. That is, in the legal question, Trollope offers a strictly theoretical reading of the feminine as it is conceived in and through nineteenth century commodity culture. Indeed, at the level of plot, Dove's theory remains just that since it is never tested out in practice: Camperdown immediately buries it, and Lizzie, like the public at large, never learns of its existence. But in Lizzie's story, Trollope continues to work through the implications of the questions raised by Dove's buried report—only now in social rather than legal terms. He takes the issues tackled in the legal debate and refocuses them in terms of social practice and experience.

Commenting on the diamonds' legal status, William Cohen calls particular

attention to the way that, for most of the novel, “this sexualized and gendered property vacillates between two opposing paradigms —one, which conforms to a model of commodity exchange, the other which appears to resist it” (241). Looking at the novel’s account of Lizzie’s social activity, consumer ambitions, and marriage prospects, we find that Trollope’s material girl similarly fluctuates between the same two opposing—even competing—paradigms.

On the one hand, for example, by absolutely refusing to yield up the diamonds she plunders in the first place —by insisting on indulging in the materialistic pleasure she takes from possessing and conspicuously flaunting them—Lizzie undermines the smooth running of the patrilineal process. As Cohen goes on to remark, “she disturbs patriarchal institutions both through her recognition of her function within that order —as a vehicle for the transfer of property between her husband and her son— and through her attempts to subvert that process” (243). In other words, Lizzie’s assertion of ownership over the jewels represents an act of transgression not just against patriarchal institutions themselves but also, and deliberately so, against the function they assign to women as ‘vehicles’ for transferring property —as a medium through which the entire patrimonial system can continue to be enacted.

On the other hand, Lizzie also attempts at the same time and through a second marriage to put both herself and the diamonds back into circulation ‘on the market.’ Referring to her thoughts on this subject, Trollope shows just how well she understands that any such plan would involve surrendering herself and her property as a package deal:

She had a grand idea, —this selfish, hard-fisted little woman, who could not bring herself to abandon the plunder on which she had laid her hand, —a grand idea of surrendering herself and all her possessions to a great passion. (1: 43)

By setting out to participate in exchange relations, however unsuccessfully at first (she fails in rapid succession to secure Lord Fawn, Frank Greystock, and Lord George as husbands), Lizzie appears no longer to resist but instead to endorse a model of commodity exchange. She effectively adopts the novel's 'paraphernalia paradigm' which decrees her body and her *things* to be eligible goods in the marketplace —to be objects whose value now lies in their potential for exchange. Yet, by proposing to retail her body and her possessions to the highest bidder, Lizzie nonetheless “shores up,” as Cohen puts it, “the patriarchy” she otherwise resists (245). She reinforces her status and function as a commodity, thereby undermining her simultaneous efforts to assert independent ownership over the jewels and to pursue her own independent consumer ambitions.

Simply put, Trollope's material girl misbehaves both as property in her own right and as the guardian of other property. She figures both as a good herself and as a subject desiring goods —as at once a commodity and a consumer. She slips ambiguously and problematically between what the narrative inflects respectively as a symbolically feminized category and as a symbolically masculinized one. More importantly, not only does she simultaneously uphold and subvert established constructions of the feminine in this way, but she does so knowingly, calculatingly, and —most importantly— duplicitously. And it is precisely in Lizzie's

'misconduct,' in the way that she manipulates, rewrites, and exceeds her assigned economic and social functions, that Trollope articulates the novel's central complaint against the figure of its material girl.

As Trollope presents the case, the problem with Lizzie is not that she problematizes the restrictions imposed on her identity and agency by a capitalist social order that insists on relegating women to the disempowering and dehumanizing category of a commodity in sexual commerce. In fact, Trollope usually backs up his strong-willed female characters such as Lady Laura in *Phineas Finn* (1869) or Alice Vavasor in *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864) who, however unsuccessfully, either resist the marriage market or challenge dominant constructions of the feminine. Rather, the problem with Lizzie—the reason that Trollope does not back her up like the others—lies in *how* and in particular *why* she problematizes the restrictions imposed on her identity and agency.

Unlike Lady Laura whose resistance to those restrictions is motivated by a desire to participate in politics, and unlike Alice Vavasor who fights against the marriage market and its sexual contract to escape domestic violence, Lizzie manipulates her assigned social and economic functions, to use Dove's earlier phrase, for a 'simple dirty question of money.' More specifically, her acts of transgression are motivated by her embracement of materialism, by her enamourment with the glittery and glamorous face of consumption, by her idolatrous worship of the commodity in its opulent and ostentatious forms. They stem from her desire to participate more fully, more complicitously, and more conspicuously in the consumer practices of a material culture. They are animated by fetishistic fantasies of consumption, by the commodity's ideological hold over her

imagination and desires. As such, Lizzie's attempt to enact the double role of being at once a commodity and a consumer on the social stage does not contest the values that underpin nineteenth century commodity culture and its attendant patriarchal institutions. It merely contests the forms of nineteenth century social practice and codes that inhibit her power to consume—that impede her efforts to pursue and indulge in the perceived pleasures and rewards of material gratification.

And the *way* that Lizzie attempts to realize her own consumer ambitions and to fulfill her own material desires is precisely by setting out to exploit her own exploitation. To this end, as we have seen, she enlists the help of material culture's fetishistic tendency to collapse all distinction between her own identity and that of her jewels. She surrenders her identity and agency to the custody of an extravagant and eroticized material thing precisely in order to play on the material and sexual desires of a fantasizing audience, as well as to advertise and indulge her enthrallment with conspicuous consumption. She sets out not only to hold the reified social body hostage to its own ideological condition, but also and in the process to 'cash in' on her own commodification.

But Trollope's material girl does not stop there. Once it becomes clear that the dubious circumstances surrounding her acquisition of the Eustace diamonds—that their potentially criminalizing status—threaten her prospects of a 'profitable' marriage and jeopardize her claims of ownership over her jewels, Lizzie progresses from manipulating to abusing and outright misusing the systems of meaning and power in which she operates. Among her many transgressions, she stages a fake theft of the diamonds' at the Carlyle Hotel, tries to blackmail and bully a succession of men into marrying her and protecting her from the law, and even commits perjury

in court after the second (and this time real) theft of the diamonds.

Nineteenth century narrative tends to emphasize, as Elizabeth Ermarth notes in *The English Novel in History*, “the social destructiveness” of those “committed exclusively” to the capitalist economic system (136). In *The Eustace Diamonds*, Trollope stresses exactly this point in his representation of the material girl. In one of the novel’s more intimate moments, Trollope reveals just how tight the bond between Lizzie and her jewels really becomes: “She thought of the necklace every waking minute, and dreamed of it when she slept. She could not keep herself from unlocking her desk and looking at it twenty times a day” (2: 80). So although Lizzie possesses the diamonds at a superficial level, the diamonds themselves possess her at another and far deeper one entirely. In effect, Trollope inverts ‘normal’ economic roles to produce an almost ‘perverse’ state of affairs in which a commodity now exerts ownership over its guardian and not the other way around. And so powerful is this commodity’s hold over both Lizzie’s conscious and unconscious moments, that she is no longer capable of severing, either emotionally or physically, her bond with the jewels. As Trollope makes clear, it is Lizzie’s intense and compulsive need to maintain that bond, coupled more generally with her totally reckless and self-serving commitment to gratifying her material desires, that motivate her to act, as Ermarth notes, like a “destroyer” (141). The novel’s attitude towards this ‘destroyer’ is, moreover, unequivocal in its hostility and disgust, as Trollope plainly vocalizes in this curt interjection: “There shall be no whitewashing of Lizzie Eustace. She was abominable” (1: 321).

Trollope is keen to stress that the social vandalism and abuse that accompanies Lizzie’s pursuit of materialism is what ultimately ruins her. The

emerging accounts of her social destructiveness and the catalogue of public scandals surrounding the diamonds have the cumulative effect of damaging her social reputation beyond repair. And when she is finally stripped of the diamonds themselves through a genuine robbery, her efforts to capitalize on their possession backfire with a vengeance. Her value as a good on the market plummets. She no longer figures as an object of desire under the public gaze but, now, quite the reverse.

As a consequence, Lizzie becomes more desperate than ever to secure the protective coating of a husband, to seek a form of insulation against her social problems: "To her it was essentially necessary that she should have the protection of a husband who might endure on her behalf some portion of those buffetings to which she seemed to be especially doomed" (1: 70-1). But that a husband would automatically inherit those 'buffetings' along with his wife and her property proves enough to deter potential suitors and even to drive away declared lovers. Lord Fawn withdraws his offer of marriage because, as he communicates in a curt letter to Lizzie, he desires "simply to be free from an embarrassment" (2: 250). That is, under threat of contamination from the controversial status of both the jewels and the woman who 'misuses' them, this fawn bolts. Others, including Frank Greystock and the bullish Lord George, soon follow suit. The point that Trollope drives home here is painfully clear: in sexual commerce, as in the commodity marketplace, no one wants to invest in a good that shatters consumer confidence. No one, in other words, wants to handle or even fence 'hot' property.

FROM DIAMONDS TO MACKEREL

In the end, *The Eustace Diamonds* offers no viable alternative to a disempowered, dehumanized, and even disembodied feminine identity as commodity. Through the character of Mr. Emilius, the crooked clergyman, Trollope brings the point home to roost at the close of the novel. That Lizzie ends up with no choice but to marry the sleazy and impoverished preacher—that only this sly, loathsome scavenger wants her—calls attention to her severely diminished value in both social and economic terms. Trollope puts this somewhat more bluntly after Lizzie's public censure in court: "She had been maimed fearfully in her late contests with the world, and now was lame and soiled and impotent" (2: 362). In short, following the public exposure of her abusive and destructive social behavior, Lizzie is damaged goods, as Mr. Emilius intuitively appreciates:

. . . when rumours reached him prejudicial to Lizzie in respect of the diamonds, he perceived that such prejudice might work weal for him. A gentleman once, on ordering a mackerel for dinner, was told that a fresh mackerel would come to a shilling. He could have a stale mackerel for sixpence. 'Then bring me a stale mackerel,' said the gentleman. Mr. Emilius coveted fish, but was aware that his position did not justify him in expecting the best fish on the market. (2: 239-40)

A self-confessed bargain shopper in the marriage market, Mr. Emilius aims no higher than the discounted 'six-pence mackerel.' Here again, Trollope makes use of the metaphoric commodity to explain a complex social situation. Trollope's new choice of commodity further informs that situation. Rather than crisply sparkling diamonds of exorbitant value, Trollope now equates his material girl with stale fish

of dubious, sub-standard value. From a solid and sparkling mineral (diamonds) Trollope now switches over to dead and decaying organic matter (rotting fish).

So although, through Mr. Emilius' mackerel metaphor, Trollope clearly continues to place Lizzie 'on the market,' he now does so as a discounted and damaged good, as an object almost without value in —and so almost without potential for— exchange. And as a sullied and unwanted good in the public eye, Trollope's material girl finds herself without standing in society, without real value in the market, and without social options: "Might she have chosen from all the world, Mr. Emilius was not, perhaps, the man whom she would have selected" (2: 363). Her marriage accordingly represents a cheap transaction —a bankrupt settlement— between two value-less villains who deserve nothing better or worse than each other. But above all, it signals Lizzie's total failure to realize her consumer ambitions or even to fulfill her material desires.

In pawning off Lizzie in this way to the mealy-mouthed preacher —who is later exposed as a polygamist in *The Prime Minister* (1876)— Trollope underlines the harsh economic realities and unforgiving social codes of the Victorian marriage market and the consumer world in which it operates. Similarly, he also reconfirms the novel's driving idea that, in the dominant sexual politics of the nineteenth century, women represent to society what the commodity represents to the marketplace. But the analogy, as Trollope develops and refines it over the course of the novel, extends much further in its implications.

Though it challenges and experiments with commodity culture's conceptualization of the feminine, Trollope's representation of the material girl

never does break away from the capitalist paradigm that frames and informs the whole of its account of society and its membership. Rather, it operates exclusively within that paradigm to assess the consequences of exploiting and manipulating economic constructions of the feminine in the self-serving pursuit of material gratification. In so doing, it suggests that such a project ultimately reinforces the cultural problematic it seeks to reform, and that it generates —rather than solves— social problems. It shows just how forcefully nineteenth century social order resists rewritings of its gender categories. And it confirms that order's tyrannous recuperative power. Diamonds, so Trollope cautions, are anything but a girl's best friend. But above all, Trollope's novel shows how, in the nineteenth century, capitalist society restrains and suppresses the kinds of rewriting of its gender categories that, however equivocally, it now endorses and exults in popular icons like Madonna.

5. DAMAGED GOODS: DECAY IN CONRAD'S *THE SECRET AGENT*

THE SHOP

In the early twentieth century, commodity culture takes on an air of decay and degeneracy in fiction that attests to an increasingly acute discomfort over capitalism's decadent effects on the values and practices of consumer society. This chapter argues that Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) registers this shift. Set in the seedy underworld and grimy back-streets of London in 1894, Conrad's savagely ironic novel of half-baked revolutionary politics and bungled urban terrorism shows the dark side and damaged face of commodity culture as it moves into the twentieth century. In particular, it envisions the material and social worlds in a state of advanced corruption and decay that puts them beyond the capacity for repair. In Conrad's writing, we find none of the underlying social optimism of nineteenth century narrative. We see no potential at all for achieving sociality in a fragmented, disaffected, and decadent society. In short, Conrad's writing introduces a note of cynicism and skepticism that does not surface nearly as forcefully in the social parables of Victorian novels. Following these thoughts, this chapter focuses its discussion on three key elements in Conrad's representation of commodity culture in *The Secret Agent*: the shop, the city, and the bomb. In so doing, the discussion delays examining Conrad's treatment of anarchism to look first at his vision of the material and social worlds against which that anarchism reacts.

Conrad begins *The Secret Agent* by introducing us to Verloc's shop —the base of operations for the novel's anarchist movement and, as such, the novel's

narrative and symbolic center. The character and condition of that shop immediately bring into focus the ways in which Conrad's vision of the material and social worlds modifies and moves on from that of nineteenth century narrative. In particular, in Verloc's shop Conrad gives a version of Dickens' old curiosity turned seedy and sour, obscene and corrupt.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Dickens offers this sight of the novel's back-street antique dealership that pays close attention to the clutter of material objects populating the shop's dim interior:

The place . . . was one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town, and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and disgust. There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in the armour, here and there; fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters; rusty weapons of various kinds; distorted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; tapestry, and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams. (4-5)

As Dickens presents it, the shop looks like some kind of cemetery for discarded material objects dislocated from the modern consumer world and belonging to distant places and earlier times. The objects themselves possess a distinctly otherworldly character. Their forms are ghostly, fantastic, distorted, and strange, as if 'designed in dreams.' In effect, the 'old and curious things' in the shop look and behave almost nothing like commodities up for sale on the market. Though their antiquated—even spectral—appearance may captivate the imagination, these dusty relics do little to excite consumer desire and even less to invite economic exchange.

Like its inventory, the shop itself is similarly dislocated from the modern consumer world. Its anonymous location in an 'odd' corner of the city ensures that it remains stranded in a state of commercial obscurity. More to the point, however, the shop seems to welcome that obscurity, hiding its "musty treasures from the public eye," as Dickens stresses, "in jealousy and disgust" (5). Here, Dickens effectively highlights what is perhaps the most curious thing about his curiosity shop—namely, that it not only defies consumer logic, but does so deliberately. The shop hides its merchandise instead of displaying it. And it seeks to escape the public gaze instead of doing everything possible to entrance it. In a sense, then, Dickens' curiosity shop figures not just as a sanctuary for discarded objects no longer fit for the competitive marketplace, but also as an anomalous and solitary site of resistance—however ineffectual—against both capitalism and its larger theater of consumption.

Verloc's shop in *The Secret Agent* shares many of the outward characteristics of Dickens' curiosity shop. It crouches in an anonymous corner of the city. It is stranded in commercial obscurity. It exudes an almost spectral aura. And it houses an outlandish and eclectic assortment of seemingly valueless objects, as Conrad's description of its window display throws into high relief:

The window contained photographs of more or less un-dressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two and six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with

titles like the *Torch*, the *Gong*—rousing titles. And the two gas-jets inside the panes were always turned low, either for economy's sake or for the sake of the customers. (13)

Like Dickens' back-street shop, this one also appears to defy consumer logic. The entire point of a window display is, as Baudrillard points out in *Consumer Society*, to assault the gaze with a "calculated riot of colour" that invites passers-by to convert fantasies of material indulgence into "real, economic exchange inside the shop" (166). The shop window in Conrad's novel, however, seems to be missing the point entirely. Its monotonous and neglected appearance offers no 'calculated riot of colour' to seduce the consumer gaze. Its cheap showcase of decaying and soiled junk does next to nothing to excite consumer desire. Nor does it extend any tantalizing invitations to real economic exchange inside the shop itself. Even the 'gas-jets' placed inside the window-pane for the sole purpose of lighting up the display are deliberately turned low instead of high.

In short, the gratuitous spectacle of the window display that becomes such a definitive fixture in retail practice by the late nineteenth century—and that receives elaborate representation in department store novels like Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900)—is conspicuously missing here. In Zola, for example, we are incessantly confronted by vivid images of dazzling Parisian store fronts. This passage shows the Baudu family, just arrived in the city from the provinces, instantly waylaid by a succession of fantastically ornate window displays:

They walked down the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, past the shop windows, stopping again in front of each fresh display. First they were attracted by a complicated arrangement: at the top, umbrellas,

placed obliquely, seemed to form the roof of some rustic hut, beneath which . . . were silk stockings, some strewn with roses, others with every hue —black net, red with embroidered clocks, fresh-coloured ones with a satiny texture which had the softness of a blonde woman's skin; lastly, on the back cloth of the shelves, gloves were symmetrically arranged, their fingers elongated, their palms as delicate as those of a Byzantine virgin . . . But it was the last window, above all, which held their attention. A display of silks, satins, and velvets spread out before them in a supple, shimmering range of the most delicate flower tones: at the top were the velvets, of deepest black and as white as curds; lower down were satins, pink and blue, with bright folds fading into tender pallors; lower down still were the silks, all the colours of the rainbow . . . pieces brought to life by the knowing hands of the shop assistants. . . (5)

Zola's images of visual pandemonium and excess show exactly what is missing in Conrad, illustrating in the process just what Baudrillard means in *Consumer Society* when he talks about the shop window's "calculated riot of colour" with all its "glorious *mise-en-scène*" and "sacrilizing ostentation" (166). These window displays are alive with energy and tension. They have form, texture, layers, structure, depth. The colors are intense and brilliant. The commodities look new, glossy, luxurious, and sensuous —inviting to the touch and tantalizingly accessible.

