

Damien Hirst and the Legacy of the Sublime in Contemporary Art and Culture

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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March 2009

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Abstract

Damien Hirst's work, complicit as it is in a capitalist culture industry, is in need of analysis as cultural symptom. Though best understood not as avant-garde art, but as commodified culture, at its best it condenses social contradiction into complex, haunting images. In doing this it draws on a continuing tradition of the "commodified sublime" with roots in early modernity. The *nachträglich* returns of this in his work present an alternative history of the sublime to its high-cultural narratives. My presentation of an archive of this capitalist sublime focuses on the eighteenth century, but ranges widely, finding traces of it in sources as various as Alexander Pope and the Scriblerians, Bertolt Brecht, John Singleton Copley, James Thomson, Bruegel the Elder, Piranesi, Wordsworth, Spielberg, Mary Shelley and Zola.

A starting point for my investigation is Lyotard's "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," a central resource for the repeated judgments on the sublime within art-critical discussions of Hirst. But although Lyotard seems at first to oppose the sublime to the temporal logic of capitalism, his essay reveals sublimity as deeply implicated in capitalist culture, problematising its use as a valorizing term.

Central for me in historicising this insight are Pope's satires on the commercialisation of culture, the *Dunciad* and *Peri Bathous*, which already attempt to divide "sublimity" from worthless consumer culture. Pope, however, is himself motivated by the use of Longinus in early-eighteenth-century commercial literature. Colley Cibber, for example, a recurring target of satire for Pope, strikingly prefigures Hirst. They share an ironisation of the sublime which I argue suggests a relation between the sublime and the strategies of Camp.

I discuss Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) in terms of its activation of an archive of shark representations. The shark repeatedly serves as a displaced image of capital's "inhuman" rapacity. In Hirst's sculpture it provides an ecstatic phantasy of capital's global reach, a phantasy inherent in the commodity form, but which reverses into the phantasy of being objectified by capital.

I propose the Hirstean sublime marks the return of the disavowed violence inherent to capital. The sublime forms in the imaginary of capital and serves to form that imaginary. Placing this relationship between the sublime and capital at its centre, mine is a broadly Marxian project. In the Hirstean sublime I pursue a (phantasmagorically haunted) representational logic peculiar to capitalism – especially forms of capitalism dominated by finance capital, such as our own moment and the early eighteenth century.

Acknowledgements

I would like in particular to thank my supervisors Adrian Rifkin and Suzannah Biernoff, for challenging me and encouraging me in making this a much more interesting piece of work than it would otherwise have been. Much that is good in this thesis is thanks to their input, and all the faults my own.

Thanks also to my Mum and Dad for all the support they have given me through this process (and through my education in general), and for the many friends and colleagues – too numerous to list – with whom I have discussed the work, and who have generally put up with me throughout its production.

This work was made possible through a Research Studentship bursary from Middlesex University.

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Fig. 1: Installation view of the exhibition Freeze, which Hirst curated in 1988 in London's Docklands regeneration zone, showing two early "spot paintings" by Hirst, painted directly onto the wall. Image from Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 52.

Money's the thing you can't get your mind round ... whereas art and science and religion you can just about get your mind round, money seems to skitter through everything and be ungraspable.

— Damien Hirst¹

¹ Quoted in Louisa Buck, *Market Matters: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Art Market* (London: Arts Council of England, 2004), 9.

A Brechtian Maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.'

— Walter Benjamin²

² Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 121.

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Fig. 2: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991. Tiger Shark, glass, steel, 5% formaldehyde solution. 213 x 518 x 213 cm. Collection of Steve Cohen. Image from Artinfo.com.

Introduction

Death, decay, the sublime were the themes of the British art that defined the end of the twentieth century; the horror of a shark swimming towards you through formaldehyde, the terror of a house become a sealed tomb.

— Jonathan Jones.¹

Damien Hirst is a dubious candidate for elevation to “sublimity.” Though he has left us with some of the most striking, iconic images of art in the 1990s, Hirst’s work is nonetheless a patchy affair. Largely turned out by assistants on a production line, made to the formula of a series of product ranges, it often collapses into the ridiculous rather than achieving the sublime. It has been criticised for merely raiding the larder of a now-institutionalised avant-garde for devices such as gridded repetition, collage, or the found or appropriated non-art object or image. His critics argue these serve Hirst as organising devices to produce something that looks and functions on the market like modern art, but has little in common with the radical political, social or even formal and anti-institutional projects of the vanguardists from whom Hirst draws his artistic vocabulary. The work which Hirst produces is, instead, highly accommodated to the market, and to its status as a luxury commodity for the super-wealthy of our violently unequal capitalist society. It is equally accommodated to the prevalent condition of art as a ritual of consumption and entertainment.² From this standpoint, Hirst’s work lacks the ambition to imagine the world differently, to make the leap beyond the known and knowable and the constraints of contemporary society which marks the “revolutionary” or “utopian” sublime of the avant-garde, as described by, for example, Jean-François Lyotard.³ Hirst turns instead to the more traditional