This phantasmagoria of commodities, with its almost psychedelic explosion of color, effectively transforms the novel's store fronts into a dream world of material pleasure and indulgence, what Zola dubs a "great fairground of display" (4). Crucially, this fairground has the desired effect on its captive audience. Hit with the full hypnotic force of the window displays, the Baudus experience what Walter

Benjamin describes in a comment on late nineteenth century Parisian shopping arcades as “the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers” (Baudelaire 55), and what Dreiser, talking in turn about the visual lure of Chicago department stores in *Sister Carrie*, calls the “drag of desire” (21).

Zola’s novel later shows how this intoxication of the commodity with its drag of desire can reach critical levels in the form of kleptomania—a psychological condition that the novel diagnoses as “a new form of neurosis” symptomizing “the acute temptation exercised by the big shops” (255). To illustrate the point, Zola offers the short vignette of the well-to-do pregnant lady who becomes obsessed with stealing the same item over and over again. In a raid on her home, the police discover a stash of “two hundred and forty eight pairs of pink gloves, stolen from every shop in Paris” (255). As Zola explains it, the kleptomaniac’s compulsion to steal has its roots in the seduction of display. The tantalizing spectacle of commodities staged by the modern department store generates desires so intense and powerful—so intoxicating, as Benjamin would have it—that they become impossible to repress.

In contrast to Zola’s *grands magasins* in *The Ladies’ Paradise*, Conrad’s little shop in *The Secret Agent* goes out of its way *not* to make a gratuitous, sensational, or even tantalizing spectacle of its public face. It works hard, in other words, *not* to exercise ‘acute temptations’ over the will and mind of the consumer. And in the absence of that spectacle—of any phantasmagoria of commodities or seduction of display—this shop gives the public body no incentive at all to stop and indulge in the dreamy ritual of window shopping. It generates none of the

irrepressible desires of the sort that drive Zola's kleptomaniacs to compulsive and obsessive acts of material gratification.

It is clear, then, that the shop in Conrad welcomes and even sets out to protect its state of obscurity and anonymity—that it deliberately dislocates its appearance from that of the modern consumer world. But it does so for radically different reasons than Dickens' old curiosity shop, as the character and condition of the objects displayed in Verloc's window slyly intimate. Taken together, the semi-nude photographs, non-descript packages, flimsy yellow envelopes, books hinting at indecency, and obscure foreign pamphlets with inflammatory political titles allude discreetly to the shop's real business of dealing in pornographic and anarchist materials—what Conrad enigmatically refers to as the selling of “shady wares” (15), and what in the cultural politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent socially taboo forms of trade. So although it may well look like an ineffective advertisement for the shop's interior, the window display does in fact hint at the shop's business in its own veiled and oblique way. The exhibited objects are shady in character (morally and politically dubious). They are shady in their material condition (damaged and decaying). And thanks to the poor lighting, they are quite literally shady in appearance.

To complete this picture of the shop as a site of shady dealings—as the kind of place where “in the daytime the door” remains “closed” and “in the evening” stands “discreetly but suspiciously ajar” (13)—Conrad carefully matches up the shop's appearance with that of its customers. As this passage highlights, those customers look as soiled and damaged as the suspect goods they consume:

These customers were either very young men, who hung about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly; or men of a more mature age, but looking generally as if they were not in funds. Some of that kind had their collars turned right up to their moustaches, and traces of mud on the bottom of their nether garments, which had the appearance of being much worn and not very valuable. And the legs inside them did not, as a general rule, seem of much account either. With their hands plunged deep in the side pockets of their coats, they dodged in sideways, one shoulder first, as if afraid to start the bell going. (13)

These self-effacing, ghostly forms are the antithesis of the flamboyant and leisurely figure of the *flâneur* —the parading streetwalker, habitual crowd watcher, and inveterate window shopper whom Benjamin sees in *Illuminations* as the embodiment *par excellence* of the late nineteenth century metropolitan consumer (168-9); and whom Deborah Parsons, following Benjamin, describes in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* as an ‘itinerant metaphor’ for urban modernity (2-3). Darting furtively into the shop with their “collars turned up and soft hats rammed down” (14), Conrad’s faceless customers go out of their way to escape the scrutiny of the public gaze. They seek not to stand out from the crowd, but to melt invisibly into it. Like the shop itself, in other words, these faceless customers work hard to ensure their anonymity and obscurity. To this end, they similarly disassociate themselves from commodity culture’s spectacular practices and, in particular, from its carnivalesque tendency towards conspicuous consumption. They share in none of the eye-catching pleasures of *la flânerie*.

The fact that the shop’s faceless customers are exclusively male further hints

at its pornographic orientation. As Steven Marcus notes in his study on Victorian sexuality and pornography, the material of pornography has historically been produced in Western culture—as it still is today—almost exclusively “by men for men” (281). That is, as an industry catering almost exclusively to male desire, the selling of pornography targets and attracts a dominantly male consumer body. Even so, the notable absence of any female clientele in Verloc’s shop does not in itself betray the presence of a pornographic trade. But it does become strongly suggestive of just such a trade when coupled with the shop’s own seedy and secretive appearance.

More to the point, however, Conrad makes it clear in his account of these anonymous consumers that the shop engages in a form of commerce that—however paradoxically—positively requires obscurity and anonymity in order to draw in its customers and shift out its goods:

Sometimes it was Mrs. Verloc who would appear at the call of the cracked bell Then the customer of comparatively tender years would get suddenly disconcerted at having to deal with a woman, and with rage in his heart would proffer a request for a bottle of marking ink, retail value sixpence (price in Verloc’s shop one and sixpence), which, once outside, he would drop stealthily into the gutter. (14)

This passage basically reads as a description of the amateur pornographer. The discomforting presence of a woman behind the counter makes the insecure customer acutely aware of himself as a consumer of explicit material. It punctures his sense of invisibility. The overpriced marking ink is of course a decoy good that allows him to

salvage the embarrassing situation by making an entirely innocuous transaction. That he buys an overpriced item he clearly does not want simply confirms the value he attaches to remaining both inconspicuous.

Accordingly, unlike the department store that thrives on the spectacle of goods and the seduction of display, Conrad's back-street shop absolutely needs to deflect and defuse the curiosity of the public gaze in order to capitalize on its merchandise. So although this corrupt and decadent version of Dickens' old curiosity shop may well look like it similarly defies consumer logic, it is really the case that this shop reverses consumer logic. Rishona Zimring makes this point in her fittingly titled article, *Conrad's Pornography Shop*, noting that "instead of making a spectacle of its goods, [Conrad's] shop sells by hiding them" (334). She rightly adds that the shop entices its highly self-conscious clientele "with the comfort of obscurity, not the seduction of display" (334). The indication is that the shop does not evade the gaze as a way to resist consumerism. Rather, it does so precisely as a way to participate invisibly yet complicitously in it—as a tactic for surreptitiously cashing in on commodity culture's deviant consumer desires.

In Conrad, then, the back-street shop no longer figures, as it does in Dickens, as a sanctuary for discarded material goods no longer fit for the competitive market—it just masquerades as one. Commenting on the fraudulent appearance of the transactions that actually take place inside the shop, Conrad reinforces this exact idea:

. . . through the dusty glass door behind the painted deal counter, Mr Verloc would issue hastily from the parlour in the back . . . he would proceed to sell over the counter some object looking

obviously and scandalously not worth the money which passed in the transaction: a small cardboard box with apparently nothing inside, for instance, or one of those carefully closed yellow flimsy envelopes, or a soiled volume in paper covers with a promising title.

(14)

Even inside, the shop maintains its facade. The sexually and politically rousing material sold over the counter continues to masquerade as merchandise wholly impotent to stimulate desire. These decaying objects and seemingly empty containers look even less like commodities than the useless and obsolete relics haunting the dim corners of Dickens' curiosity shop, and nothing at all like the sensuous and ethereal *objets de luxe* so theatrically showcased behind the plate-glass windows of Zola's novel.

But unlike the dusty antiques in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the damaged goods in Conrad's shop do possess value in exchange —what Marx sees in *Capital* as the key economic property that allows a material thing to function in the marketplace as a capitalist object of exchange (see 46-8). To put it simply, in *The Secret Agent* customers do at least pay money, an expression of value in the abstract, in *exchange* for the objects secreted away inside the shop. The value of those objects, however, is visually masked. The pornographic and anarchist spectacles concealed inside the flimsy envelopes, cardboard boxes, and rotting books are displaced behind an entirely unspectacular look of emptiness and waste. These commodities are in disguise, not on parade.

In this respect, Conrad offers a vision of the commodity that breaks with those dominating nineteenth century narrative. In *Vanity Fair*, for example,

Thackeray sees the commodity as a spectacular object of desire that animates entire carnivals of consumption. Similarly, the commodity features in Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* as a glamorous and glittery thing, a dazzling icon for the opulent and ostentatious face of consumerism. Even in Gaskell's industrial novels, where the commodity remains largely absent from the narrative, it nonetheless represents a conspicuous object of luxury; and its rare narrative appearances are marked by ornate if soulless displays—as in the case of Thornton's museum of a living-room in *North and South*. In short, the commodity's presence in nineteenth century narrative is anything but subdued or self-effacing; and its identity anything but a source of false representation. In Conrad's early twentieth century vision, however, the commodity figures instead as an obscure—even obscene—object of desire whose presence and identity are now masked, deferred, suppressed, displaced.

This disguising of the commodity's presence and identity plays a critical role in articulating the novel's attitude towards revolutionary politics. To begin, Conrad never does slip behind the commodity's disguise to disclose any dirty or salient details about the shop's pornographic and anarchist material. If anything, the description of that material becomes increasingly indeterminate over the course of the novel. By the time the Assistant Commissioner of Police—himself in disguise—visits Verloc's shop to snoop around, the merchandise on display is reduced to an almost amorphous mass:

. . . a suspect patch of dim light issued from Mr Verloc's shop front, hung with papers, heaving with vague piles of cardboard boxes and the shapes of books By the side of the front window, encumbered by the shadows of nondescript things, the

door, standing ajar, let escape on the pavement a narrow, clear streak of gaslight within. (127)

With its vague imagery, nebulous shapes, and ‘shadows of nondescript things,’ Conrad’s description in this passage makes it impossible, as Brian Shaffer points out in *The Commerce of Shady Wares*, “to tell whether it is the politically rousing or sexually arousing materials that are being detailed” (444). This, however, is no accident on Conrad’s part. From the outset, Conrad deliberately collapses the distinctions between the two forms of merchandise. They share the same physical space, the same material condition of damage and decay, the same look of emptiness and waste, the same forms of disguise, and even the same anonymous consumers.

Brian Shaffer argues that Conrad forges these “bonds between revolutionary politics and pornography” in order “to tarnish the glamour of subversive politics with the smuttiness of tawdry sex” (443). To this end, Shaffer adds, both spheres “are depicted as figuratively or literally masturbatory, and as attracting a morally dubious readership” (443). Conrad’s early account of Verloc’s customers, with their soiled clothing and suspect behavior, certainly bears out Shaffer’s point about a dubious readership. Similarly, something of pornography’s association with lonely and humiliating acts of self-abuse rubs off on these seedy figures.

But although his argument makes an important point, Shaffer does not follow through to take the relationship between the shady wares and consumerism into account. Rishona Zimring does, however, when she argues that Conrad’s sex shop fulfills the function of a safety valve for a society that generates “excess desire,” desire that “in turn finds satisfaction in the commodification of women and

the reproduction of rousing revolutionary titles” (334). This idea that the shop acts as a kind of safety valve is one the Conrad himself touches on when he states that the shop’s dubious goods “preserve an imperfect society from the dangers of moral and physical corruption, both secret, too, of their kind” (231). For Zimring, this suggests that Conrad sees “desire, whether sexual or revolutionary,” as having “as its object simulations and as its banal relief, an economic transaction: the purchase” (334-5). In such terms, Conrad’s collapsing of the distinction between pornographic and anarchist material can be understood not just as a way to satirize and debunk revolutionary politics (as discussed later on), but also as a commentary on the social function of catering to ‘deviant’ consumer desires. In *The Secret Agent* the selling of anarchist material, like the selling of pornography, is about defusing existing desires not fueling new ones.

Conrad’s disguising of the commodity also generates another form of discord in the novel. In exchange for their money Verloc’s customers receive objects that look ‘obviously and scandalously’ not worth the sums that ‘pass in the transaction.’ These transactions, as Conrad carefully emphasizes, have the same dubious look about them as the shop, its customers, and its goods. Moreover, as moments of commodity exchange, they jar like everything else about this retail space with commodity culture’s dominant consumer practices and trends, and in particular with mainstream experiences of shopping.

In *The Ladies’ Paradise*, Zola offers this scene of a department store’s daily rush-hour traffic that conveniently brings into focus what is again conspicuously missing in Conrad:

The great afternoon rush-hour had arrived, when the overheated machine led the dance of the customers, extracting money from their very flesh . . . there was a sense of madness In the still air, where the stifling central heating brought out the smells of materials, the hubbub was increasing, made up of all sorts of noises —the continuous trampling of feet, the same phrases repeated a hundred times at the counters, gold clinking on the brass of the cash-desks, besieged by a mass of purses, the baskets on wheels with their loads of parcels falling endlessly into the cellars. (108-9)

Commenting on this passage in the introduction to his edition of *The Ladies' Paradise*, Brian Nelson suggests that Zola's description of the store's sales, with all its "swirling movement" and "frenetic circulation of money, goods, and bodies," is "the perfect expression of commodity culture" as "a culture of speed, movement, dislocation, disorientation" (13). Indeed, Zola's account of the rush-hour mob and its experience inside the store offers images not just of dislocation and disorientation, but of disembodiment and dismemberment as well. The dancing customers are skinned alive —their money extracted 'from their very flesh'— to a frantic beat of metal coins clinking at the cash registers, to an uproar of stampeding feet, and to an orchestra of disembodied human voices. All this, moreover, takes place in a fairground atmosphere of chaos and confusion that sweeps up the crush of grinding bodies in a fever of impulse buying.

By contrast, the sale of goods in *The Secret Agent* takes place in a solemn atmosphere of tension and discomfort that shares in none of the spontaneity and riotous festivity of the shopping experience in Zola's 'overheated machine' of a store. In Conrad, there is no rush-hour traffic, no dance of customers, no hubbub of

cacophonous noise, no dizzying blur of moving goods and bodies. Rather, the transactions in the novel's sex shop occur in almost complete silence and solitude—in sedate moments of veiled movement, muffled voices, and stifled sounds. The exchange of commodities is marked by concealment, not exhibition. Conrad's faceless customers do not linger indulgently over their transactions any more than they exult publicly in the objects they purchase. They appear to take no pleasure from the act of buying or even from the larger experience of shopping itself. Here, the sale of goods does not represent an occasion for instant gratification, but speaks instead of deferred pleasure and repressed desire.

Conrad's account of the sex shop may not ambush us with any of the speed or movement that sets the department store rushing in Zola, but it does similarly hit us with images of dislocation and disorientation. Those images, however, are generated for different reasons and by a different consumer experience. In *The Ladies' Paradise*, material objects, rather than human beings, take center stage in the spectacle. In many ways, they seem more animate than the stunned customers they entrance. It is as if they somehow possess an autonomous life of their own. The customers in turn become lost in the visual and psychological confusion of this fantastic experience. Absorbed into the robotic rhythms of the crowd, they become objects in their own right to be processed mechanically through the store's 'machine'—a machine that dehumanizes and estranges the individual on a massive, almost industrial scale.

But in *The Secret Agent* the inanimate things inside the sex shop remain just that: dead objects. The displacement of their real identities behind an appearance of damage and decay (however symbolically suggestive) removes all potential for

these commodities to come spectacularly alive in the customer's imagination. As a consequence, they deaden rather than enliven the atmosphere of the broken social space they inhabit. More importantly, the commodity's illicit character in Conrad means not only that these objects are placed in disguise, but also that the customers who buy them efface their identities in the same way. Displaced as we have seen behind a similar appearance of damage and decay, those customers become the mirror images of the dead objects they consume.

The effect is a disorienting consumer experience that becomes an obstacle to sociality. The stress at every level on anonymity, obscurity, detachment, and deception positively impedes human relations. It even reduces the human subject to the dehumanized category of an inanimate *thing*. And like the commodities populating that space, the shop's customers are similarly cut-off from their own identities as well as the identities of others. They are severed from the larger social body. And they are dislocated from the wider consumer world. In sum, Conrad sees the sex shop as a deeply asocial space that exerts an alienating and dehumanizing influence over the human subject.

THE CITY

This sense of alienation and dehumanization extends beyond the confines of the sex shop to encompass the whole of Conrad's vision of the city. In his 1920 'Author's Note' to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad recalls the daydream that inspired the novel's cityscape. It is a vision of London so somber and brooding that it transforms the metropolis into a place of darkness as engulfing and menacing as the African interior in *Heart of Darkness* (1902):

It was at first for me a mental change, disturbing a quieted-down imagination, in which strange forms . . . appeared and claimed attention as crystals will do by their bizarre and unexpected shapes. One fell to musing before the phenomenon . . . Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. (10)

Such images of the city's hostility and indifference towards humanity—of a human population buried alive and suffocating in the obscurity and anonymity of urban existence—recur throughout the novel. In *The Secret Agent*, the city figures as “an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, suffocated by . . . blackness” (126). The buildings are “a black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man” (54). The streets are like “a slimy aquarium from which the water [has] been run off” (124). In short, this squalid urban wilderness is, as Randall Stevenson notes in *Conrad, Clockwork and the Politics of Modernism*, positively Dickensian in its “images of hostility and horror” (45).