1 Jonathan Jones, “He’s Gotta Have It,” *The Guardian* 4th April 2003: 14

2 For these criticisms, see in particular Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London: Verso, 1999). I will also in this dissertation discuss Gene Ray’s critique of Hirst (Gene Ray, “Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst,” *Third Text* 18.2 [2004]: 119-33.), which, drawing on Stallabrass’s account, follows something of this line. Other critics of Hirst in these terms include Michael Corris, “Pop Star Divided: Damien Hirst and the Ends of British Art,” *Art Text*.58 (1997): 64-71; Nicholas Glass, “Damien Hirst: Artist or Brand?,” *Art Review* November 2000: 44-5; Jean Fisher, *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art* (London: In.I.V.A., 2003), 258-65.

3 See especially Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson, *The Inhuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 89-107. Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime will be an object of further concern in this

themes of the high seriousness of a longer history of art: death, the vanitas, religion, and the body. But these are generally handled in a rather flip and notional fashion, and one develops the suspicion that these, too, are taken up to develop the mere appearance of the category of art, and of its seriousness – of its sublimity even.⁴

This critique I take as read – but it is not the business of the present work to pursue it. Taking on board such a critique, it is certainly not in order to valorise Hirst's work as "great" art that I propose a relation to the sublime. As I shall be understanding the term here, the value judgments it produces are, in any case, highly problematic. I do not take the sublime as a trans-historical aesthetic category against which art can be measured. Rather, the sublime is treated as a historically specific discourse, a complex and multifaceted one, that came to prominence in Western culture a little over three hundred years ago. The word *sublime* rapidly became a central critical term and remained such throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It has more recently returned as a pressing concern in late-twentieth-century thought. The discourse on sublimity has had a decisive influence on the fate of art and culture: around its body of theory were instituted a series of themes, images, tropes, motifs and cultural and artistic practices – practices of both the production and consumption of culture – which in turn privileged a certain set of affects and sensibilities, and which defined a certain set of objectives and modes of address for cultural objects and activities. The sublime amounted to a prime aesthetic technology (however heterogeneous and contested) of modern subjectivity itself.

It is the "sublime" in this sense – or, rather, a legacy of the discourse on the sublime, its traces or remainders, or, even better, to use Aby Warburg's word, its "*Nachleben*"⁵ – which I am proposing is at work in Hirst. This does

dissertation.

4 Discussing one of the films of David Cronenberg (one of Hirst's favourite film-makers – see Damien Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Selected Works, 1989-2004* [Napoli: Electa and Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, 2004], 182.), Fredric Jameson has written that it focuses on "serious issues, with long and distinguished traditions of philosophical speculation and debate behind them; but who would wish to argue that *Videodrome* represents a serious contribution to their development? Equally clearly, however, the film does not misrepresent them [...] in any low-brow way [...]. My sense is that [...] ideas of the older conceptual type have lost their autonomy and become something like by-products and after-images flung up on the screen of the mind and of social production by the culturalisation of daily life [...] [T]he 'concepts' I have identified [...] are all in one way or another 'media' concepts." (Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* [London: B.F.I., 1995], 24-5.) Something very similar could be said of Hirst's treatment of what he has so infamously and flippantly called the themes of "life and death and all that stuff," around which his work revolves. (Cited in Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 25.) The bathos of this phrase of Hirst's is itself symptomatic of such a media appropriation of serious concepts, and of the peculiarly ironic, blocked position which inheres in taking up the simulacra of such properly serious questions within a media culture.

5 The contemporary Warburgian writer, Georges Didi-Hübermann defines the *Nachleben* thus:

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Fig 3: *Arginosuccinic Acid*, 1995 (right), with *Partial Thromboplastin*, 2004 (left). Installation view at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photo Luke White.

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Fig. 4: *In and Out of Love*, 1991. Household gloss paint on canvas, butterflies, MDF, table and ashtrays with cigarette ends. Dimension variable. Image from *I Want to Spend...*, 131.

not imply a judgment either way about the “sublimity” of Hirst’s work. The problem that I will be setting out to understand is not whether Hirst’s work “is” or “is not” sublime, but what it means that so insistently the themes, tropes, motifs, affects and sensibilities of the sublime are reiterated in it. As I argue in Chapter 1, so insistent is this reiteration that Hirst’s work often appears to have taken Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry into the sublime*⁶ as a handbook for cultural production. If Hirst does not achieve sublimity – or at least not always or for everyone – his work is nonetheless oriented to that which was set up within our culture and privileged by the sublime. The sublime, as we shall see, is also deeply implicated in the expectations through which Hirst’s work is received and judged. The quote from Jonathan Jones with which I start this introduction shows that I am far from the first person to utilise the notion of the sublime to discuss Hirst. The difference is that my account sets out to examine *why* the term is being used, with a degree of reflexive criticality which its general use as an evaluative category lacks. If there is a “sublime” in Hirst, this may not be entirely “a good thing.”

Writing about Damien Hirst

This work, then, is neither an apologia for Hirst, nor simply another critical assault in the name of an avant-garde tradition, on the complicity of the “young British artists” (yBas) with the dominant capitalist art system and its promulgation of Neoliberal ideologies. So why am I writing about Hirst in the first place? And how does this position me within the context of extant work on Hirst, and, more generally, approaches to writing contemporary art?

What is immediately startling about Hirst is the paucity of substantial literature devoted to him, given his status and success within the art world.⁷

“the history of art invented by Aby Warburg combines, in its fundamental concept – *Nachleben*: ‘afterlife’ or ‘survival’ – precisely the powers to *adhere* and to *haunt* that inhere in all images. [...] [A] surviving image is an image that, having lost its original use value and meaning, nonetheless comes back, like a ghost, at a particular historical moment: a moment of ‘crisis,’ a moment when it demonstrates its latency, its tenacity, its vivacity, and its ‘anthropological adhesion,’ so to speak.” Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, [Devant l’image], trans. John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), xxii. Original emphasis.

6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Wormersley (London: Penguin, 1998), 49-199.

7 A few facts are sufficient to make the degree of Hirst’s success within the contemporary art world clear. Hirst was shortlisted for the prestigious Turner Prize in 1992, and won it in 1995. In 1996/7, his work was the centrepiece of the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy in London and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In 2005, Hirst was listed No. 1 in *Art Review*’s “Power 100” rankings of the most powerful people in the international art world. (See “2005 Power 100,” *Art Review* [Nov 2005]: 70-105.) His work has risen meteorically in value, in particular since the Sotheby’s auction of the décor of the Pharmacy restaurant in 2004. (See Anthony Hayden Guest, “Everything Must Go,” *Observer Magazine* [19 September 2004]: 22-8.) This rise in his prices culminated in Hirst becoming the world’s most expensive living artist

This is itself a matter of the increasing autonomy in recent years of the art market from its critical apparatuses, a situation in which Hirst's prices rise inexorably even across periods of his career in which he is being universally panned in both specialist and general presses.⁸ It is also indicative of Hirst's ability within this situation to circumvent the critical art press through direct appeal to the mass media, courting as he does controversy and celebrity.⁹ Taken by Hirst as irrelevant, serious academic scholarship has returned the favour and ignored the artist.

If we ignore tabloid controversy and gossip (certainly the most voluminous discourse within which the work is embedded), the remaining literature on Hirst is largely split into two kinds. The first of these is fundamentally promotional literature. There exists a glut of catalogues and monographs turned out as a part of the "Hirst industry," with essays produced by writers directly or indirectly funded by Hirst, his galleries and other institutions instrumental in the promotion of his work.¹⁰ Appended to

at auction with the sale of *Lullaby Spring* (2002) at Sotheby's in June 2007. Hirst is reputed to have amassed a fortune which was first reputed to be £100 million (See, for example, Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "Damien Hirst: The Murderme Collection at the Serpentine Gallery," *Times* 25 November 2006, <<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,14936-2470568,00.html>>) and more recently \$1 billion. (See Richard Wood, "Art Brings Damien Hirst a Billion Dollars: The Artist so Rich He's Losing Count," *Sunday Times* 7 September 2008. <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article4692890.ece>.)

⁸ I am thinking, in particular, of the Romance in the Age of Uncertainty exhibition in 2003. (See, for example, Adrian Searle, "So What's New?" *Guardian* 19 September 2003: 12-15; Michael Glover, "Hirst's Gory Display of Melodrama and Mock-Religiosity," *Independent* 9 September 2003: 7). Similarly, the critical failure of Hirst's photorealist paintings seems to have had no impact on their prices. (See Paul Arendt, "Hirst Show 'Terrible,' Say New York Critics," *Guardian* 7 April 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,1453803,00.html>> visited 3 September 2005.)

⁹ During his heyday, Hirst was a figure to be found as frequently in the gossip columns, notable for his drunk and drugged antics, as he was in the arts pages for his work itself. But Hirst's work, from the very off, was promoted through appeal to controversy in the national press. It was in fact Hirst's gallery, the White Cube, behind the *Daily Star* article "The *Star* takes the Chips to the World's Most Expensive Fish" (27 April 1991) throwing Hirst's *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purposes of Understanding* (1991) into the media spotlight after its sale to Charles Saatchi. Hirst's name was made as much through his inclusion in the "Cool Britannia" edition of *Vanity Fair* as it was through any properly critical response to his work. (David Kamp, "London Swings Again!," *Vanity Fair* March 1997, also available Online at *Vanity Fair's* website, <<http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/archive/1997/03/london199703>> visited 10 March 2008.)