Even so, Conrad's vision of the city is much darker than any we find in Dickens. In fact, it is so oppressively dark that it brings to mind the distinctively bleak cityscapes of *film noir*—a cinematic genre that first emerged from Hollywood in the early 1940's in response to urban America's social and material decay in the

wake of the depression era. Through dimly-lit photography and shadow-laden camerawork, classic *noir* films such as John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) or Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946) similarly see the city in menacing images of darkness, disorder, waste, and decay —images that the future *noir* of films like Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* (1982) take to visual and conceptual extremes. Set in the Los Angeles of 2019, *Bladerunner* envisions a sprawling urban wasteland where, in a classic *noir* gesture, it is always night and always raining. In its dystopian projections, as Ralph Willet notes in *The Naked City*, the film imagines the metropolis of the future as a place where “empty warehouses and abandoned industrial plants drip with leaking acid rain,” where “rubbish piles up,” where “infrastructures are in a state of disintegration,” and where “scavengers roam among the garbage” (100). And though *Bladerunner* does offer some glimpses of another city built high above this one —of a high-tech world filled with flashing neon lights, flying cars, and majestic skyscrapers— it does so only to highlight even further the mass urban degeneration taking place everywhere at street-level.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad takes the novel's images of urban degeneration to visual and conceptual extremes of their own. In the following street scene, for example, Conrad exposes the full severity of the city's alienating and dehumanizing effects. The imagery that ensues is so uncompromisingly bleak and brutal that it would not be out of place in the dystopian urban world imagined in *Bladerunner*. The passage also shares the same tone of social cynicism that, as Raymond Durnat argues in *Paint it Black* (37), becomes as such a definitive feature of the *noir* genre:

On one side [of the street] the low brick houses had in their dusty

windows the sightless, moribund look of incurable decay —empty shells awaiting demolition. From the other side life had not departed wholly as yet. Facing the only gas-lamp yawned the cavern of a second-hand-furniture dealer, where, deep in the gloom of a sort of narrow avenue winding through a bizarre forest of wardrobes, with an undergrowth tangle of table legs, a tall pier-glass glimmered like a pool of water in a wood. An unhappy homeless couch, accompanied by two unrelated chairs, stood in the open. (74)

What is particularly striking —as well as disturbing— about this street scene is the total absence of a human population. The street is deserted. The houses look uninhabited. Even the second-hand-furniture shop seems abandoned. Here, the material degeneration is so acute that the city becomes more than just hostile and indifferent towards humanity. The condition of ‘incurable decay’ also makes human living in this demolition zone seem unthinkable and even potentially lethal. The word ‘incurable,’ moreover, gives the terminal decay infecting this urban space the malignant feel of a cancerous disease.

It is, in turn, through the description of the second-hand-furniture shop that Conrad comments —albeit obliquely— on the impact of that urban space on social relations and human experience. The only visible life in the street is the fetish life of objects. That is, Conrad projects human characteristics onto the shop’s collection of used furniture, endowing it with a life-like autonomy and subjectivity of its own. It is interesting that Conrad singles out furniture of all things, since Marx uses the example of a wooden table in *Capital* to illustrate how the fetishism of commodities transforms material objects into independent beings:

The form of wood . . . is altered by making a table out of it. Yet the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (82)

The passage is somewhat confusing because Marx explains the fetishistic illusion *with* a fetishistic illusion —what in this case almost reads like a version of the Pinocchio fantasy where a crafted wooden puppet magically snaps to life and, with its newfound wooden brain, starts thinking and acting for itself. What Marx is attempting to describe, however, is the way that the commodity's mass mediation of capitalist society tends to erase the trace of the human presence animating it, so that relations between people *look* like relations mediated by things. This is what Marx means when he talks about “material relations between persons and social relations between things” (84). Objects take on the characteristics of human subjects, while human subjects in turn take on the characteristics of objects.

The same process takes place in Conrad's description of the second-hand-furniture shop. Like Marx in the 'Pinocchio' passage, Conrad invests the commodity with the power to stand in and so mediate for the human presence camouflaged behind it. In such terms, Conrad's account of the strange life of furniture implicitly comments on that of the city's human population. It is significant, then, that Conrad brings material objects to life only to stress their condition of estrangement and paradoxical look of lifelessness. The chairs are 'unrelated.' The couch is 'unhappy' and 'homeless.' These used goods have none of the animated vitality of Marx's

dancing table which, in its relations with other commodities, even stands on its head. Rather, they seem to exist in a state of suspended animation. Abandoned, neglected, and unwanted, their life as commodities up for sale on the market is marked by immobility, stagnation, inertia. But most importantly, as unrelated objects, Conrad's mismatched pieces of used furniture have no relationship with each other. Marx talks in *Capital* about how the fetishistic illusion creates the appearance of 'social relations between things.' In Conrad's version of the fetishistic illusion, however, the asociality of the space that the commodity now inhabits prevents the possibility of any such relations.

That Conrad uses the condition of objects here as an expression for the reified human condition accordingly suggests that in this place of terminal decay human subjects are, like the commodities representing them, damaged goods. More importantly, it also suggests that the experience of urban life under capitalism estranges and depersonalizes the individual—that the city's human population is itself similarly inhibited from entering into social relations.

These ideas inform another key passage in the novel. It is a description of the city's public trade in newspapers that again highlights a breakdown in social relations:

. . . a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of dirty men harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubishy sheets of paper soiled with printer's ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like a tapestry the sweep of the kerbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet in

comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (72)

The language of garbage saturates the entire passage. The newspaper sellers operate out of the gutter. The posters are ‘maculated with filth.’ And the papers themselves—harmonizing with the dirt of the people, the streets and even the sky—look ‘damp,’ ‘rubishy’ and ‘soiled.’ In short, Conrad shows in this passage the degeneration of yet another of the city’s social spaces. It is significant that he does so by focusing on newsstands. The newsstands represent what should be a hot-bed of social activity—a public place of congregation, gossip, information, and exchange. But they do nothing of the sort. The look of filth and waste disables their potential to stimulate social relations. The news is literally covered in dirt.

The effect, as Rishona Zimring points out in her reading of this passage, is that “the circulation of news” figures “as the flow of garbage” (335). With this idea in mind the dirt of the newspapers can also be seen, as Zimring argues, to represent “the printed words themselves” (335). In other words, the newspapers’ trashed condition doubles as a statement about the trashy material they contain, so that the dirt *on* them becomes figuratively representative of the dirt *in* them. In such terms, it makes even more sense that Conrad depicts the news as ‘disregarded’ and its reading public as disinterested. Even this textual social space has deteriorated to the point where it overflows with its own verbal form of garbage.

It is clear from these various street-scenes that Conrad’s treatment of the city goes out of its way to emphasize the asociality of urban space, the anonymity and obscurity of urban existence, and the states of alienation and dehumanization that

ensue. What follows is a vision of the city dominated, like that of the sex shop, by images of darkness, disorder, waste, and decay that go beyond the bleak urban imagery of earlier writers like Dickens to prefigure that of *film noir* in its blackest moments. In particular, as Randall Stevenson points out, Conrad's images make the city into "a chaotic space in need of . . . order and rule of law" (45) —into the kind of menacing urban "jungle" (126) that the character of the Assistant Commissioner finds it to be when he sneaks about the city streets at night. And it is precisely by stressing in this way the city's material and social deterioration that Conrad "sets the stage," in Zimring's words, "for corrective visions of cleanliness and order" (335) —visions that emerge paradoxically from the novel's anarchist bomb plot and its attempt at urban terrorism.

THE BOMB

The bomb plot in *The Secret Agent*, in which Conrad extrapolates from the real events surrounding the 1894 Greenwich Bomb Outrage (see Sherry 202-28), takes as its target the one instantly recognizable symbol of modern universal time: the Greenwich Observatory and so what represents not only the physical embodiment of the prime meridian but also, as Randall Stevenson stresses, "the absolute center of the world's spatial and temporal ordering" (38). In other words, the idea behind the bombing of the Observatory is not to destroy a building but, rather, to attack the concept for which that building stands.

But why blow up time? The character of Mr. Vladimir (the novel's thinly disguised Russian diplomat and the mastermind behind the plot) explains at some length in a condescending and deeply cynical lecture to Verloc who, in his capacity

as Vladimir's "*agent provocateur*" (30), has so far proved incompetent at provoking anything at all. In this condensed extract, Vladimir extols what he calls his "philosophy of bomb throwing" (35):

The sacrosanct fetish of today is science This is what you should try for. An attempt upon a crown head or on a president is sensational enough in a way, but not so much as it used to be Now let us take an outrage upon a church No matter how revolutionary and anarchist in inception, there would be fools enough to give such an outrage the character of a religious manifestation A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer in the same way from the suggestion of non-political passion; the exasperation of a hungry man A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism . . . You anarchists should make it clear that you are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation. But how to get that appallingly absurd notion into the heads of the middle classes so that there should be no mistake? A bomb in the National Gallery would make some noise. But it would not be serious enough. Art has never been their fetish But there is . . . science It is the sacrosanct fetish The blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration. (34-7)

Underpinning Vladimir's 'philosophy of bomb throwing' is the idea that, as every good terrorist knows, the choice of target is the key to delivering the message—that in many ways the target *is* the message. In this case, the target is much more than modernity's "sacrosanct fetish" of science. The target is capitalism itself. In other words, Vladimir sees the 'blowing up of the first meridian' as a suitable anarchist

objective precisely because of what it represents to capitalist society —namely, the modern construct of time that emerged from the industrial revolution and that enabled the expansion of capitalism in general and the mechanization of productive society in particular.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács talks at length about how, beginning in the early nineteenth century, this construction of time affects the everyday experience of work :

If we follow the path taken by labour in its development from the handicraft . . . to machine industry we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalisation . . . The period of time necessary for work to be accomplished (which forms the basis of rational calculation) is converted, as mechanisation and rationalisation are intensified Time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’ [Work] becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons [the worker]. (88-90)

This transformation of time from a ‘flowing’ and ‘variable’ experience into an ‘exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum’ corresponds more widely to the project implicit in the standardizing of Greenwich Mean Time in the late nineteenth century. That project becomes clear if we consider what was established at the international Prime Meridian Congress of 1884 where the initiative to standardize GMT was launched. As Stephen Kern explains in *The Culture of Time and Space*, the congress located “Greenwich as the zero meridian, determined the exact length of the day, divided the earth into twenty-four time zones, and fixed a precise beginning to the

universal day” (12). The ‘invention’ of GMT, in other words, represented an extension of capitalism’s quantification and mechanization of time, as Lukács describes it, on a massive, global scale.

Lukács also talks about how, in everyday working practice, productive society becomes imprisoned by the ‘abstract laws’ of the ‘mechanism’ of time. Marx puts it more succinctly in *The Poverty of Philosophy* when he makes the characteristically axiomatic claim that “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most time’s carcass” (127). This idea that the individual becomes a prisoner of the clock applies more widely to the effects of establishing a universal system of regulated time. The standardizing of GMT in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conceived to meet the expansionist economic needs of Western capitalist nations, helped to regulate working hours, production, transport, commerce, and communications throughout the world. In the process, it also facilitated the Western colonial project and in particular, as Stevenson again points out, its “division, rule and exploitation” (38) of developing nations.

In *The Secret Agent*, Vladimir is accordingly right on target when he identifies the Greenwich Observatory as an ideal objective for an act of anarchist terrorism. Not only does the structure embody the modern institution of time, but it also symbolizes the entire capitalist system that depends and thrives upon that institution. Still, there remains a strong element of absurdity about this bomb plot. No matter how it is experienced, constructed, or represented, time is an abstract concept. It is impossible to blow up time in any literal sense. The same, of course, is true of capitalism.

Yet, in Vladimir’s cynical thinking, the absurdity of trying to blow up time

and everything it stands for is precisely what makes an attack on the first meridian such a promising act of terror:

It will alarm every selfishness of the class which should be impressed. They believe that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity. They do. And the absurd ferocity of such a demonstration will affect them more profoundly than the mangling of a whole street—or a theatre— full of their own kind. To the last they can always say: ‘Oh! it’s mere class hate.’ But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasions, or bribes. (36)

The social class that Vladimir singles out in this passage is the bourgeoisie. Clearly he takes pleasure in anticipating its shock and horror at the “ferocious imbecility” (37) of bombing the first meridian—or more exactly, the imbecility of bombing the *idea* of the first meridian. This sort of attack on the science of time, as Vladimir mockingly points out, is potentially terrifying for the bourgeoisie not just because it symbolically targets a source of its ‘material prosperity,’ but also because it does so in a gesture that conveys a determination “to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation” (35)—a gesture that speaks of a fanatical commitment to subverting capitalist order.

But Vladimir is no anarchist. Not only does he belong to the bourgeoisie, but he also seeks, despite all his obvious “scorn and condescension” (33) towards the middle classes, to protect its material interests. In short, his allegiance is to capitalism, not to the forces of chaos and confusion working to subvert it. And in

this, Conrad supplies one of the novel's most glaring ironies. Vladimir's ulterior motive in dreaming up the anarchist bomb plot is not after all to weaken capitalist order but in fact to strengthen it, as his private secretary spells out for Verloc's benefit:

What is desired . . . is the occurrence of something definite which should stimulate . . . the vigilance of the police and the severity of the magistrate. The general leniency of the judicial procedure here and the utter absence of all repressive measures, are a scandal to Europe. What is wished for is the accentuation of the unrest; of the fermentation that undoubtedly exists. (23-4)

Vladimir himself later rewords this in even less compassionate language:

This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty The imbecile bourgeoisie . . . make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have political power still, if only they had the sense to use it for their preservation They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. What they want just now is a jolly good scare. (33)

The point of trying to engineer this 'jolly good scare' is to frighten the public into accepting what Vladimir refers to as "universal oppressive legislation" (34). This 'oppressive legislation' is conceived as a way not just to restore law and order to the city, but in the process to preserve capitalism and its forms of wealth from the kinds of material and social degeneration that Conrad's representation of commodity culture highlights in its treatment of both the sex shop and the city it inhabits.

With its total disregard for civil liberty, Vladimir's 'corrective vision of cleanliness and order,' to return to Zimring's phrase, borders uncomfortably on fascism. Its idea of cleaning up the city and straightening out society basically boils down to creating a xenophobic and repressive Police State. Conrad, however, does not offer Vladimir's vision as any kind of genuine or credible solution to the problems of decay facing commodity culture. Rather, he makes it clear that Vladimir's vision is itself a product of the corruption it seeks to stamp out. Vladimir talks with contempt, for example, about how the 'imbecile bourgeoisie' has become an accomplice to 'the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses.' It seems to escape him entirely that this is exactly what he does when he commissions an act of urban terrorism from an anarchist. More importantly, Vladimir figures in the novel as a representative of the Establishment. That Conrad shows him financing crime suggests not just that the Establishment has become complicit in the cultural phenomena and political projects it sets out to contain, but that in so doing it becomes morally corrupt as well.

Conrad subjects the novel's anarchists to the same irony. Nowhere does this become clearer than in Verloc's interview with his paymaster. When asked by the skeptical Vladimir whether he is a "desperate socialist" or an "anarchist" (26), Verloc immediately replies: "Anarchist!" (26). The irony of course is that Verloc is trying to convince the man who is paying him to spy on his fellow revolutionaries that he is committed to the revolutionary cause. More to the point, Verloc's subversive activities, however ineffectual and reluctantly executed, are funded by a representative of the bourgeoisie. In the case of the bomb plot, those activities are even designed specifically to serve the material interests of the middle classes while,

in the process, betraying the revolutionary cause.

With the notable exception of the Professor (as discussed later on), the rest of the novel's anarchists have also sold out in one way or another. Most notably, the characters of Karl Yundt, Michaelis, and Comrade Ossipon all support their revolutionary activities through careers as male gigolos for rich, aristocratic women. Conrad confirms as much when he mentions that Yundt is "nursed" financially by "a blar-eyed old woman" (51), that Michaelis has been "annexed" by a "wealthy old lady" (51), and that Ossipon is "sure to want for nothing" so long as there are "silly girls with savings-bank books in the world" (51). Like Verloc in his dealing with Vladimir, all three of these self-proclaimed "terrorists" (43) leech off the very system of privilege and power they claim to reject. In fact, their method of generating income smacks of the worst kind of capitalist profiteering. They sexually exploit women in the pursuit of money; or as Brian Shaffer aptly puts it, they "prostitute" themselves in the service of their revolutionary careers (457). As such, it is entirely fitting that this gang of anarchists holds its secret meetings in the sex shop—a space that is itself dedicated to capitalizing on the sexual exploitation of women. So like the bourgeois figure of Vladimir, Conrad's anarchists similarly become complicit in a project they seek to subvert. Only now, instead of a champion of capitalism collaborating with anarchists, we have a gang of anarchists acting like hardened capitalists.

Conrad is keen to show how this hypocrisy has the effect of corrupting the gang's political integrity by draining its will to act. Verloc stands out above the others in this respect. His hypocritical embracement of materialism and its derived comforts, which flies in the face of his revolutionary politics, expresses itself as an

extreme aversion to work —what Conrad describes in less charitable terms as pure laziness:

[Verloc] was in a manner devoted to [idleness] with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence . . . He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been that he was the victim of a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort.
(20)

Conrad's savage irony suggests that Verloc's fanaticism is misplaced. This agent of subversion perversely devotes all the excess passion that *should* go into his political activism to evading all forms of activity. To put it another way, he puts all his energy into avoiding the expenditure of energy. It is similarly ironic of course that, as someone who claims to be fighting for the working classes, Verloc does not believe in the 'effectiveness' of human labor.