¹⁰ The most significant of these monographs and catalogues are Damien Hirst, *Damien Hirst* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art and Jay Joplin, 1991); Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, *On the Way to Work* (London: Faber, 2001); Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*; Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*, First pub. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1997, reduced ed. (London: Other Criteria, 2005). *On the Way to Work* is a series of interviews between Hirst and Gordon Burn; *I Want to Spend...* is an attempt to comprehensively catalogue Hirst's most important work up to 1996; *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is the catalogue to Hirst's first full-scale retrospective, which sets out, once again, to definitively present Hirst's work, and which contextualises it with essays and an extended interview. There is also a vast catalogue of Hirst's drawings, Damien Hirst and Jason Beard, *From the Cradle to the*

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Fig. 5: *Bodies*, 1989. Medicines, packing, display case. Image from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 63.

this publicity machine was a series of writers (many of whom contributed to the publications of the Hirst industry) who championed Hirst in the art and national press.¹¹ Such writing is essentially affirmative, refusing to challenge or question Hirst, and remains at a rather journalistic level of discourse.¹²

The other body of literature is more critical and involves a greater degree of analysis of the social conditions and consequences of Hirst's work, though it also tends to remain rather journalistic, and its main arena remains the national newspapers and art magazines, rather than the scholarly peer-reviewed journals or academic tracts where more substantial thought can take place. These critics, predominantly from the political left,¹³ attack Hirst within a wider

Grave: Selected Drawings: Damien Hirst (London: Other Criteria, 2004). Hirst is also discussed – and put into context – in the catalogue *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, (London: Royal Academy, 1997); in Virginia Button's *The Turner Prize* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997); in *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 1999); and in Sarah Kent's *Shark Infested Waters: The Saatchi Collection of British Art in the 90s* (London: Zwemmer, 1994).

11 Richard Cork's writings on the work of Hirst and his contemporaries are collected in Richard Cork, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Jonathan Jones has been another of the key defenders of Hirst, and discusses his love for Hirst in the early years, for example in, "He's Gotta Have It," 2-16; "Is This the Birth of 21st-Century Art?," *Guardian* 5 June 2007, <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/visualart/story/0,,2095607,00.html>> visited 23 June 2007. Sarah Kent of *Time Out* was another key voice in launching Hirst and many of his contemporaries. As well as the book *Shark Infested Waters* (cited above), Kent produced the text for the catalogue for the Saatchi show that launched the phrase "yBa." (*Young British Artists: John Greenwood, Damien Hirst, Alex Landrum, Langlands and Bell, Rachel Whiteread, the Saatchi Collection* [London: Saatchi Gallery, 1992].) Frieze's Stuart Morgan, was another key supporter. See in particular "Damien Hirst: The Butterfly Effect," *What the Butler Saw: Selected Writings by Stuart Morgan*, ed. Ian Hunt (London: Durian Publications, 1996), 247-53; *No Sense of Absolute Corruption* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1996). Morgan was also instrumental in his career-building interview with Hirst in the pilot issue of *Frieze*, "Life and Death: Interview: Damien Hirst," *Frieze* Summer 1991: 22-5. Aside from professional critics, Hirst has also enlisted the support of various of his celebrity friends. The novelist Will Self wrote about Hirst in "A Steady Iron-Hard Jet," *Modern Painters* Summer 1994. Self returned to discuss Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), in "To Die For," *Telegraph* 2 June 2007: 22-8. Mariella Frostrup, a B.B.C. arts and film journalist, wrote a brief piece for the catalogue for the Sotheby's auction of the remnants of the Pharmacy restaurant, "View on the Pharmacy" in Damien Hirst, *Damien Hirst's Pharmacy* (London: Sotheby's, 2004), 92-3. (An even briefer endorsement is given by Stephen Fry, on p.56.)

12 Such writing is also supplemented by the voluminous interviews which Hirst has given, and which serve, to an extent, to substitute for critical debate in the art and general press. See for example, Adrian Dannant, "Life's Like This, Then It Stops," *Flash Art* March/April 1995: 59-63; Mark Sanders, "Pop Art: Revolution for Your Breakfast," *Dazed and Confused* September 1997: 48; Martin Gayford, "Damien Hirst Talks About Diamond Skull, Death," *Bloomberg.com* 1 June 2007, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=ax86i3rbNVgE>> visited 5 June 2007; Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Hirst on Hirst out of Hirst Art," *Sunday Telegraph* 13 Mar 2005, available <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> visited 17 March 2005; Damien Hirst, "Interview with Damien Hirst," *Furball* 29 April 1994, archived <<http://dh.ryoshuu.com/press/1994furball.html>> visited 14 February 2005.

13 There are also those from the conservative right who find the work too shocking, lacking in traditional skill, and so on, but I find these less significant. The core example of such a critic would, of course, be Brian Sewell, the avowed enemy of contemporary art, and writer for the *Tory Evening Standard*. It's interesting that Sewell's first response to Hirst was in fact positive, seeing in Hirst a powerful indictment of the controlled technological spaces of the modern

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Fig. 6: *The Fate of Man*, 2005. Silver, 15.2 x 20.3 x 12.7. Edition of 25. (Above).

Fig. 7: *The Sacred Heart*, 2005. Silver, 44 cm. tall. Edition of 25. (Below).

Both from the “New Religion” Series of multiples. Images from Paul Stolper Gallery’s website. <<http://www.paulstolper.com>>

critique of the subsumption of the artworld within the culture industries which was launched against the British art of the 1990s, especially the work collected, displayed and promoted by Charles Saatchi.¹⁴

The most significant attempt to develop this critique of Hirst and the yBas into a book-length argument is Julian Stallabrass's *High Art Lite*.¹⁵ In this, Stallabrass sets out a persuasive sociological account of the roots of the qualities of 1990s British art, traced to changes in social, economic and class structure during the successive governments of Thatcher, Major and Blair, and the consequent shifts in the institutions and economy of the art world. He roots the nature of contemporary art in the depression of the political left in the wake of the fall of Eastern European communism and the rise of Reaganist-Thatcherist enterprise ideology. For Stallabrass, the effects of these factors were reinforced by the disintegration of working-class consciousness produced by the decline of manufacturing industries and the loss of the shared experience of labour these once provided, and by the growth of the consumer society which encouraged people to find their socio-cultural identities in practices of consumption rather than production.¹⁶

world. This, however, points as much to a thread of conservatism within Hirst as it shows the openness of Sewell to forms of modern or contemporary art. Brian Sewell, "Damien Hirst," *The Reviews That Caused All the Rumpus and Other Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), 270-1.

14 Key collections of essays which take this line are David Burrows, *Who's Afraid of Red White and Blue?: Attitudes to Popular and Mass Culture, Celebrity, Alternative and Critical Practice and Identity Politics in Recent British Art*, Art-Dialogue-Education (Birmingham: Article, 1998); Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass, eds., *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art* (London: Black Dog, 1997). In addition, see, for example, Jean Fisher's exemplary *Vampire in the Text*, cited above. Jean Fisher here makes an impassioned plea for a group of artists working in an oppositional, anti-capitalist, feminist and postcolonial mode of practice, and within this mounts a critique of the failure of much of contemporary art to engage in this. For an invective against Saatchi and the power of his collection, see Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, *Supercollector: A Critique of Charles Saatchi*, 2nd ed. (London: Institute of Artology, 2003). The most substantial defence which was mounted of the yBas and their populism, though Hirst is not discussed in this, nor directly championed in any form, is the body of work which was developed by Dave Beech and John Roberts around the notion of "philistine" modes of contemporary art, which attempted to locate a critical potential within its laddish acting up and its hedonism. However, as formulated by Beech and Roberts, this remained a rather problematic position, and it is also rather tangential to my own interests and concerns here. Beech and Roberts's most substantial work on the notion, along with some of the replies to it, are collected in Dave Beech and John Roberts, eds., *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002).

15 I have already drawn from this book in order to articulate the critique of Hirst at the very start of this introduction.

16 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 213-5. Stallabrass further notes the effects on the collective imagination of the "trivialisation" of the mass press under the influence of Rupert Murdoch (129). According to Stallabrass, it is in such a context, where the political left seemed to many increasingly irrelevant, outdated, powerless, or unable to gain a purchase on the new conditions, that the art world saw a decline in the sway of the predominantly socialist institutions of theory and criticism in determining the terms of artistic discourse and value (53-55). Instead, the art market itself, once it had recovered from the crash in prices which occurred at the end of the eighties, took over the role of directly determining artistic reputations and

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Fig. 8: Sarah Lucas, *Sod You Gits*, 1990. Photocopy on paper, 216 x 315 cm. Collection of Charles Saatchi. Image from *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 118.

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Fig. 9: Mat Collishaw, *Bullet Hole*, 1888-93. Cibachrome mounted on 15 light boxes, 229 x 310 cm. Collection of Charles Saatchi. Image from *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 73.