This dedication to indolence —to passivity, inertia, stagnation— visibly registers in Verloc's physical appearance: "His eyes were naturally heavy; he had an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed" (14). Conrad picks up again on Verloc's wallowing appearance when he describes him a little later on as being "burly in a fat-pig style" (20). More importantly, Conrad stresses that this look of lethargy gives Verloc an air of degeneracy:

. . . the air common to men who live on the vices, the follies, or the baser fears of mankind; the air of moral nihilism common to keepers

of gambling hells and disorderly houses; . . . to drink sellers and, I should say, to the sellers of invigorating electric belts and the inventors of patent medicines. (21)

The passage tellingly compares Verloc to gamblers, boozers, quacks, carpet-baggers, and con-men—people who, as Conrad describes them, not only live off the corruption of society, but also eschew honesty and hard work. The comparison could not be more appropriate given that Verloc runs a sex shop. The pornographer is as much a cultural archetype of ‘moral nihilism’ as the others Conrad lists. As we have already seen, Conrad depicts the selling of pornography as a shady business that operates through deception, that survives on corruption, and that caters to society’s deviant consumer desires. Moreover, Conrad’s collapsing of the distinction between the shop’s pornographic and revolutionary materials suggests that the figure of the anarchist, like that of the pornographer, can similarly be understood in terms of ‘moral nihilism.’ It again hammers home the idea that, like gamblers, boozers, quacks, carpet-baggers, con-men, and now pornographers, the novel’s anarchists not only eschew honesty and hard-work but contribute as well to capitalism’s decadent effects on the values and practices of material culture—effects that are symptomized by the novel’s images of urban decay. In short, running a sex shop represents an ideal and fitting form of occupation for an apathetic agitator and corrupted materialist like Verloc.

With the notable exception once again of the Professor, the rest of the novel’s anarchists all suffer, albeit in a less pronounced way, from the same condition of apathy afflicting Verloc. Conrad brings into clearer focus how that apathy erodes their political integrity in this account of Michaelis’ views on the

future of capitalism:

He saw capitalism doomed in its cradle, born with the poison of the principle of competition in the system. The great capitalists devouring the little capitalists, concentrating on the power and the tools of production in great masses, perfecting industrial processes, and in the madness of self-aggrandizement only preparing, organizing, enriching, making ready the lawful inheritance of the proletariat. Michaelis pronounced the great word 'Patience.' (48-9)

What Michaelis' theory basically argues is that no action is required to bring about the revolution since capitalism is already programmed to self-destruct. The theory has tremendous appeal to Michaelis who, like Verloc, has become averse to work and dependent on the material comforts that capitalism has to offer. In other words, Michaelis' theory conveniently justifies an apathetic attitude towards bringing about the revolution, as Comrade Ossipon's response to Michaelis makes clear: "Then its no use doing anything; no use whatever" (49). The 'fanatical inertness' to which Conrad calls attention in his description of Verloc's idleness similarly underscores the whole of this polemic defense of inaction.

Yet despite some obvious gaps in his thinking, Michaelis' views on the future of capitalism are nonetheless more astute than they might first appear to be. The process of 'great capitalists' devouring the 'little capitalists' in the 'madness of self-aggrandizement' comes very close to describing some distinctive capitalist trends of the twentieth century —namely, the related phenomena of globalization and multi-national conglomeration. Where the logic of Michaelis' argument breaks down, however, is in the claim that capitalism's 'principle of competition' is its own

poison —that, in its greedy pursuit of profit, capitalism prepares, organizes, and enriches the ‘lawful inheritance of the proletariat.’ It is entirely unclear how, why, or when the capitalist system might self-destruct. But setting aside this leap in reason, it is interesting to note that Michaelis and the others seem to overlook the inconvenient paradox that if capitalism is somehow programmed to self-destruct then their role as revolutionaries is in fact redundant.

Michaelis’ vision of self-correction, with all its fanatical inertness, contrasts sharply against Vladimir’s philosophy of throwing bombs with its call for immediate and decisive action. But Conrad does not offer this vision of self-correction as a credible solution to commodity culture’s condition of decay any more than he does in the case of Vladimir’s uncomfortable fascism. Rather, Conrad again suggests that, motivated as it is by apathy, this vision is itself part of the corruption and decay it seeks to resist.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the novel’s gang of anarchists reacts negatively to the news of the Greenwich bombing (Verloc keeps the plan secret and delegates the job to Stevie, his mentally challenged brother-in-law, who bungles it by accidentally exploding the bomb and himself). Reading from a newspaper, Ossipon reports the story to the others:

Bomb in Greenwich park . . . Half past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man’s body blown to pieces. That’s all. The rest’s mere newspaper gup. No doubt an attempt to blow up the Observatory Were you expecting that sort of move? I hadn’t the slightest idea it’s nothing short of

criminal this business may affect our position very adversely in this country. Isn't that crime enough for you? (65)

Conrad uses this succinct account of the bombing to make two key points. First, Ossipon's chopped reading of the newspaper story immediately draws attention to the complete futility of this suicidal attempt at urban terrorism. The only material damage from the bomb is one 'enormous hole in the ground' and one 'smashed' tree. The only human casualty is the bomber himself. This intended act of terror turns out to be nothing of the sort. Instead, it becomes an empty —almost absurd— gesture, a grotesque statement of incompetence. The bomb does not blow up capitalism's abstract construction of time. It does not even succeed in blowing up the physical embodiment of that construction.

Secondly, Ossipon's reaction to the news betrays a vested interest in maintaining the status-quo. Referring to the bourgeoisie, Vladimir talks about how the bomb attack is designed to "alarm every selfishness of the class which should be impressed" (36). As it turns out, it also alarms every selfishness of a class of people which should *not* be impressed and whose selfishness should *not* be alarmed. Ossipon labels the bombing 'criminal.' This indignant reaction reads like something we might expect from an outraged bourgeois reactionary, but not from a self-proclaimed terrorist committed to the subversion of capitalist society. With this idea in mind, it is even more interesting that the reason Ossipon sees the bombing as 'criminal' is because it threatens the stability of the anarchist position in Britain —the stability, that is, of a movement specifically dedicated to spreading instability. The contradiction is blatant. This agent of disruption wants nothing to change. He

does not even want anything to happen.

It is through the figure of another revolutionary, the “incorruptible Professor” (249), that Conrad vocalizes these ideas and, in the process, delivers his most explicit critique of anarchism. In this key passage, the Professor berates his fellow revolutionaries for their hypocrisy, indolence, and corruption:

You revolutionists . . . are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention You are not a bit better than the forces arrayed against you The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality —counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game —so do you propagandists. But I don't play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I've worked alone for years You talk, print, plot, and do nothing. (64-7)

The Professor's tirade identifies one of the main problems with the 'game' played out in the novel between the forces of chaos and confusion and those of law and order —namely, that it *is* a game, and one in which 'revolution' and 'legality' have become nothing more than 'counter moves' that cancel each other out, what the Professor also describes as 'forms of idleness at bottom identical.' In other words, the Professor points out the futility of *playing* at anarchism. Specifically, he suggests that participating in the game means enslavement to social convention. It means selling out to the forces of domination. But above all, it means doing nothing.

The Professor claims not to play at being a revolutionary, but instead to

work at it. In fact, he is the only anarchist in *The Secret Agent* who does not subsidize his revolutionary lifestyle through some other form of activity. Verloc has his trade in pornographic commodities, while Ossipon, Michaelis, and Yundt all profit from turning themselves into sex objects through a form of male prostitution. By contrast, the Professor's source of income is directly and inextricable linked to his political extremism. He sells bombs. Or to put it another way, he deals in exploding commodities. So although the Professor does participate —however unlawfully— in capitalist modes of exchange, the objects he exchanges have the potential quite literally to explode the system in which they circulate. Unlike the others, the Professor engages in a form of trade that expresses a fanatical commitment to spreading instability, a commitment to the explosive disruption of capitalist order.

Even so, the Professor's vocation is not without its own inner paradox. In its capacity as a sort of safety-valve for consumer society, as Rishona Zimring has suggested, Verloc's shop supplies commodities that defuse volatile desires. Its pornographic material, for example, offers temporary relief from desire through the consumption of the graphic fantasies it contains. By contrast, the Professor's explosive material is designed not to relieve desire through the safety of fantasy, but instead to enable its violent realization. The problem, however, is that the Professor's exploding commodities have the potential to kill their consumers (the Professor designs the bomb that kills Stevie). There is, of course, a certain gruesome appropriateness about an opponent of capitalism selling a form of commodity that kills its consumer. But the complication is that the people who 'consume' the Professor's merchandise are themselves opponents of capitalism

—so that, in this case, eliminating the consumer means weakening the forces of chaos and confusion working against capitalism. In other words, the Professor's commitment to spreading instability is paradoxically undermined by the instability of the explosive material in which he deals. Hence his sick ambition to invent a "perfect detonator that would adjust to all conditions of action," a "variable yet perfectly precise mechanism," a truly "intelligent" bomb (62).

This fanaticism for explosives contrasts sharply with the fanatical inertness of the novel's other anarchists. So too does all the hard work that the Professor puts into designing those explosives. He claims to work at it fourteen hours a day, and even to go without food when necessary. Conrad's description of the physical space in which the Professor works and lives further comments on this figure's commitment to the cause of revolution:

The enormous iron padlock on the doors of the wall cupboard was the only object in the room on which the eye could rest without becoming afflicted by the miserable unloveliness of forms and the poverty of material . . . poverty suggesting the starvation of every human need except mere bread. There was nothing on the walls but the paper, an expanse of arsenical green, soiled with indelible smudges here and there, and with stains resembling faded maps of uninhabited continents. (242)

It is interesting that Conrad singles out the locked cupboard as the only object in the room that is not 'afflicted' by material poverty and 'miserable unloveliness' of form, since the cupboard is where the Professor stores his explosives. From this it would be fair to infer that the reason the Professor exempts this particular piece of

furniture from aesthetic and material neglect is because it functions as a container for the one and only form of material object with which he allows himself to enjoy a fetish relation: bombs. More to the point, the neglect evident in the rest of the room speaks of the deliberate starvation of all but the most basic human —needs that are starved in the service of the revolutionary cause. It speaks, in other words, of a dedication not to material comfort, but to material deprivation. The effect this has on the appearance of the room is the same look of terminal decay that Conrad's vision of the city's damaged exteriors so graphically imagines. This domestic space is as hostile and potentially lethal to human living as the novel's public spaces. Even the colors of the room look poisonous.

Conrad carefully matches up the appearance of this room with that of its human occupant, just as he does with the sex shop and its faceless customers. Specifically, he depicts the Professor as “physically very empty” (84):

A dingy little man in spectacles . . . His flat, large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull, which look frail enough for Ossipon to crush between his thumb and forefinger; the dome of the forehead seemed to rest on the rim of the spectacles; the flat cheeks, of a greasy, unhealthy complexion, were merely smudged by the miserable poverty of a thin dark whisker. The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual. (58)

The description of this “miserable and undersized” (73) human figure immediately recalls that of the domestic space he inhabits. Both are represented in terms of material poverty and physical damage. Both share a look of emptiness and waste.

Commenting on the Professor's physique, Brian Shaffer rightly suggests that this figure of "radical alienation" and "creeping insanity" is represented "in a state of degeneration" (454). To this I would add that it is a state of degeneration that perfectly mirrors the images of decay through which Conrad represents urban conditions under commodity culture throughout *The Secret Agent*.

In such terms, the Professor can be seen as a human embodiment of the city. He even has the same hostile and indifferent attitude towards humanity. That attitude is evident not only in his mania for bombs, which speaks of a complete disregard for human life, but also in the social views underpinning his anarchism. In this revealing moment at the end of the novel, for example, Conrad shows the Professor fantasizing about mass murdering the masses. In so doing, he provides the novel's final corrective vision:

The weak! The source of all evil on this earth! . . . They are our sinister masters —the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind. They have power. They are the multitude Exterminate, exterminate! First the great multitude of the weak must go, then the only relatively strong. You see? First the blind, then the deaf and dumb, then the halt and the lame —and so on. Every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention must meet its doom. (243)

The passage is not without a heavy dose of irony. Throughout *The Secret Agent* Conrad repeatedly draws attention to the Professor's physical defects, such as his diminutive stature, his frail physique, and his shortness of sight. In other words, the Professor belongs in every physical sense to the category of the weak he so

passionately wants to destroy. But this “agent of destruction” (103) conveniently glosses over the awkward point that in calling for the extermination of the weak he is also calling for his own extermination.

More to the point, this aversion to the ‘multitude of the weak’ culminates in a vision of social purification disturbingly similar to the final solution envisioned by Hitler. In particular, the Professor’s views on the extermination of the physically disabled bring to mind the kind of genocidal thinking behind the Nazi project of racial and ethnic cleansing that led to the horrors of the Holocaust. Equally disturbing about the Professor’s homicidal fantasy is the vagueness about where, if at all, the killing would stop. What category comes next after the weak and the relatively strong? Who follows the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the lame? We get the distinct impression that the elimination of ‘every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention’ means the elimination of humanity itself.

In short, Conrad does not present this final corrective vision as any kind of genuine alternative to the others, any more than he offers it as an acceptable answer to mass culture’s decay. Rather, the Professor’s vision represents the most depraved and deranged of them all. It is also potentially the most dangerous. For unlike the novel’s other anarchists, the Professor is not robbed of the will to act by a hypocritical embracement of materialism and its derived comforts. That is, he does not have the same vested interest as the others in paradoxically maintaining the status quo. His dedication to a life of material deprivation and discomfort frees him from being dependent on the capitalist system. He has nothing to lose by causing the destruction of capitalist society. As a result, the Professor is the only anarchist in the novel who is in fact committed to action. Indeed, his obsession with bombs

derives from what Conrad describes as a “conviction that the framework of an established social order cannot be effectually shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence” (73), a belief that no “combination of paper and ink” will ever “put an end” to “the condemned social order” (66). This “perfect anarchist” (84), as Conrad sardonically refers to him, has every intention of realizing his vision of social purification. Unlike the others, he is prepared to put his political and social theories into practice and, in the process, to commit indiscriminate acts of violence in the name of the anarchist cause.

And it is with the threat of just such an act that Conrad ends the novel. The final scene shows the Professor indulging in apocalyptic daydreams as he walks alone and ignored through the city streets. In reading the passage, it is worth remembering that the Professor never goes out in public without concealed explosives strapped to his body—explosives that he constantly fingers through the pockets of his coat:

The incorruptible Professor walked . . . averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (249)

The word ‘incorruptible’ suggests that nothing can or will sidetrack the Professor. He has given up on humanity. He has even given up on himself. And in renouncing his future, he becomes a ‘force’ beyond reason and control. The idea is reinforced

by the knowledge that the Professor's body is laden with explosives. While his mind caresses 'images of ruin and destruction' his hands are nervously fondling the means to create them. The threat of violence hangs over the entire passage. This human time bomb could explode at any time.

Not only does Conrad end *The Secret Agent* on this ominous note, but he does so without ever providing relief from the disturbing images of social and material degeneration present everywhere in the novel. In the end, Conrad's writing offers no potential, however remote, for regeneration and renewal. Rather, it sees commodity culture's decay as incurable, its damage as irreparable, its corruption as irreversible, its stagnation as inevitable. The result is a novel that does not share in the underlying social optimism of nineteenth century narrative, but that speaks instead of a profound cynicism over the possibility of resisting or correcting capitalism's decadent social effects. And it is precisely this attitude that comes to dominate literary representations of commodity culture in the modernist period. It leads to the diseased Dublin of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), to the superficial cocktail set of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926), and even to the dystopian consumer projections of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

EPILOGUE: ANARCHY IN THE UK

Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* uses the Vietnam War as a setting for retelling the story of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Implicit in Coppola's screen adaptation is the idea that the forms of horror envisioned in Conrad's novel transcend time and place —that they somehow remain an

inescapable and integral part of the human condition and its imprint on the world. In one of his many meandering monologues in the film, Marlon Brando (playing Kurtz) exclaims in a haunting whisper that “horror has a face.” This line comes very close to articulating what Coppola sets out to achieve in *Apocalypse Now* —namely, to give a recognizably modern face to Conrad’s turn of the century vision of the colonial project and its paths to madness. In this case, that face takes on the tortured features of the American experience in Vietnam. The result is a brooding film that forges a complex series of links between the media of film and fiction, between the Vietnam war and the scramble for Africa, and between the brutality of cultural imperialism and the dark side of the human psyche.

I want to close this chapter by pursuing a similar idea to the one behind Coppola’s cinematic remake of *Heart of Darkness* —namely, the idea that the cultural phenomena, themes and anxieties addressed in Conrad’s writing can find analogues in recent twentieth century history. Specifically, I want to look in detail at the rise of punk in Britain in the 1970’s in order to explore some surprising parallels with Conrad’s story of anarchism in *The Secret Agent*. For as this epilogue goes on to show, if Conrad’s narrative vision in *The Secret Agent* has a recognizably modern face then —like the Vietnam war for *Heart of Darkness*— the Sex Pistols are arguably it.

The sinuous story of punk in Britain begins in the late 1960’s with the story of a curious little shop located at 430 King’s Road in London. The shop occupies the ground floor of a decrepit late Victorian house that was first converted into a retail space in the early twentieth century. Inside, exposed pipes run along a ceiling

supported by bare steel pillars. What little natural light filters through the obscured front window is sickly and pale. There is no toilet on the premises. This is the “vacant space” (3), as Jon Savage puts it in *England’s Dreaming*, from which British punk is soon to emerge. It is the cultural bomb-site that is about to become the Sex Pistols’ broken home.

Over the years, 430 King’s Road has played host to a variety of businesses, including a pawn-brokers, a café, a yacht agency, and a motor scooter dealership. But it is 1967 and the shop is now selling vintage American clothing under the playful name ‘Hung On You.’ It steadily expands its range of merchandise during the next few years to cash in on Britain’s infatuation with American pop art, counter-cultural music, and alternative fashion. The name is changed to ‘Mr Freedom’ in 1969 and again in 1970 to ‘Paradise Garage.’ At this time a new owner, Trevor Miles, takes over the business and installs a jukebox, a disco ball, and a small dance floor to complement the eclectic collection of garish and bizarre retro clothing and memorabilia. By late 1970, ‘Paradise Garage’ is a popcult phenomenon, a trendy youth hang-out, a living museum of sorts for sixties pop kitsch.