As described by Stallabrass, the art that emerges is cynically careerist, self-servingly attention-seeking, sensationalist, dumbed down, aimed at the lowest common denominator, and packed with that content of the “trivialised” media calculated to be familiar to as wide as possible an audience. It is an art which has separated itself from the socially committed left-critical art theory that supported the avant-garde, but which holds increasingly less sway in the context of the erosion of class consciousness. Contemporary art turns instead to the mass media for recognition, and is thus enchained to the spectacular consumption of an audience whose attention guarantees the continued press coverage which in turn certifies the significance of the art and ensures its market value.¹⁷

For Stallabrass, there do remain moments of value or critique in this work: its refusal of humanist, moralising platitudes about art, or the pseudo-intellectual pretentiousness which had circulated around the dominant “painterly” neo-expressionism of the 1980s; the resistance of its nihilism to the “civilising” project of New Labour regeneration; and even the shock which the work delivered to the elitism of “radical” art institutions themselves.¹⁸ Most importantly, he suggests, the work holds up a mirror to the darkness and violence of Thatcher’s Britain, undercutting any Fukayama-esque belief that the “end of history” has arrived leaving us in a free-market utopia, where social antagonism has been overcome in a perpetual democracy of universal affluent consumption. However, for Stallabrass these remain merely “negative” moments, and art’s failure to present us with an image of a better world and to militate for that world amounts to a resignation which colludes with the world as it is, ultimately accepting it, naturalising our circumstances as inevitable and unalterable.¹⁹ This is a strong charge against this art, and one from which

forming the canons of contemporary cultural value, as I have outlined above. (For Stallabrass on the growth of the influence of media-savvy and aggressively entrepreneurial dealers, and collectors such as Jay Jopling, Karsten Schubert, Maureen Paley, and, of course, the “Supercollector,” Charles Saatchi, see Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 6, 196-222). He also describes how, with the assault by the Conservative Government on arts funding, museums became increasingly dependent on the resources of these dealers, who thus came to have even more power over the circuits of artistic display and reputation (170-195). See also Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s* (London: Verso, 2002).

17 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 11. Such an art, however, is destined to be merely “a bright if distant star in the firmament of mass culture” (1), one which borrows the glamour of fashion, advertising, pop music and celebrity for its appeal, and which, even if what it returns to the system is the glamour of the transcendent aura of art (and, perhaps more importantly, the aura of the vast sums of capital which its ownership commands), must compete with the spectacular simulations of the “increasingly palpable” fantasies of the mass entertainment industries of cinema and television, although obviously without the economic resources of these industries. (53-55, 168).

18 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 8, 284.

19 Stallabrass writes: “It is often said of high art lite that it has a dark view of things, and it does; the true depth of its cynicism, though, is not to be found in its representation of suicides,

I would not like to defend it. Measured in this way against the progressive agendas of the last century, “high art lite” indeed comes up short.

However, for me this is not the end of the matter. There is simply so much that slips out from the grasp of Stallabrass’s account. Stallabrass’s description of Hirst’s *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) is typical here:

Every weekend, one autumn at the Tate Gallery, long queues of pretty young, pretty cool people would form between two tall glass cases, arranged to form either side of a narrow corridor. Each case contained one half of a cow that had been split lengthways along its body, and the queue was for the privilege of walking between the two of them to examine the innards [...] If the point of the work was to make people behave in this way, then it would have been a good joke.²⁰

Here, the logic of Stallabrass’s sociological critique proposes that the viewing experience is utterly determined in advance by the context, understanding it, as he does, to be legible as a component of the apparatus of consumption. Such experience is *a priori* determined as vacuous, and the viewing agency and subjectivity of the viewers, along with the specificities of their encounters with the piece of work are evacuated from Stallabrass’s account. He presents the work in terms of affectless and empty ritual performed in the name of fashion. For the people in Stallabrass’s description, there is no question of a response to the work; they form a parade as much as they do an audience. And yet this conclusion is already determined by the terms of Stallabrass’s own discourse, which posits the work as functioning entirely within the terms of a culture industry which has swallowed art’s artistic function to put it to work as commodity and spectacle. As a result, further sustained attention to the work is foreclosed. The conclusion that the work offers nothing more than a flat, inauthentic experience is predetermined in the terms in which the discussion is posed.

The result is a certain inability to enter into the works, to give a gripping or productive account of the experience one has of them, to find out what it is that draws the large audiences which contemporary art commands, or what it is that such audiences take away from such encounters. Stallabrass’s institutional and ideological critique may explain a certain number of things about the characteristics of this art; however, what it does not explain is why it is that this work permeated so far into the cultural imagination of the time, or why

or torture victims, or abused children, or in its multitude of corpses, but instead in all that it turns its back on, all that it leaves out when it comes to what art can be.” (Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 169.) For Stallabrass, it is because of this resignation of political purpose that this generation of artists takes up an interest in the polysemy of language and the openness of texts, leading it to a model of artistic production in which signification is constantly unfinished, and to an endemic irony which deprives it of position or agency. (See esp. 21, 139-54.)

20 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 18-9.

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Fig. 10: *Mother and Child Divided*, 1993. Steel, G.R.P.O. composites, glass, silicone sealants, cow, calf, formaldehyde solution. Dimensions variable. Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo. Image from *I Want to Spend...*, 307.

Hirst's images became ones through which his historical moment so repeatedly pictured itself.²¹ Hirst's success in this is not simply a matter of savvy media and business skills or a neatly packaged product, but also required that in some sense this work spoke to, of and for a historical moment.

Stallabrass's account also does not help much in making sense of my own complex and conflicted experience of Damien Hirst. It fails to account for the fact that Hirst's work haunts and perplexes me – quite in spite of myself, and in spite of what “Hirst” ought to mean to me, as the capitalist artist whose artworks are “absolutely” corrupted²² by their becoming commodities, becoming spectacle, and by their accommodation to the capitalist system. It fails to account for the fact that I keep finding myself returning to Hirst's sculpture, and that I remain confounded by it. In spite, then – or perhaps precisely because – of the capitalism of Hirst's work, it has an element of irreducible complexity, a “knottiness,” which Stallabrass's account in *High Art Light* misses.

Writing Hirst Differently

Nearly a decade has passed since Stallabrass's book was published, and though this is not a long time, it is nonetheless long enough for a slight shift in the perspective on Hirst to have opened up, one which allows a somewhat different approach, whereby some of what disappears in Stallabrass's account can be made to start to reappear.

Stallabrass, like most other authors writing on Hirst, does so within the context of an art-critical polemic on a cultural production which it treats as its contemporary. Such a polemic is primarily involved with measuring “what is” against “what should be.” But the moment in which Hirst and the yBas were distinctively “now” has already past. There are new issues of contention around which contemporary art debates circle, and new artists too.²³ These new issues

21 Evidence for the extent to which Hirst's work permeated the cultural imaginary of the moment is to be found in the very fact that it became such an instantly recognisable and ubiquitous image, not just within the world of art, but beyond this too. The images found their pastiches in advertising for cars, whiskey, and sandwich pickles, and became a touching point of satirical cartoons, where everything from the Prime Minister to the Royal Family was imagined dissected and hanging in a Hirstean vitrine. Gordon Burn describes a single day at the height of Hirst's fame: “I was served a drink by a woman wearing a promotional T-shirt with a pattern of a Damien Hirst spot painting almost washed out of it; caught the same spots, this time turned into a high fashion outfit by Rifat Ozbek, being worn by a singer on ‘Top of the Pops’ on television; [...] and spotted press and TV ads for the latest Ford saloon – one motor car sliced in half and placed in the kind of glass-and-steel cases that have slipped into the vernacular thanks to *Mother and Child Divided* and other notorious Hirst pieces.” (Hirst, *I Want to Spend*, 8.) Something similar has happened with the image of the skull, which in the wake of *For the Love of God* (2007) has become a ubiquitous image within fashion designs and the like.

22 There was a Damien Hirst exhibition entitled “No Sense of Absolute Corruption” at the Gagosian Gallery, New York, 4 May - 21 June 1996.

23 For example, the “biennialisation” of art, “relational aesthetics,” “aesthetics and politics,” etc.

and artists now form the reference points in relation to which (in either rally or revolt) young students align their careers and their creative strategies and selves, just as Hirst *et al.* were for my generation. The art of the yBas already starts to strike the contemporary art world as anachronistically *passé*, even quaint. It is an art which seems to be slipping from the present of art practice into the frozen, canonising spaces of the museum – into the recent past of art history itself. As such, it seems to have suffered what Benjamin identified as the fate of all commodities which have recently fallen out of vogue: “Each generation experiences the fashions of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable.”²⁴

In this context, the critical urgency of Stallabrass’s project of confronting the hegemony of such a body of work has waned,²⁵ and, for me at the very least, it gives way to the project of the reclamation of the recent past, a recent past which is in danger of slipping out of the consciousness of discourse altogether whilst not, however, slipping out of the historical chain which constitutes our world. The problem – an art-historical problem rather than an art-critical one as such, and one, moreover, which is that of a history ruled by a *Nachträglichkeit*²⁶ – is not primarily about understanding “what is” in terms of “what should be,” but making sense of *what has been*, and of our relation to this past.²⁷ The

24 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), [B9, 1], p.79. For Benjamin, the objects of the recent commercial past, now freed from their commercial and ideological purpose, as discovered anew in the arcades, could be mined for the sparks of utopian hope which they contained. It was precisely its anachronism that made the old commodity politically vital. (See [B1a4], pp.64-5.) Benjamin points us towards a *Nachträglichkeit* at the heart of the lifespan of the commodity itself. (See also Susan Buck-Morss, “Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution,” *New German Critique* 29 [1983]: 218.) Could the same go for the art of the nineties, now that it is already no longer at the heart of the reproduction of the art system? Is this the way to approach an art which was itself – and even self-consciously so – reconciled to its fate as being a commodity within a capitalist-dominated cultural market?