But in late 1971, the bottom drops out of the American ‘60’s retro fad and ‘Paradise Garage’ suddenly finds itself out of vogue. Trevor Miles declares bankruptcy and walks away from the ailing business. Enter the young Malcolm McLaren —university drop-out, rock enthusiast, politicized malcontent, budding entrepreneur. McLaren is riveted by the radical ideas of the Situationists International, an avant-garde political and artistic movement with revolutionary aspirations of debilitating consumer society and its everyday forms of alienation (see

Wollen 9-16). For some time now, he has been dipping heavily into SI literature and its derivative rag-mags, devouring pro-SI manifestos, pamphlets, and flyers, and keeping tabs on SI inspired art shows and music events (for excellent samples of SI material see Blazwick's *Situationist Scrapbook*). The appeal is SI's commitment to exposing consumerism's soporific social effects, its rejection of the superficialities of mediated culture, and above all its implicit call to chaos and anarchy in the face of urban decay. For McLaren, the shop at 430 King's Road offers both an opportunity and a space in which to put some of these ideas —however liberally— into practice. So with a similarly minded friend, Vivienne Westwood, he takes over the business. The shop's name changes again, this time to 'Let it Rock,' and 430 King's Road receives a make-over designed to reflect the political and artistic convictions of its newest owners.

McLaren and Westwood belong to a generation of British youth who, as Jon Savage notes, deeply mistrust "the apparent social progress of the free and easy hippie culture that [is] all around them" (9). In particular, they see the music of the late sixties and early seventies as an embodiment of that culture's platitudes and vacuous legacies. The music of the time is out of tune with the grim social realities of life in Britain. Moreover, it has lost all the spirit of teenage revolt that fueled fifties' Rock'n'Roll. It represents but the domesticated offspring of the original rock movement —the bastard child of a commercialized music industry, and a symbol of hypocrisy and corruption. In reaction, as Savage goes on to explain, McLaren and Westwood decide to turn "to the music, fashion and accouterments of the 1950's" (9) in an effort to rekindle the subversive *esprit de corps* that underpinned popular culture in the early years of rock. The shop is redecorated and restocked

accordingly.

Crucially, McLaren and Westwood conceive the shop's new identity not so much as a nostalgic return to the roots of rebel rock, but more as a way to politicize fashion. The idea is to transform style into an instrument of destabilization—to sell music, clothing, art, jewelry, and other fashion accessories all expressly designed (with a heavy emphasis on the word) to subvert the *status quo*. Inside the shop, customers can buy a 'look' to use as a public affront on mainstream society's aesthetic sensibilities and consumer values. As McLaren happily prophesizes, this is "the end of good taste as we know it" (in Sharkey 8). Chic is out. Trash aesthetics are in.

'Let it Rock,' however, is only the first phase in the alteration of the shop's identity under McLaren and Westwood. By 1972, they recognize the need to move on from plundering '50's popcult aesthetics if they are to continue pushing the limits of acceptability while constantly redefining oppositional fashion. After all, early rock culture has only so much shock appeal, only so much potential to rattle the Establishment. 'Let it Rock' has reached the end of its short shelf-life. Inspired by '60's American biker-fashion—with its strong outlaw connections—the shop now becomes 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young to Die.' Studded leather jackets, shirts covered in cigarette burns, and ripped T-shirts with large metal zippers replace the crushed velvet of the '50's 'Teddy-boy' look. What shortly becomes the defiled 'safety-pin' fashion of early British Punk is beginning to take shape in these mutilated new designs—designs that gloriously succeed in taking the shop's trash aesthetics to a new subcultural low.

In 1973, McLaren and Westwood take a trip to New York to promote the shop's revamped look and to scout around for new merchandizing ideas. While there, they immerse themselves in the Manhattan scene. They hang out with Andy Warhol and his pop-art crowd. And they develop an interest in the emerging and viciously asocial music of American hard rock bands like The New York Dolls. The trip also serves to highlight British society's comparatively repressed and conservative character. On their return to London and spurred on by what they see and experience in New York's underground scene, the duo is eager, in Jon Savage's words, "to fast-forward number 430 into the present" (66). As McLaren recalls, "I just wanted something new, I didn't know what but I couldn't stand anything retro" (in Webb 10). The shop now enters the most transformative phase of its plastic surgery, and one that takes its seditious founding concept to a radical extreme.

From the beginning, the shop's remit has been to lash out at mainstream society's hypocrisies and complacencies, to confront its social and sexual hang-ups, to resist its mass consumer forms, and to tap into its deviant desires. What the shop needs now, however, is not only a way to revitalize these objectives, but also a way to consolidate them into one instantly recognizable and highly conspicuous expression. The owners hit on a simple but explosive idea: to use sex as the shop's new banner. As Westwood would later explain, "we were writing on the walls of the Establishment, and if there is one thing that frightens the Establishment, it's sex. Religion you can knock, but sex gives them the horrors" (in Blazwick 81). But to horrify the Establishment in the settling wake of the sexual revolution of the late 1960's means radically repackaging sex.

Breaking with the utopian ideals of free love that are still floating around in

Britain at this time, McLaren and Westwood take inspiration from the ugly, dirty, and taboo face of modern sex. That is, they turn to the illicit world of pornography, fetish, and S&M. The plan, in McLaren's own words, is this: "to open a shop . . . which would bring out all the sexual clothes that people normally sold as a fetish but which we would sell as street clothing, on the boutique strip" (in Savage 66). 'Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die' closes down in April 1974. It is then redesigned, refitted, restocked, and finally reincarnated some months later as a stylized sex shop.

Inside, crude graffiti coats the walls, spelling out provocative phrases lifted from pornographic books and Situationist manifestos. The racks and counters boast a gruesome collection of specialized fetish and S&M gear—including, as Savage reports, "inflatable rubber masks . . . whips, chains, lacy rubber petticoats and boots with fantastic, foot-high heels filed down to pinpoints" (68). The bondage-inspired street clothes on offer, mostly designed by Westwood herself, are roughly and lewdly fashioned out of materials like rubber, leather, and vinyl. Outside, an imposing sign crudely emblazoned in huge pink letters boldly announces the shop's revamped identity. It reads: 'SEX'.

The new name makes the site's commercial and cultural project immediately explicit. The single word describes exactly what customers can find and buy inside. More to the point, its obtrusive public display serves as a direct provocation to passers-by. It forces the public at large to come face to face with forms of 'deviancy' it would rather see contained, not gratuitously showcased before the consumer gaze. In short, like the shop itself, its name grossly violates the orthodox conventions of mainstream sexual, social and consumer practice. But this, in the subversive spirit of SI radicalism, is the entire *raison d'être* of 'SEX'.



Above: 'Paradise Garage' with Trevor Miles, 1970.

Right: MacLaren & Westwood inside 'Let it Rock,' 1973.



Above: 430 King's Road as 'SEX,' 1976.

Left: Westwood showing off some fetish gear inside 'SEX,' 1975.



Above: The Sex Pistols' "Anarchy flag," 1976.

Left: The Sex Pistols, 1977

Ever the entrepreneur, McLaren constantly toys with ways of maximizing the shop's profile. In 1975, he takes a solo trip to New York where he catches up on the hard, abrasive music coming out of clubs like CBGB's —music that we recognize today as the early sounds of American punk. Back in Britain and once more fired up by New York's underground scene, McLaren decides to mold a renegade rock band of his own. Seeing an opportunity to boost the shop's visibility in the process, the band's name follows easily. The idea of the Sex Pistols is hatched.

For talent (to use the word generously) McLaren recruits four scraggy misfits from the gang of squatting teenage freeloaders who have become a permanent fixture at the back of his shop. They can't play instruments. They can't sing. They are exactly what McLaren is looking for. They are abandoned, bored, and frustrated. They are the lost souls of Generation X. They are a disaster waiting to happen.

One month and a crash course in music later, the Sex Pistols start playing live at small gigs that McLaren —now their manager— organizes and promotes. The group has scraped together a handful of covers and original songs to perform. The music is simplistic R&B at best, but grating, deranged, and mangled by heavy distortion. The lyrics, screamed out by front man Johnny Rotten, go out of their way to offend and antagonize. The group's stage look is straight out of 'SEX': spiked hair, ripped T-shirts, and rubber bondage pants conspiring to create an appearance of irreverence, deviancy, and danger. The impression of menace is heightened by the band's habit of swearing and spitting at the audience between songs. This suits McLaren perfectly. His vision for the Sex Pistols has nothing to do with musical accomplishment, but everything to do with promoting disorder and provoking

outrage.

Though McLaren still puts in regular appearances at 'SEX' it is clear that overseeing the shop's offshoot venture is now his top priority. In 1976, McLaren manages to muscle a reluctant EMI into recording the Sex Pistols' first single, *Anarchy in the UK*. The song's title succinctly articulates what the group is all about. The lyrics refine that message:

I AM AN ANTICHRIST
I AM AN ANARCHIST
I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WANT
BUT I KNOW HOW TO GET IT
I WANT TO DESTROY PASSERSBY
I WANT TO BE ANARCHY

Couched in a rhetoric of hate, anger, and violence, the song is nothing short of an incitement to riot. On its release, it quickly becomes a battle-cry for a generation of disaffected urban youth deprived of educational and employment opportunities by Britain's recession of the mid-1970's. Feeling betrayed and jettisoned by the System, as Paul Friedlander explains in *Rock and Roll: A Social History*, this "growing underclass" literally sees itself as having "no future" (251). The Sex Pistols give voice to these frustrations. As in all popcult phenomena timing is everything, and the release of *Anarchy in the UK* is timed to perfection. What begins as a publicity stunt for a Chelsea sex shop now becomes a major cultural event in its own right.

In short, with the release of *Anarchy in the UK* punk is up and running in Britain. But exactly what constitutes punk remains up for debate even today, as

Roger Sabin's recent re-evaluation of the phenomenon, *Punk Rock: So What?*, excellently illustrates. The difficulty of pinning down punk arises precisely because, as Jon Savage is quick to point out, it draws on a panoply of elements lifted "from the history of youth culture, sexual fetish wear, urban decay and extremist politics" (230). Taken together, Savage adds, these elements have "no conscious meaning but speak instead of many things," including "urban primitivism, the breakdown of confidence in a common language" and "the fractured nature of perception in an accelerating, media-saturated society" (230). Given this tendency to draw indiscriminately on a wide range of cultural referents to say many things (and sometimes nothing at all), punk is perhaps best understood in Roger Sabin's terms as a subcultural movement that is "part youth rebellion, part artistic statement," that experiences its "high point between 1976 and 1979," that has its "primary manifestation in music," and that stands philosophically for "an emphasis on negationism, . . . class-based politics, . . . and a belief in spontaneity and 'doing it yourself'" (2-3). To this, I would add more generally that punk is about breaking rules not writing them, about tearing down not building up. It is hostile, nihilistic, and anarchic. And as Robert Garnett suggests in *Too Low To Be Low* (22), the Sex Pistols are its most vivid embodiment.

Following up on *Anarchy in the UK* the Sex Pistols go on to record two albums —*Never Mind the Bollocks* (1977) and *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* (1979)— before formally dissolving in late 1979 amid a storm of infighting, legal disputes, and financial misdealings. During their short life-span, they perform throughout the UK, Europe, and eventually the United States to growing crowds of crazed punk initiates. In an ironic twist, their music even makes it into the

commercial charts. Throughout, Malcolm McLaren remains the group's manager, and PR man, effectively molding the face of British punk from behind the scenes.

By 1979, however, the moment of punk has already passed. Why that moment passes is reflected in what happens to 'SEX.' From the beginning, the shop at 430 King's Road acts as the Sex Pistols' unofficial clubhouse and clothing supplier. Unsurprisingly, the group's meteoric rise triggers a blast of free publicity for the shop. In no time at all, number 430 becomes the nerve-center of punk fashion and the centerpiece of Chelsea's punk promenade. Aligning the shop even more directly with punk, McLaren and Westwood change the name to 'Seditionaries' in 1977 and slickly repackage the premises. But there is no longer anything all that seditious about the place. Its unorthodoxy has become the new orthodoxy. So much so, in fact, that by 1978 Westwood's punk designs regularly feature in glossy British style magazines such as *Forum* and *The Face*.

The commercial success of 'Seditionaries' corresponds more widely to the recuperation of punk itself into the culture industry. It is punk's mass youth appeal that inevitably paves the way for its commercialization and cultural dilution. By 1979, as Robert Garnett argues, punk has effectively been "reified" and "processed" back into the mainstream (17). Most of its original hard-core elite have either sold out, dropped out, overdosed, or faded into obscurity. And what little remains of its authentic counter-cultural posture gets absorbed into splinter movements like Goth, new romanticism, and mod revivalism, and later still into the derivative subcultures of metal, thrash, and grunge.

What particularly interests me about the story of the Sex Pistols—and through them the story of British Punk—are the ways in which it resonates with

Conrad's representation of commodity culture and anarchism in *The Secret Agent*. To begin, the Pistols' signature song *Anarchy in the UK* would make an excellent subtitle title to the novel. It would also make an ideal anthem for the novel's subversive figure of the Professor, whose deep-rooted asociality and homicidal fantasies are summed up almost exactly by the song's refrain: "I WANT TO DESTROY PASSERSBY. I WANT TO BE ANARCHY." The chorus of another Pistols song, *God Save the Queen* (1977), similarly captures the nihilism at the root of the Professor's social philosophy:

THERE'S NO FUTURE
IN ENGLAND'S DREAMING
NO FUTURE NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE FOR YOU
NO FUTURE NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE FOR ME

If punk has a slogan, then 'NO FUTURE,' repeated *ad nauseam* here in a sort of mantra-like chant, is arguably it. The phrase succinctly articulates punk's attitude towards social progress and social opportunity. For the same reason, it also makes a perfect slogan for the Professor who similarly sees the "condemned social order" (73) as having no future.

In short, the Professor's attitude closely resembles that of punk in a number of different ways. He is antagonistic towards the general public. He rejects the values and practices of mainstream society. He deliberately breaks with social convention. He aspires to the destabilization of social order. He is dedicated to horrifying the Establishment. He is disgusted with consumerism and its soporific

social effects. He is committed to sabotaging the capitalist system and its structures of privilege and power. He wants anarchy in the UK.

But the Professor does not just think like a punk, he also looks like one too. In *The Obituary of Rock and Roll*, Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons recall the appearance of punk music fans in the 1970's:

Their clothes were elaborately contrived to make the wearer as terrifyingly repugnant as possible Hair shorn close to the skull and dyed any colour so long as it was not natural, spiked up with Vaseline; nose, ears, cheeks, lips, and other extremities pierced with a plethora of safety-pins, chains, and dangling insignia; ripped and torn jumble-sale shirts . . . mangled with predictable graffiti of song titles, perversions or Social Observations. (18)

Though Burchill and Parsons are talking about punk fashion at its most extreme and contrived, the aesthetic and physical mutilation they describe nonetheless recall certain aspects of the Professor's appearance in *The Secret Agent*. For example, Conrad calls particular attention to the dilapidated condition of the Professor's clothing as well as to the visual repugnance of his disfigured form. And although he may not go so far as to give the Professor spiked hair, pierced extremities, or graffitied clothes, Conrad does give him an aesthetically and physically vandalized appearance that reflects the figure's anti-social convictions. This, of course, is the exact idea behind punk fashion. Inspired by bands like the Sex Pistols and supplied by shops like 'SEX', punk's 'safety-pin' look is specifically designed to reflect its anti-social posture.

The urban space that Conrad imagines in *The Secret Agent* also has its

parallels with punk. Conrad's vision of late nineteenth century London sees the city in images of darkness, disorder, waste, and decay that modify and move on from Dickensian representations of the city to anticipate the forms of mass degeneration that come to characterize late twentieth century urban conditions. It is from this space that the Professor emerges as an embodiment of urban decay. In the mid 1970's, London experiences a period of deterioration that practically transforms the city into the kind of place Conrad envisions in *The Secret Agent*. Thanks in particular to the failures of Labour government, economic recession, and a general strike, the city is plagued by power cuts, fuel shortages, housing shortages, disruptions to public transport, interruptions to public services, backlogs of undelivered mail, crippling unemployment, class tension, racial tension, spreading poverty, rising crime, and a series of IRA bombings. Meanwhile, garbage is literally piling up everywhere in the streets. This is the degenerated space from which British punk emerges —the crisis of urban decay that the Sex Pistols come to embody and that Conrad's writing already imagines.

But if we take the Sex Pistols as punk's earliest and most vivid embodiment, then the movement arguably emerges from an even more specific site within the degenerated urban space of 1970's London. The address is 430 King's Road, the location of 'SEX'. 'SEX', as we have seen, is much more than a trendy hang-out for disaffected youth. The shop is a politicized space that stands for everything punk comes to represent. Crucially, the way that McLaren and Westwood politicize the shop is by transforming it into a pornographic space. At one level, the 'pornographing' of 430 King's road is conceived as a way to violate the conventions of mainstream sexual, social and consumer practice. At another, it is

conceived as a way to highlight mass culture's decay. The Sex Pistols are formed with the same ideas in mind. They are created in (and named after) the shop. They begin as an extension of its counter-cultural project.

The story of British punk accordingly begins in the exact same kind of deviant consumer space as Conrad's story of anarchism. It starts in a sex shop. And like 'SEX', the shop in Conrad is a politicized space. It consciously breaks with sexual, social, and consumer orthodoxy. Its pornographic identity deliberately serves to highlight commodity culture's state of corruption and decay. And its appearance of waste and damage mirrors the degeneration of the sprawling urban wasteland it inhabits.

In short, Conrad's writing in *The Secret Agent* rehearses the story of British punk some seventy years before the release of *Anarchy in the UK*. This, however, is not to say that in the early twentieth century Conrad actually saw anything like the Sex Pistols phenomenon looming on the cultural horizon. Rather, the argument is simply that, in showing the dark side and damaged face of commodity culture as it moves into the twentieth century, Conrad's writing already identifies the cultural conditions under capitalism that would eventually generate punk, that it already envisions the kind of degenerated and dehumanized urban space from which punk would emerge, and that it already imagines the pornographic site that would become punk's broken home.

6. SHOP TILL YOU DROP: RETAIL THERAPY IN DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

THE SPECTACLE OF GOODS

Don DeLillo's comic novel *White Noise* (1985) offers a parody of consumer culture in postmodernity. Tenured professors read nothing but cereal boxes, people and places don't exist without the media, and supermarkets contain all of society's codes and cultural artifacts, all of its 'psychic data.' Set in the United States during the Reagan years, the novel describes a late twentieth century society in which the mantras of consumerism have sunk so deeply into the collective social consciousness that they now operate at unconscious levels as well. It describes a world bombarded with subliminal advertising, invaded by muzak, bathed in television rays, waves, and audio tidbits, flooded with commercial jingles, punctuated by mediaspeech—a world, in short, consumed by white noise.

This chapter plunges headlong into this world of shopping, simulation, and surface to examine DeLillo's representation of consumer culture in the postmodern era. It begins with a detailed reading of the spectacle of goods contained in the novel's opening passage that proceeds to situate *White Noise* in the context of postmodern culture. It then goes shopping with DeLillo in the malls and supermarkets of suburban America, and concludes by rummaging through the images of garbage generated by the novel's attention to consumer excess. Throughout, the discussion maintains a sharp focus on the way commodities not only invade conscious thought but also command unconscious moments.

White Noise opens with a key passage that recalls the kind of manic indexing of material goods we find in nineteenth century novels like Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Narrated by Jack Gladney, Professor of Hitler Studies at an American liberal arts college, the scene describes "the day of the station wagons" (4), the annual ritual of students returning to campus after the summer break. The focus, however, is not on the students themselves but on the mass of belongings they bring with them—or more exactly, on the strangely mesmerizing spectacle created by that mass of belongings:

The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved towards the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, stationary and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside: the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. (2)

The list of objects is exhaustive, but that of course is the entire point of the passage. The sheer volume of goods signals that *White Noise* belongs to a world dominated by commodities, congested by their presence, glutted by their consumption.

The same idea is suggested in the way these objects overpower the narrative. The students are upstaged by their own belongings. A procession of people is transformed into a parade of commodities. In this moment of fetishistic displacement —where inanimate *things* stand in and speak for the human subjects they now represent— Gladney's narration reveals more than just amusement at the event. It shows consumer objects hijacking the thoughts and driving the imagination of a mesmerized spectator. It speaks of a mind tuned into consumer practices and desires.

At the same time, Gladney's narration also betrays a certain complicity in the performance taking place before him. After all, Gladney is not exactly a passive observer. Rather, in a process we already encountered in Trollope with the representation of the 'material girl' and her diamonds, the gaze enables a form of visual consumption. The activity of 'just looking' at commodities, to return to Rachel Bowlby's phrase, becomes an experience that is itself consumed. In this case, that experience also represents a source of pleasure and even gratification: "I've witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years. It is a brilliant event, invariably" (3). Gladney returns year after year to 'consume' the spectacle of goods.

The 'day of the station wagons' also contains another telling moment that offers further insight into the spectacle. It is a description of the parents in which Gladney comments sardonically on their material nepotism and self-absorption:

The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition. The women crisp and alert, in diet trim . . . Their husbands content to measure out the time, . . . something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. (3)

This description of the parents is significant for several reasons. First, it establishes the parents' connection to the spectacle of goods. They are the owners of the station wagons and, in all likelihood, the people bank-rolling the students. In other words, the parents are the ones who make the annual ritual possible in the first place. They put up the money that buys the soft furnishings, the sports gear, the stereos, the electric appliances, and —though they may not know it— the controlled substances. The parents represent the capital behind the commodities on display.

Despite this connection to the annual ritual, the parents nonetheless belong to a side-show taking place alongside the main event. Standing around 'sun-dazed near their automobiles,' they figure as spectators removed from direct participation in the students' activities. But the parents are not passive onlookers. Rather, like Gladney, they too are engaged in a form of visual consumption. The object of their gaze, however, is not so much the phantasmagoria of commodities, but more the sight of each other. The parents are watching themselves watching the event.

What they see in this process are mirrored images of themselves —reflections, that is, of their own material nepotism and narcissism. Together, the parents' aura of massive insurance cover, carefully sun-glazed skin, artificially slimmed figures, aesthetically manufactured faces, and suburban family cars suggest

more than affluence, security, comfort, and stability. They suggest a die-hard embracement of consumerism in all its ostentatious and self-flattering forms. They speak of habitual consumer practices driven by vanity and self-indulgence. And it is precisely this shared identity as conspicuous consumers that the parents recognize in each other.

More importantly, this moment of almost Lacanian recognition produces a psychological *rapprochement* between the parents. Their homogeneity as consumers becomes a source of reassurance and renewal. It even enables a sense of community. DeLillo uses the parents' cars to drive home the point:

This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything else they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation. (4)

The cars tell the parents who they are. Here, goods speak to people. They create and constitute identity. A commodity becomes representative of an entire lifestyle. It even functions as an emblem of nationhood. The effect on the parents is a sense of belonging derived from a shared pattern of consumption. One of the implications is that, for DeLillo and the novel as a whole, what effectively constitutes the American nation today is nothing more than a collection of purchasing practices, a grouping of consumer trends. Another implication is that what unites the parents around their cars has nothing to do with seeing their children off to college, and everything to do with congratulating themselves on their own material success. The annual gathering of station wagons represents a public opportunity for the parents to celebrate and

flaunt their identity as consumers, to recharge their enthusiasm for self-gratification, to share their idolatry of commodities.

Finally, Gladney's description of the parents is marked by the same process of fetishistic displacement that accompanies his account of the students and their possessions. In his mediation of the parents' experience of mutual recognition, Gladney invests commodities (the station wagons) with the power to represent their human owners. He arrives at a reading of the parents through a reading of the material goods they possess. A group of living subjects now derives its collective identity from an assembly of inanimate objects. At one level, Gladney's distortion of vision simply reflects the parents' distorted vision. It duplicates their thought processes in order to exhibit the state of false consciousness—or ideological condition—that enables them to see and understand each other in reified terms. At another level, Gladney's distortion of vision also comments on his own state of mind. His ability to read the parents' thoughts in the first place suggests more than just an understanding of their fetishistic relationship with the material world. It suggests personal experience of that fetishistic relationship—some degree of identification *with* the parents and their consumer activity. The novel supports this idea later on. It turns out that Gladney drives a station wagon too.

In short, DeLillo opens *White Noise* with an episode that serves not only to locate the novel in the thick of a consumer culture, but also to implicate its central figure—however ambivalently—in the fetishistic practices of that culture. The result is that here, as in nineteenth century novels like *Vanity Fair* and *The Eustace Diamonds*, the commodity takes center stage. It directs the performance. It

constitutes the 'show.' More to the point, and again like earlier writers such as Thackeray and Trollope, DeLillo places the commodity on parade precisely in order to highlight the vanity, narcissism, and self-indulgence that accompany and motivate consumer activity. He similarly sets out to explore the intensity of the desires and the force of the fantasies generated by the commodity's seduction of the human imagination. In these respects, DeLillo's late twentieth century novel continues a line of cultural critique that begins in nineteenth century fiction and runs through modernism and its troubled visions of material decadence and decay. In the process, the novel also continues to express anxieties about the commodity's mediation of everyday life —anxieties of the sort that already surface in Gaskell's account of the industrial condition, Thackeray's profile of the gourmand, Trollope's construction of the material girl, and Conrad's treatment of the sex shop and its surrounding cityscape.

CONSUMER CULTURE IN POSTMODERNITY

Despite such parallels with nineteenth and early twentieth century writing, the late capitalist world depicted in *White Noise* nonetheless belongs to a different cultural moment accompanied by different cultural practices. That cultural moment is postmodernity, and those cultural practices are what we now call postmodernism —a "style of culture," as Terry Eagleton describes it in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, marked by its "depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic" character (vii). Whether or not the arrival of this 'style of culture' in the second half of the twentieth century is something to be

lamented, as Eagleton and other post-Marxist thinkers like Frederic Jameson sometimes insist, belongs to a debate too large and complex to take on in this space. Suffice it to say that, on the other side of the fence, cultural thinkers like Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* and Elizabeth Ermarth in *Sequel To History* make convincing cases for celebrating the postmodern condition. What matters here is that DeLillo goes out of his way in *White Noise* to stress that the forms of consumerism paraded about in the novel operate in the context of a distinctly postmodern world—that they emerge from and are enabled by the condition of postmodernity. Along the way, however, DeLillo does grapple with questions similar to the ones engaging thinkers like Eagleton, Jameson, Hutcheon, and Ermarth. Underlying the novel's vision of late twentieth century society are questions about whether to embrace or resist the postmodern experiences on offer.

One such experience occurs early on in *White Noise*. It involves Gladney and his side-kick Murray Jay Siskind, a visiting lecturer on living icons. It takes place at a local tourist attraction known as “the most photographed barn in America” (12). And it highlights exactly what constitutes postmodernism in DeLillo. This first extract deals with the pair's arrival at the barn:

Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filterkits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides—pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book. (12)

As a side note, it is worth pointing out that DeLillo once again records the presence of excess consumer goods. The tourists at the barn do not just show up with cameras. Some of them show up with all kinds of extraneous equipment as well. In the hands of amateur photographers, the tripods, telephoto lenses, and filterkits seem excessive. But that of course is the idea behind all the extra gear. The opportunity to play with superfluous consumer gadgets is definitely part of the site's attraction.

It is also worth noting that Gladney and Murray do not bring a camera with them. They have not come to participate directly in the tourist activities taking place at the barn. Rather, as Murray's note-book scribbling suggests, they have come to observe and record those activities. They consume the 'event' as spectators. At one level, then, DeLillo's treatment of the barn echoes Daniel Boorstin's idea in *The Image* that tourism is no longer about experiencing a moment, but instead about capturing an image: "We go more and more not to see at all, but only to take pictures" (117). At another level, DeLillo's treatment of the barn also carries on from Boorstin to suggest that this transformation of tourism into an activity based on capturing images can itself become an occasion for tourism. Gladney and Murray travel to the barn precisely in order to look at people taking pictures.

More to the point, however, the phenomenon of THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA makes it clear that DeLillo conceives postmodernity in almost exactly the same terms as Baudrillard in his thinking on information and media culture. This is a link that many other critics make. Most notably, John Frow in *Notes on White Noise*, Stephen Baker in *The Fiction of Postmodernity* and Leonard Wilcox in a key article on *White Noise*, all stress the

similarities between DeLillo's view of contemporary society and Baudrillard's postmodernism where, as Linda Hutcheon morbidly describes it, "the simulacrum gloats over the body of the deceased referent" (11). So what exactly are the similarities?

The answer requires an explanation of what Hutcheon means by simulations gloating over dead signs. From *Consumer Society* through *Simulations* to *America* and beyond, Baudrillard's writings all tend towards a vision of contemporary consumer society in which reality finds itself in deep crisis. His conception of postmodernity hinges on the idea that in today's mass consumer world—and thanks largely to innovations in electronic media and information technology—the real has been so far displaced by its simulation that simulations have become the new reality. Tim Woods spells this out concisely in *Beginning Postmodernism*:

Like Lyotard, Baudrillard claims we have entered a new postmodern era of simulations governed by information and signs and a new cybernetic technology. In a society where simulations have become dominant, these models structure experience and erode distinctions between the model and reality. Simulation is where the image or the model becomes more real than the real. (26)

The problem with this scenario, as Baudrillard explains in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, is that in a world dominated by simulations "signs will exchange among themselves exclusively, without interacting with the real (and this becomes the condition for their smooth operation)" (125). In Baudrillard's vision of a world of "screen and network" (*Ecstasy* 126)—surface and simulation—the sign no longer *means*, no longer *refers*, no longer *designates* beyond or outside its seamless

exchange and solipsistic play with other signs. Unsurprisingly, capitalism is “the villain of the situation” (29), as Robert Hughes points out, because it multiplies desire by endlessly multiplying signs.

The result, as Baudrillard puts it in *Simulacra and Simulations*, is that “it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality” but instead a question of “concealing the fact that the real is no longer real” (172) —an idea imaginatively explored in the Wachowski Brothers’ recent cyberpunk film *The Matrix* (1999). Culture thus becomes, as Baudrillard goes on to argue in *Fatal Strategies*, “the collective sharing of simulacra, as opposed to the compulsory sharing of the real and of meaning” (50). In *Simulacra and Simulations*, he calls this loss of the real in the face of its simulation ‘hyperreality’: “a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal” (166). Again, Tim Woods helpfully spells out the basics: “hyperreality is the state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left only with simulacra” (27). In this “universe of simulation without referents,” he adds, “the reality of simulation becomes the benchmark for the real itself” (27). For Baudrillard, then, the condition of postmodernity *is* the condition of hyperreality —the condition of living in the empty space of simulation, in a depthless world of surfaces, in a reality “always, already reproduced” (*Simulations* 142). This crisis of representation is what Hutcheon has in mind when she describes Baudrillard’s postmodernism in terms of simulations gloating over dead signs.

Before moving back to DeLillo it is important to make one final point about Baudrillard. For all its many insights into the strange workings of contemporary culture, Baudrillard’s writing on simulacra and hyperreality nonetheless adopts an extreme and potentially untenable position. Douglas Kellner goes so far as to

suggest in *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* that while “Baudrillard’s texts are arguably good science fiction, they are rather problematic as models of social theory” (203). In particular, Kellner detects a “technophobia” and “nostalgia for face-to-face conversation” in Baudrillard which is privileged “over debased and abstract media communication” (67). Like many others, Kellner criticizes Baudrillard for his refusal to see “the possibility of ‘responsible’ or ‘emancipatory’ media communication” (67). Robert Hughes states the case far more bluntly in a scathing but astute review of *America* when he complains that Baudrillard’s conception of the postmodern condition “consigns the citizen to a state of dithering paranoia,” adding that “millions of people” are “quite capable of sifting through [television’s] truncated and overvivid exhortations, of blanking the commercials and sorting through the trash” (30). The point I want to make on the back of these comments is simply this: given his alarmist and generalizing claims about media saturation and its delusional effects, Baudrillard needs to be read with a certain degree of skepticism. Surely we have not yet reached levels of saturation and delusion he envisions.

That said, *White Noise* suggests we have. Or more exactly, the novel contains a vision of the postmodern world taken to the same conceptual extremes encountered in Baudrillard. It is a vision similarly characterized, as Leonard Wilcox points out, “by a ‘loss of the real’ in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs” (346). The novel’s excursion to THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA offers a clear illustration of these confluences between DeLillo and Baudrillard. The tourist attraction has no basis in any objective reality. It exists only as mediated image and empty sign. It makes a spectacle of a spectacle.

It simulates a simulation. It functions solely within the realm of Baudrillard's hyperreal, of that which is 'always already reproduced.'

Within the novel itself, Murray Siskind arrives at a similar conclusion in his own roundabout way. In an effort to indoctrinate Gladney into the study of mass culture, Murray offers this string of wild comments on the significance of the barn:

'No one sees the barn Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender We've agreed to be part of a collective perception They are taking pictures of taking pictures What was the barn like before it was photographed? What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get out of the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now.' (12-3)

Murray's commentary reads like a passage from Baudrillard's *America* —the meandering travelogue on contemporary Americana that Robert Hughes has described as a "slim *sottisier*" filled with "a heated and self-mythologizing flow of apostrophes and aphorisms" (31). On the innocuous experience of exiting a highway, for example, Baudrillard shares this sequence of seemingly random thoughts:

To the person who knows the American freeways, their signs read like a litany. 'Right lane must exit.' This 'must exit' has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have to go, to expel myself from this

paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone ‘Must exit’: you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only —useless and glorious— form of collective existence Merely reading the signs that are essential to your survival gives you an extraordinary feeling of instant lucidity, of reflex ‘participation,’ immediate and smooth. (53-4)

However bewildering, Baudrillard’s transformation of the mundane act of reading road signs into a moment of epiphany parallels Murray’s interpretive response to the experience of the barn. What is more, Murray’s own flow of apostrophes and aphorisms is similarly inspired by a reading of signs posted on the side of a road —a reading, as it happens, that resonates powerfully with Baudrillard’s thinking on hyperreality.

In particular, Murray’s claim that the signs about the barn make it impossible to see the barn echoes Baudrillard’s ideas about the collapse of the real in the face of its mediated representation. In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard briefly defines simulation as a “short-circuit of reality” and “its reduplication by signs” (182). The definition neatly describes the phenomenon Murray observes. The billboards announcing THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA, and not the actual barn, are what establish and sustain the identity of this road-side attraction. Here, the presence of the real is short-circuited and reduplicated —*literally*— by signs. Those signs, in turn, become the benchmark for the real itself. They ensure that the tourists only see the barn in and through its hyperreal existence as mass-mediated image without origin or reality —a point Murray seems

to appreciate when he asks: “What was the barn like before it was photographed? . . . How was it similar to other barns? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures” (13).

In effect, Murray is making the same point as Daniel Boorstin in *The Image* when he proposes that post-war American society is “haunted not by reality, but by those images we have put in the place of reality” (6). With this idea in mind, Boorstin goes on to suggest that as far as tourism is now concerned “we go not to test the image by the reality, but to test reality by the image” (116). Not only do these comments directly anticipate Baudrillard (*The Image* was first published in 1961), but they also articulate Murray’s own, more enigmatic thinking about the barn: “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (12-13). The barn’s photographic aura can be understood in Boorstin’s terms as the haunting presence of the image that has replaced reality. It can also be understood to represent what Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulations* calls “the spectre raised by simulation” (168). That is, the barn’s aura can be seen through the lens of Baudrillard as a flash of hyperreality in which images, signs, codes, and models become more real than the real —an illustration, to rephrase Hutcheon, of the simulacrum rising from the dead body of the referent. The seemingly absurd situation of ‘people taking pictures of taking pictures’ further supports such a reading of the barn. The tourists are consuming images of images. The object of their photographic gaze is not the thing itself but a mediated image

that bears no relation to the thing itself. The commodity for sale here is nothing less than the postmodern order of image and simulacrum itself.

Finally, and despite the many points of comparison, there is a key distinction to be made between Murray the “would-be post-modern guru” (Baker 87) and Baudrillard the “Patron Saint of New-Pop” (Hughes 29). The distinction involves a difference in attitude towards the postmodern world they both describe. As the novel’s excursion to the barn makes clear, Murray derives enormous pleasure from experiencing the postmodern in its most outrageous and extreme manifestations. Gladney, for example, observes that Murray is “immensely pleased” (13) by what he sees and experiences at the barn. Elsewhere in the novel, Murray displays the same enthusiasm for other postmodern cultural phenomena as we come across him roaming aimlessly through supermarkets or staring rapturously at television screens. His various encounters with consumer culture in postmodernity all figure as occasions for celebration and enjoyment. In short, DeLillo posits the character of Murray as the celebratory voice of mass culture and consumerism—a point Stephen Baker makes in *The Fiction of Postmodernity*, adding that Murray is not only “attuned to the dissolution of the object world into so many images and simulacra of itself” but is also “willing to act as an enthusiastic advocate of this new ‘reality.’” (87). It is Murray’s advocacy of this new ‘reality’ that sets him apart from Baudrillard.

Unlike Baudrillard, Murray rejoices at the loss of the real and exults in the triumph of simulacra over the object. His emphatic endorsement of a postmodern world of surface, screen, and network—a consumer world in which all distinction between reality and its representation dissolves in a haze of simulation and a void of

meaning— runs against the deep-rooted ambivalence we find in Baudrillard. In a discussion featured in Mike Gane's *Selected Interviews*, for example, Baudrillard has this to say about the place he describes in as "neither dream nor reality" but only "hyperreality" (*America* 28): "In many ways, America is hell; I vomit it out, but I am also susceptible to its demonic seduction. I'm throwing things up at the same time I'm greedily devouring them" (131). The grotesque imagery accompanying this demonization of 'the land of hyperreality' reveals the full extent of Baudrillard's ambivalence towards the cultural phenomena that consume so much of his writing. The disturbing image of someone simultaneously vomiting and ingesting the 'hell' of contemporary America clearly suggests an unresolved and discomforting conflict between revulsion and attraction.

A similar conflict also surfaces —though far less explicitly— in Baudrillard's troubled relationship with television. Another interview in Gane's book finds Baudrillard uneasy about owning a TV set: "I've only had it for the past two or three years. Before, I didn't want the damn thing And once I had it, I found I liked having it. But I use it in a very random sort of way" (30). Though we get no explanation of what Baudrillard means by 'using' television in a random way, it is clear that this last comment attempts to defend his reluctant seduction by 'the damn thing.' The contrast with Murray in *White Noise*, who advertises his addiction to television at every opportunity, could not be more severe. In this extract from a conversation with Gladney, for example, Murray reflects on the euphoric effects of his nightly televisual marathons:

I've been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience, let me tell you. Close to mystical Sealed-off, self-contained, self-referring TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data . . . it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students, 'What more do you want?' Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of the darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. '*Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.*' The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can . . . get past our irritation, weariness, and disgust. (50-1)

Here, Baudrillard's 'damn thing' becomes Murray's sacred thing—an object of nocturnal worship and a source of almost spiritual elation. In this account, watching television approximates a religious experience in which the 'coded messages' and 'endless repetitions' of commercials perform the ceremonial function of chants, mantras, and sacred formulas. The idea that the experience of this 'network of little buzzing dots' can culminate in such forms of delirium immediately brings to mind Baudrillard's notion of an "ecstasy of communication"—the experience of euphoria, as he explains it, brought about by "the smooth operational surface of communication" in our electronic era of "connections, contact, contiguity, feedback, and general interface" (Ecstasy 127). But although Murray derives an 'ecstasy of communication' from the 'smooth operational surface' of his television set, he responds to the experience in a way that continues to conflict with Baudrillard.

Informing Baudrillard's thinking in *The Ecstasy of Communication* is Marshall McLuhan's familiar assertion from the 1960's that, in an information society, "the medium is the message" (30). And like McLuhan, Baudrillard sees television as "the ultimate and perfect object for this new era" (127). One of the reasons is that the medium not only exemplifies but also enables the conditions necessary for producing the ecstasy of communication. Baudrillard explains:

Today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, . . . a pornography of all functions and objects in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regulation, in their forced signification, in their performativity It is the obscenity of what . . . dissolves completely in information and communication It is the medium that imposes itself in its pure circulation All functions abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. That's the ecstasy of communication. All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information. That's obscenity The promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces. (130-1)

Despite its convoluted articulation, Baudrillard's point is deceptively simple. The postmodern mediascape is obscene in its 'promiscuous' saturation, solicitation, and seduction of society. The effect on the subject, marooned in this space of simulation, is a sort of out-of-body experience—a dizzying feeling of ungrounded exhilaration in which meaning and reality become lost in the play of surfaces. This is the ecstasy of communication, and it too is 'obscene' because it belongs to and emerges from the 'pornographic' transparency and visibility of mass media. This, at any rate, is

Baudrillard's position, and one that insists through its negativized rhetoric on presenting this ungrounded exhilaration as a some kind of social health hazard.

In *White Noise*, by contrast, Murray arrives at the radically different conclusion that the ecstasy of communication is an experience to be embraced. His message, as Leonard Wilcox helpfully deciphers it, is that "looking for a realm of meaning beyond surfaces, networks, and commodities is unnecessary" because "the information society provides its own sort of epiphanies, and watching television . . . is one of them" (350). Like Baudrillard, in other words, Murray not only sees television as the ultimate object for the postmodern age of disseminated simulacra, but also shares the view that meaning and reality become lost in the play of surfaces. The difference, however, is that Murray sees no need to resist mass media's saturation, solicitation, and seduction. Rather, he suggests that if we can just 'get past' the 'irritation, weariness, and disgust' of the sort expressed by Baudrillard, then the play of surfaces itself can offer all the meaning and reality we need in a postmodern consumer world. This response to the experience of watching television reads in turn as yet another celebration of the loss of the real. For Murray, the world of television, with its insipid jingles, slice-of-life commercials, banal advertising slogans, and floating images of fetishized consumer objects, becomes more real than the real. And it is precisely because Murray is conscious of the way television erases distinctions between reality and representation —precisely because he recognizes the medium as a space of simulation— that he so thoroughly enjoys 'consuming' its spectacles.

This TV addict clearly shares none of Baudrillard's reservations about the age of simulation. With the character of Jack Gladney, however, DeLillo supplies

someone who does. Whereas Murray embraces the depthlessness of the postmodern mediascape, Gladney becomes increasingly ambivalent over the course of the novel about living in a world of simulation without referents. One source of that ambivalence is television. In terms that recall Baudrillard's comment about being 'susceptible' to America's 'demonic seduction,' Gladney sees the medium as possessing a "narcotic undertow" and "eerie diseased brain-sucking power" (16). This view of television is reinforced for Gladney when he overhears his young daughter Steffie speaking in her sleep one night:

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*. A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain-noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. (154-55)

Commenting on this passage in *The Fiction of Postmodernity*, Stephen Baker calls attention to the way "Steffie's nocturnal chants" dramatize "the colonization of the unconscious by the commodity structure" (95). The idea of a child dreaming about a brand name certainly suggests a commodity-saturated consciousness and an internalization of the entire consumer system. More to the point, however, the passage identifies television as responsible for that process of consumer

conditioning. Steffie's unconscious utterance exposes the full force of the medium's 'narcotic undertow' and 'brain-sucking power.' It reveals just how deeply TV advertising can penetrate the mind, just how effectively it can invade unconscious thought and command unconscious moments.

It is interesting, then, that in the moment before he recognizes the words 'Toyota Celica' Gladney describes the utterance as an 'ecstatic chant' filled with 'ritual meaning.' The idea that the words contain a ritual meaning brings to mind Murray's earlier comment about how television's endless repetitions can transform meaningless advertising slogans into 'sacred formulas.' Steffie's dream-speech suggests that such transformations take place at an unconscious level. In turn, the idea that the words sound like an 'ecstatic chant' suggests that Steffie is re-living a Baudrillardian ecstasy of communication in her sleep. Here, the experience of watching TV continues to be recycled in the 'substatic regions' of the mind. The white noise of television becomes the brain noise of the unconscious. Finally, Gladney's amazement at the way he senses 'meaning' and 'presence' in 'near-nonsense words' that refer to nothing outside or beyond themselves also echoes Baudrillard. What Gladney experiences is the disturbing realization that brand names, like the systems of mediation through which they circulate, are there to produce the illusion of meaning and presence. They are there, in Baudrillard's terms, to conceal the fact that 'the real is no longer real.'

For Gladney, the realization that he lives in a "world of displacements" (103) where the real has been drained of meaning and presence is anything but the occasion for celebration Murray finds it to be. Rather, Gladney's experience of that world becomes a source of bewilderment and disorientation. It leads to feelings of

anxiety and confusion that only reinforce his uncertainty about whether to embrace or resist the postmodern phenomena he encounters. Gladney's run-in with SIMUVAC in the wake of the 'Airborne Toxic Event' underlines the problem:

'That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds Important.'

'Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for.'

'But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real.'

'We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.'

'A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse a simulation?'

'We took it right into the streets.'

'How is it going?' I said.

'The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn't get a jump on the computer traffic. Suddenly it spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about.' (139)

This exchange between Gladney and the SIMUVAC man illustrates most explicitly DeLillo's depiction of the postmodern world in *White Noise* as a place where simulations triumph over reality. Not only is SIMUVAC's entire *raison d'être* the simulation of reality but, to Gladney's alarm, the organization is actually using a real disaster to practice for a simulated one. In other words, SIMUVAC inverts the

conventional relationship between reality and representation. The simulation becomes the benchmark for the real and not the other way around. This, of course, is Baudrillard's recipe for hyperreality, a condition in which the real effectively disappears. In DeLillo's version, however, the real is not so easily displaced. As the SIMUVAC man complains, he has to make allowances for the awkward presence of real victims who do not behave like simulated ones. SIMUVAC is stuck with a reality it sees as less authentic than an 'actual simulation.' The real event fails to live up to the model.

As these reversals suggest, SIMUVAC represents another embodiment of the Baudrillardian idea that, in a media-saturated world driven by the reproduction of images, signs, codes and models, representation can become more real than the real. That idea runs through the whole of DeLillo's representation of the postmodern consumer world in *White Noise*. It informs the novel's excursion to THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA where the tourists consume images of images. It leads to the novel's vision of television as a space of simulation where meaning and reality become lost in the play of surfaces. It accounts for the moments of ungrounded delirium experienced in that play of surfaces. And in the case of Steffie's dream-speech where the everyday babble of consumerism penetrates and recycles through the unconscious, it even explains the condition of 'white noise' that titles the novel.

The same idea also shapes the novel's representation of shopping. As we see next, DeLillo's vision of a Baudrillardian world of surface and simulation extends right into the novel's retail spaces where the interplay of empty signs, mediated images, and fetishized consumer objects continues to confuse the boundary between

substance and illusion. And nowhere in *White Noise* do consumer culture and postmodernity collide more spectacularly than in the malls and supermarkets of suburban America.

SHOPPING

The activity of shopping consumes a surprisingly large portion of the narrative in *White Noise*. The novel spends entire chapters cruising the aisles of supermarkets, peering curiously into shopping carts, soaking up the atmosphere at check-out counters, and roaming aimlessly through malls. Far from extraneous, these shopping trips are central to DeLillo's representation of the postmodern consumer world. Not only do they take us to see the disorienting social spaces that are created when capitalism meets postmodernism, but they also show the effects those spaces have on everyday consumer practice and experience.

The first of the novel's retail excursions brings these ideas into focus. In this episode, Gladney takes his family shopping at the local supermarket where they bump into Murray Siskind. Gladney is intrigued by the contents of Murray's basket:

His basket held generic food and drink, non-brand items in plain white packaging with simple labeling. There was a white can labeled CANNED PEACHES. There was a white package of bacon without a plastic window for viewing a representative slice. A jar of roasted nuts had a wrapper bearing the words IRREGULAR PEANUTS.
(18)

As these items reveal, Murray's taste in groceries is much the same as his taste in everything else. He chooses the kitsch, the trash, the junk. He is drawn by the *lack* of quality. As always, Murray feels compelled to explain the moment:

This is the new austerity . . . Flavorless packaging. It appeals to me. I feel I'm not only saving money but contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus. It's like World War III. Everything is white. They'll take our bright colors and use them in the war effort . . . Most of all I like the packages themselves . . . This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock. (18-9)

In a world where people so often choose products precisely for and because of their brand names, Murray's preference for non-brand items seems about as irregular as the peanuts in his basket. Yet there is a certain hidden logic behind his strange attraction to 'flavorless packaging.' If the rise of brand-name shopping tells us anything, it is that packaging is everything. But how to stand out in a mass of slickly packaged goods? As Murray sees it, generic products offer one answer. In today's stores where bright colors compete everywhere for the consumer's attention, the visual uniformity of bland, white packaging gives non-brand items 'the power to shock.' Their homogenous appearance is what paradoxically makes them unique. In this sense, and as the label 'IRREGULAR PEANUTS' explicitly states, generic products represent anomalous commodities in the context of the modern supermarket.

Even so, these non-brand items still share an important similarity with their mainstream counterparts. The distinguishing characteristic is still the packaging. And this, of course, is the source of Murray's attraction: "Most of all I like the

packages themselves” (19). Like any slave to the fashion of brands, in other words, Murray is not buying the commodity itself so much as the image projected by its packaging. That the image in this case would not entice most shoppers remains beside the point. It is still the commodity’s surface appearance—the spectacle of its packaged exterior—that creates desire.

In such terms, the supermarket offers Murray an experience similar to that of watching television. Not only is the space dominated by a play of surfaces, but those surfaces also obfuscate the presence of the real. Visually assaulted by the shocking white austerity of the generic packaging, for example, Murray loses sight of the actual products contained inside: “It’s like World War III. Everything is white” (18). The real—in this case the commodity—is displaced by its representational display. Given this similarity with television, it is hardly surprising that Murray, a TV addict who celebrates the medium’s dissolution of reality, also enjoys consuming this particular spectacle of goods. Shopping in DeLillo’s supermarket is strangely like tuning into the depthless world of television.

Such a view of the supermarket brings to mind Jameson’s thinking in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where he suggests that one of the definitive features of the postmodern is “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (60). For Jameson, as Noel King explains in his article on *White Noise*, “this new depthlessness” is not merely metaphorical, but rather “is to be felt quite forcibly in the new organizations of social spaces” (67). In *White Noise*, the supermarket is one such space. Not only does the supermarket illustrate what Noel King, following

Jameson, calls the postmodern “triumph of surface” (67), but it also shows how disorienting the experience of that depthlessness can actually be.

In the following passage, for example, the animated play of surfaces inside the supermarket —the riot of bright colors, the rush of moving bodies, the hum of circumambient noise— causes Gladney to experience a form of sensory overload.

This is his description of the atmosphere of chaos and confusion he encounters:

We walked past the fruit bins, an area that extended about forty-five yards along one wall. The bins were arranged diagonally and backed by mirrors that people accidentally punched when reaching for fruit in the upper rows. A voice on the loudspeaker said: ‘Kleenex Softique, your truck’s blocking the entrance.’ Apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright. People tore filmy bags off racks and tried to figure out which end opened. I realized the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (36)

The ‘dull and unlocatable roar’ that Gladney eventually identifies is the white noise of shopping —the buzz of meaningless sounds created by the acoustic commotion of humans, objects, electronics, and machines. This acoustic commotion combines with the visual commotion of bright colors, reflective planes, and shining surfaces to transform the supermarket into a space of disorientation and dislocation. Confused

shoppers bump into mirrors, fumble with plastic bags, and knock over piles of fresh fruit. Disembodied human voices emerge from ‘toneless’ loudspeakers calling out strange names like ‘Kleenex Softique.’ Later on in the novel, a sudden re-organization of the supermarket’s shelves further aggravates the situation. It causes “agitation and panic in the aisles” as people wander around in a “fragmented trance” trying “to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (325).

The atmosphere of chaos and confusion inside DeLillo’s twentieth century supermarket closely resembles that of Zola’s nineteenth century department store in *The Ladies Paradise* where, as we saw in the previous chapter, the swarm of moving bodies and circulating goods sweeps up the mobbed shoppers in a fever of impulse buying. Zola’s depiction of the store’s rush hour traffic chimes so perfectly with DeLillo’s depiction of the supermarket that it is worth quoting again:

A compact mass of heads was surging through the arcades, spreading out like an overflowing river into the middle of the hall By now the commotion inside was muffling the sounds from the street Beyond the huge murmur of the sale there remained but a sensation of the vastness of Paris The great afternoon rush-hour had arrived, when the overheated machine led to the dance of customers, extracting money from their very flesh there was a sense of madness In the still air, the hubbub was increasing, made up of all sorts of noises —the continuous trampling of feet, the same phrases repeated a hundred times at the counters, gold clinking on the brass of the cash-desks, besieged by a mass of purses, the baskets on wheels with their loads of parcels falling endlessly into the cellars. (108-9)

Like DeLillo's supermarket, Zola's department store is dominated by a pandemonium of noise. Moreover, the acoustic and visual commotion in Zola's store similarly results in images of disorientation and dislocation. In the dead air and suffocating heat, heads without bodies crowd the arcades, dancing customers are skinned alive, and a cacophony of stampeding feet, floating voices, and metallic clinking smothers the sounds of the city outside. Though DeLillo's supermarket and Zola's department store belong to very different moments in the development of consumer culture, both novelists offer surprisingly similar accounts of the atmosphere inside their stores.

In *Carried Away*, Rachel Bowlby offers some insight into why this similarity exists. Talking about the 'invention' of modern shopping, she suggests that the supermarket can be understood as the twentieth century equivalent to the nineteenth century department store:

In the nineteenth century was the department store; in the twentieth century was the supermarket In many ways, department stores and supermarkets belong together. Both are large-scale institutions, selling a vast range of goods under one roof and making use of modern marketing principles of rapid turnover and low profit margins Both were taken, when they first appeared on the scene, as emblematic of contemporary developments not only in marketing, but in social life more generally: cities and leisure in one case, suburbs and cars in the other Department stores, and supermarkets in their later developments, dazzled with their lighting and displays of goods —so beautiful, or so much. Like the supermarket, the department store presented a new kind of indoor retailing space, which was *open*, with goods on display for looking

at, and with no sense that customers had come in with a definite intention to buy. (8-9)

Bowlby makes a number of key points in this extract. First, the modern supermarket not only has its roots in the nineteenth century department store, but also employs the same retailing strategies. Both spaces use the spectacular display of goods to entice the consumer and stimulate desire. Both spaces are designed to transform the routine activity of shopping into an experience that becomes an object of consumption in its own right. And it is precisely these ideas that inform the representation of retail space in Zola and DeLillo, with the result that both novelists depict the experience of shopping in broadly similar terms.

Even so, there is a crucial distinction to be made between DeLillo's supermarket and Zola's department store. Again, Bowlby's comments shed light on the issue. As she points out, both institutions emerge from and mark the arrival of two distinct cultural moments. The department store emblemizes urban modernity, the late nineteenth century moment of 'cities and leisure' theorized by Walter Benjamin. The supermarket, however, emblemizes what could be called suburban postmodernity, the late twentieth century moment of 'suburbs and cars' —screens and networks— theorized by cultural thinkers like Baudrillard. DeLillo's representation of the supermarket illustrates this point. Inside the store, there is an overwhelming sense of dislocation from reality that does not appear in Zola —or rather, the sense of a 'new' or artificially constructed reality characterized by the kind of flatness, depthlessness, and superficiality that Jameson, echoing Baudrillard, sees as distinctive features of the postmodern.

In such terms, the supermarket in *White Noise* can be understood as another expression of the hyperreal condition that distinguishes the postmodern consumer world in Baudrillard's thinking. Objects disperse into images. The real slips behind its representation. Surface replaces depth. The supermarket can also be seen through the lens of Baudrillard as an 'obscene' space. It is worth recalling that in *The Ecstasy of Communication* Baudrillard calls the postmodern mediascape an "obscenity of the visible," adding that "the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces" (131). Baudrillard is talking about mass media, but he could just as easily be describing the disorienting world of gratuitous display contained inside DeLillo's supermarket.

Given this resonance, it is also worth recalling Baudrillard's idea that the experience of mass media's "smooth operational surfaces" leads to the phenomenon of the ecstasy of communication (127). DeLillo's representation of shopping features a variation on this idea. As the following passage highlights, the experience of the supermarket's 'smooth operational surfaces' generates its own form of ecstasy, an ecstasy of shopping. The voice belongs to Gladney:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the *mass and variety* of our purchases, in the *sheer plenitude* those crowded bags suggested, the *weight and size and number*, the familiar *packaging designs* and *vivid lettering*, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the *sense of replenishment* we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls —it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being. . . (20; my italics)

Baudrillard talks about the ecstasy of communication as a “state of fascination and vertigo” linked to the “delirium of communication” (132). The comment comes very close to describing how the supermarket affects Gladney. Only now, the state of fascination and vertigo is linked to the delirium of shopping. In the dizzying swirl of surfaces and signs, Gladney experiences what Leonard Wilcox, discussing the ecstasy of communication, calls “an undifferentiated flux of pure signifiers” (347). As in Baudrillard, the result is a moment of elation and release.

The moment quickly passes, however, and Gladney is soon back to morbidly ruminating about death—a subject that preoccupies his thoughts and causes attacks of anxiety throughout the novel. In other words, the ecstasy of shopping only provides a temporary escape from reality. It only lasts as long as the subject remains lost and immersed in the delirium of shopping. So although shopping can offer moments of elation and release, those moments are inevitably short-lived. The indication, moreover, is that the ‘fullness of being’ derived from the experience of shopping is nothing more than an illusory effect, a transparent state of delusion, a false and fleeting sense of well-being.

DeLillo further develops these ideas in the novel’s outing to the ‘Mid-Village Mall’ where Gladney goes on a wild shopping spree. The episode is triggered by a chance encounter inside an enormous hardware store. Gladney’s description of that store clearly echoes his earlier description of the supermarket:

A great echoing din, as of the extinction of a species of beast, filled the vast space. People bought twenty-two foot ladders, six kinds of sandpaper, power saws that could fell trees. The aisles were long and

bright, filled with oversized brooms, massive sacks of peat and dung, huge Rubbermaid garbage cans. Rope hung like tropical fruit, beautifully braided strands, thick, brown, strong People spoke English, Hindi, Vietnamese, related tongues. (82)

The hardware store is overwhelmed by the exactly same sort of visual and acoustic commotion that animates the supermarket. But there is a subtle difference. In their range of goods, rows of aisles, and sheer vastness, both stores are spaces of excess. Unlike the supermarket, however, the hardware store represents a masculinized and masculinizing space. This produces an additional form of excess that registers in the type of commodities sold inside the store. The customers are not simply buying ladders and saws. They are buying ‘twenty-foot ladders’ and ‘power saws’ that can mow down trees. The implication is that shopping for these oversized and overpowered tools serves to reinforce male fantasies of power and control. To take this one step further, we might even say that the excessive size of the equipment in the hardware store serves to alleviate male anxieties about the size of another, more personal, piece of ‘equipment.’

Something of the masculinity of this space rubs off on Gladney. The language and imagery he uses to capture the atmosphere deep inside the hardware store make this everyday place seem like a wild and exotic location. The white noise of shopping becomes ‘a great echoing din, as of the extinction of a species of beast.’ The hanging rope looks like ‘tropical fruit.’ People speak in distant languages like ‘Hindi’ and ‘Vietnamese.’ By presenting the hardware store as a place of adventure, mystery, and potential danger, Gladney constructs a setting perfectly suited, as Tim Engles notes, to a male “assertion of self” (772). Thanks to his own description of

the space, Gladney is transformed—if nowhere else than in his own imagination—from an ordinary shopper into the exciting and archetypally male figure of the explorer.

This fantasy comes crashing back to reality when Gladney bumps into a university colleague, Eric Massingale, who is also roaming around the hardware store. Struck by the difference in Gladney's off-campus appearance, Massingale tells him that, without his glasses and gown, he looks like a “harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). Gladney pretends not to be offended by the comment and makes a beeline for the exit. But the encounter affects him deeply. Not only does it deflate his daydream of adventure, but it also serves as an unwelcome reminder of his ordinariness. At another level, the encounter can also be seen as emasculating. Even when surrounded by the aura of machismo emanating from the hardware store, he still looks harmless and insignificant (read *unmanly*) to his male colleague.

In response to this moment of humiliation, Gladney hits the mall to indulge in a massive shopping binge. The idea is to lose himself in the experience of shopping—to escape his feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment through reckless spending and impulse buying. This of course is ‘retail therapy’ in its most flagrant form, and in *White Noise* it leads to this extended scene of excess:

The encounter put me in the mood to shop. I found the others and we walked across two parking lots to the main structure in the Mid-Village Mall, a ten-storey building arranged around a center court of waterfalls, promenades and gardens. Babette and the kids followed me into the elevator, into the shops set along tiers, through the

emporiums and department stores, puzzled but excited by my desire to buy. When I could not decide between two shirts, they encouraged me to buy both . . . They were my guides to endless well-being. People swarmed through the boutiques and gourmet shops. Organ music rose from the great court. We smelled chocolate, popcorn, cologne; we smelled rugs and furs, hanging salamis and deathly vinyl. We moved from store to store . . . There was always another store . . . I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies . . . Brightness settled around me . . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms . . . A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction. (83-4)

This passage contains no descriptions of the consumer objects that Gladney so feverishly purchases in his rampage through the mall. Instead, the emphasis is placed almost exclusively on the activity of shopping itself: "I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it" (84). Gladney does not care what he buys. He does not even think about it. He has no vision or plan. He shops randomly, impulsively, frantically, and recklessly. The clear suggestion, as Thomas Ferraro points out, is that Gladney seeks comfort in "the spending of money, not the actual acquisition of goods" (21). Gladney confirms as much when he talks about the rush he gets from spending money: "The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact

came back to me in the form of existential credit” (82). In short, Gladney hits the mall looking for the ecstasy of shopping and finds it in the rush of spending.

The mall itself plays an important role in enabling such forms of sublimation. Like the supermarket, the mall is alive with the delirium of shopping. The difference, however, is that the mall takes that delirium to a new extreme. The sensory stimulation is more intense. The atmosphere of chaos and confusion is more pronounced. The sense of disorientation and dislocation is more severe. Even the play of surfaces is more spectacular. There are more displays, more goods, more aisles, more shops, more crowds, more noise. This space of excess, in other words, features all the conditions necessary for producing the phenomenon of the ecstasy of shopping. This, of course, is the driving idea behind the mall. It is specifically designed to cause the individual to become lost in the endless swirl of surfaces and signs. The mall is built for retail therapy. There is ‘always another store,’ always another invitation to consume, always another opportunity to delay the return to reality.

The shopping spree at the mall has some surprising side-effects on the Gladney family. It unites them in a collective enterprise, giving them a sense of communal identity that seems to be missing in the home. “My family gloried in the event,” says Gladney, “I was one of them, shopping, at last” (83). Here, shopping renews the bonds of family. It becomes a game that the family can play together: “The two girls scouted ahead, spotting things I might want or need, running back to get me, to clutch my arms, plead with me to follow . . . They gave me advice, badgered clerks on my behalf” (83). More importantly, Gladney’s sudden urge to shop—his uncontrollable need to spend—gives the rest of the family a strange

thrill. Babette and the children are “puzzled but excited” by his “desire to buy” (83). Swept up in the rush of spending, they experience a vicarious form of the ecstasy of shopping.

It would appear that Gladney’s attempt to regain his confidence and composure through retail therapy pays off. The shopping spree through the mall brings him feelings of elation and release. It leads to a rare moment of family bonding. It even enables him to look ‘big’ again in the eyes of his children: “I could tell they were impressed” (84). For Gladney, the result is a new-found sense of enlargement: “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself . . . Brightness settled around me . . . I felt expansive” (84). There is a catch, however, to the therapeutic effects of shopping. The ‘brightness’ that settles around Gladney—the glow of self-importance—is inextricably linked to the activity of shopping. It can only exist within the consumer sphere of retail spaces like the mall. But most importantly, it can only be sustained as long as Gladney continues to spend.

DeLillo ends the family outing to the mall on a note of discord that reinforces these ideas. As soon as the Gladneys leave the mall, the aura of ‘brightness’ disappears and the fantasy of ‘endless well-being’ implodes. Feeling emotionally drained and physically exhausted, they lapse into silence and long for solitude: “We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone. A little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken” (84). The desire for solitude and the inability to communicate outside the mall suggest disturbingly that the sense of togetherness created by the shared experience of retail therapy is as illusory and

ephemeral as the ecstasy of shopping from which it derives. Equally disturbing are Steffie's TV mutterings. The only person to speak after returning from the mall is this child, and she is speaking to a TV set. Not only does the moment further comment on the breakdown of family relations that follows the shopping spree, but it also reveals how this particular member of the family responds to that breakdown. Seamlessly interfacing with the television, Steffie escapes into the realm of the Baudrillardian ecstasy of communication.

Moving from the delirium of shopping to the delirium of communication, DeLillo's mall crawl begins in one depthless postmodern space and ends in another. The transition is no coincidence, however. Earlier in the novel, Gladney talks about television's "narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power" (16), and Steffie's mimicking of TV voices is certainly a case in point. But the way DeLillo slides between the ecstasies of shopping and communication takes the idea one step further. It suggests that shopping, like television, has its own 'narcotic undertow' and 'brain-sucking power.' The novel's various retail excursions certainly bear this out. Together, they show just how deeply the delirium of shopping can penetrate the unconscious, just how completely it can seduce and mesmerize the mind. In so doing, the novel's shopping trips also show how contemporary retail spaces like the mall and the supermarket belong to and are produced by the same postmodern world of surface and simulation that generates destinations like THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA, organizations like SIMUVAC, and vacuous mass media like television.

GARBAGE

In *Carried Away*, Rachel Bowbly observes that “consumption” is both “ecstasy and waste” (19). A similar idea animates DeLillo’s representation of consumer excess in *White Noise*. In the novel’s shopping scenes, we see how that excess generates strange forms of ecstasy. But in the following scene, we also see how it generates strange forms of waste. Looking for an experimental wonder drug that promises to remove his chronic fear of death, Gladney rummages through the household garbage. He does not find the pill, but he does come across this strange, grotesque, and somewhat menacing heap of trash:

I walked across the kitchen, opened the compactor and looked inside the trash bag. An oozing cube of semi-mangled cans, clothes hangers, animal bones and other refuse. The bottles were broken, the cartons flat. Product colors were undiminished in brightness and intensity . . . The compressed bulk sat there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking. I jabbed at it with the butt end of a rake and then spread the material over the concrete floor. I picked through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass . . . Why did I feel like a household spy. Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one’s deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? . . . I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ball point refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. (258-9)

Gladney's responds to this heap of trash like an archeologist on a dig, by studying material remains in search of some insight into the way of life that produced them. In this case, those material remains belong to a late twentieth century consumer culture and are produced by its everyday forms of excess. Gladney senses that the garbage contains clues to understanding the 'dark side of consumer consciousness'—the deep-rooted consumer habits, fetishes, addictions, and inclinations that drive and shape both his own life and that of his family. The problem is that, however suggestive of some deeper meaning, the garbage defies interpretation.

The reason the garbage defies interpretation is, as John Frow points out, precisely because it retains the features of the postmodern consumer world from which it derives: "the list is of an accretion of wastes that have come full circle from the supermarket" and, I would add, the mall, "but which still retain the formal structure (and even the 'undiminished colors') of the presentation of surfaces" (190). The result, as Frow goes on to suggest, is that "at the heart of this inside is nothing more than a compacted mass of outsides" (190). In other words, the triumph of surfaces that not only distinguishes the novel's retail spaces but also its larger vision of the postmodern world survives the trauma of the trash compactor. Gazing at this garbage is no different than gazing at a supermarket shelf, a television screen, or even a picture of *THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA*. Despite the illusion of depth, there is no meaning beneath, behind, or beyond the surface. Rather, the surface *is* the meaning. The subtlety escapes Gladney, and once again he is left anxiously pondering the significance of a postmodern moment.

In closing, it is worth recalling that what motivates Gladney to sift through garbage in the first place is the search for a magical pill that removes the fear of

death. He is looking for a way to fill the void at the core of his being. *White Noise* suggests that this void is in fact the postmodern condition —the condition of living in the empty space of simulation, in a depthless world of surfaces, in a reality always, already reproduced. In such terms, Gladney's ambivalence in the face of his own garbage is a response to more than just the stench of waste. It is a response to the void at the very core of late twentieth century consumer culture.

7. POSTSCRIPT: 'STEP RIGHT UP'

Step right up! Step right up! That's right, it fillets and chops and dices and slices and never stops and lasts a lifetime and it mows your lawn and it picks up the kids from school and it gets rid of unwanted facial hair and it gets rid of embarrassing ink spots and it delivers the pizza and it lengthens and it strengthens and it finds that slipper that's been at large under the couch for several weeks and it plays a mean rhythm and it makes excuses for unwanted lipstick on your collar and it's only a dollar. Step right up! Step right up! 'Cuz it forges your signature and if you're not completely satisfied mail back unused portion of product for complete refund of original price of purchase. Don't be fooled by cheap imitations. You can live in it, love in it, swim in it, sleep in it. It entertains visiting relatives and it turns a

sandwich into a banquet and it walks your dog and it steals you a car and it gets rids of your gambling debts and it helps you quit smoking. It's a friend and a companion and it's the only product you will ever need. Follow these easy assembly instructions. It never needs ironing. It takes weight off hips, thighs, and chins and it gets rid of dandruff and it finds you a job. It is a job. It's new. It's improved. It's old-fashioned. It never needs winding. It gets rid of heartache. It wins the election. No obligation. No salesman will visit your home. We've got a jackpot. Prizes, prizes, prizes. All work guaranteed. How do we do it how do we do it how do we do it? We need your business. We're going out of business. We'll give you the business. Receive our free brochure. Batteries not included. Step right up! Step right up!

—Tom Waits, from lyrics to *Step Right Up*.

In an upbeat track from his otherwise sedate album, *Small Change* (1976), the American singer-songwriter Tom Waits overlays a jazzy double-bass score with lyrics lifted from the quick-fire language of advertising and street-peddling. The song's title, 'Step Right Up,' evokes the signature cry of the carpetbagger—the archetypal con-man of the early American West. In the song itself, Waits poses as just such a figure and attempts to bamboozle the listener into 'buying' an unspecified product capable of doing everything from walking the dog and mowing

the lawn to stealing a car and delivering the pizza. In other words, Tom Waits not only gives the song's ubiquitous commodity magical powers it cannot possibly possess, but also endows it with a life-like autonomy and agency of its own. It is a friend and a companion. It entertains visiting relatives. It picks up the kids from school. It can even turn a sandwich into a banquet. The result is a miraculous consumer object that promises extraordinary forms of pleasure it cannot possibly deliver.

Step Right Up playfully engages with the idea that has animated this thesis. The song takes to a conceptual extreme the notion that, in the dreamy world of consumerism, the commodity becomes a living object of consumer fetish that stimulates desire but ultimately denies satisfaction. *Step Right Up* also offers another illustration of the argument advanced in this thesis —namely, that the project of representing commodity culture's impact on identity and agency remains a dominant concern in cultural production from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This study has focused on the ways in which that project drives and shapes fiction, showing in the process how it leads to Gaskell's skeletal human forms, Thackeray's carnivals of consumption, Trollope's material girl, Conrad's damaged goods, and DeLillo's spectacular world of shopping, simulation, and surface. But as Tom Waits' song reminds us, the same project also drives and shapes representation in other fields.

In painting, it registers in the apocalyptic vision of George Cruickshank's *Worship of Bacchus* (1864), the robotic horror of Fernand Léger's *Three Women* (1921), and the serialized iconography of Andy Warhol's pop-art. In architecture, it leads to London's Crystal Palace of 1851, Le Corbusier's symmetrical tower blocks,

and the utilitarian structures of the Bauhaus movement. In film, it produces the sprawling cityscape of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), the comic factory world of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and, more recently, the narrative of greed in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987). And in music, it even surfaces in songs by performers as diverse as Madonna, The Sex Pistols, and Tom Waits.

Reading the fiction of Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, Conrad, and DeLillo, this study has traced the line of tension that the rise and triumph of commodity culture shoots through nineteenth and twentieth century literature. But if we look beyond literature to other fields such as visual art, music, film, and architecture, we see that the rise and triumph of commodity culture leave deep imprints across the full range of artistic production. These imprints offer more than just illustrations of the various ways in which consumerism impacts on cultural representation from the Victorian period through to the present day. These imprints reveal the increasing primacy and inescapability of the commodity in the flow of everyday culture.

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