25 Stallabrass himself admits this in the preface to the revised, 2006 edition of *High Art Lite*, where he notes that the moment in which the book was produced has passed. He writes: “This book was written for [and] in particular circumstances and for a particular purpose: it was first published [...] at a time when ‘young British art’ [...] appeared triumphant and most criticism was prostrate before its glittering success.” (xi.) His own book was written to open up critical tools to analyse the reasons for this success and to ask serious questions about its desirability. But Stallabrass goes on to acknowledge the change in context, and to note that since his book the critical tide has certainly turned against the yBas. Thus in the new edition, Stallabrass has not reworked the material produced earlier, but, “reluctant to alter the polemical character of the book, a product of its time” (xii), lets it stand as a document of the nineties and its debates, satisfying himself to correct errors and to add a final chapter charting the demise of the status of the yBas. Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

26 See the discussion of this term later in this introduction.

27 This does not, of course, mean that the struggle for the future of art (and the question of what should be) is irrelevant to such a historical approach, but rather that the encounter with the art object in question, and the relation of such an encounter to the future is a rather different one.

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Fig. 11: *Away from the Flock*, 1994. Steel, glass, lamb, formaldehyde solution. 96 x 149 x 51 cm. Collection of Charles Saatchi. Image from *Damien Hirst: Pictures from the Saatchi Gallery*, 17.

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Fig. 12: *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*, 1991. Mixed media. Image from *I Want to Spend...*, 77.

problem now seems to be, as T. J. Clark formulates it in his work on abstract expressionism, the necessity of *making* recent art into “a thing of the past,” the failure of which means not being able to move on.²⁸ Not to write Hirst and his contemporaries into history means to be compelled to repeat them, as if they were still a part of our present; a problem which is all the more pressing in that Hirst and his contemporaries are already so patently bound into a time of repetition.

This shift away from the register of art criticism, and the need to attempt to capture more of the complexity of the experience and significance of Damien Hirst’s sculptures involves taking up different models of meaning to those which Stallabrass uses. Stallabrass’s criticism measures Hirst against a model which foregrounds the conscious (political) agency of the artist, a model intertwined with the history of avant-garde practice and its critical supports. Such an approach, however, ignores the problem in general of the unconscious within art practice, and the polysemy – the overdetermination – of cultural products.²⁹

To try to understand Hirst in terms of such unambiguous, determinate artistic messages is to measure it against wrongly selected criteria. Whilst these criteria may be of use in evaluating what is interesting or laudable in the work of a serious political artist such as (for example) Hans Haacke, if we measure Hirst by these standards, we treat him only in terms of what he is not. Stallabrass’s account, however, starts to help us think where else we should locate him. Stallabrass’s complaint is that Hirst and his contemporaries are accommodated to the mechanisms of spectacular popular culture. If we accept Stallabrass’s location of Hirst within the culture industries, then wouldn’t the

28 T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 371.

29 Stepping aside from the psychoanalytic register, the criticism could also be made in terms of speech act theory itself. Stallabrass is largely wedded to the kind of idea of the artistic act that J. L. Austin proposes for speech in general. For Stallabrass, Hirst’s work can in this version be reduced to the category of what Austin calls “unhappy” or “infelicitous” acts which fail to carry out a performative intent. (J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1975].) Their “irony” is merely a failure to produce a felicitous (and in particular, a felicitously emancipatory) artistic gesture. However, Hirst could alternatively be seen as exemplary of Derrida’s critique of Austin’s sense that speech acts are usually and normatively effective in their performance of a conscious intent, marking those that fail in this as such as abortive or malformed. Derrida, instead, suggests that the normal state of language is to be divided, ambiguous, polysemous and poly-agential, and that the possibility of miscommunication in fact forms the very condition of the possibility of communication itself. (Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], 307-30.) Such “happy” or “felicitous” artistic acts to which Stallabrass would want to contrast the work of the yBas would in this case represent something of an exceptional case in the field of works of art (if not an impossible ideal), and though we may well wish to embrace such works where we see them, the act of measuring those works that function differently against such criteria serves to obscure from us what in fact it is that they do perform.

best thing be to analyse him in the way that the most sophisticated analyses of popular culture proceed?

Hirst and the "Culture Society"

We need, that is, to locate Hirst, as Angela McRobbie does, within "the culture society"³⁰ in order to recognise the profound extent to which culture has become for us a commodity (at the very moment that, conversely, commodity consumption itself has become fully culturalised).³¹ Hirst would surely be one of the first to recognise himself in such a characterisation as a producer of cultural commodities.³² His sculpture therefore needs to be analysed as a form of capitalist art. As such, he can be imagined – in terms which are not as uncomplimentary as they seem at first – not so much as an avant-garde artist, but as the capitalist art system's brilliant hack. Hirst is simply so very close to the circuits of capital: to the tastes and desires of the elite who buy his work and on which it depends economically, and to the "popular" audience to whom his work is also nonetheless addressed.³³ Being so close to these, it is in Hirst that we would expect the emergence of the *symptom* of that capitalist art system.³⁴ The "therapeutic" logic of such a position is that it is of the utmost importance that we recognise Hirst as our own symptom, and not as something that has

30 Angela McRobbie, *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3. McRobbie draws the phrase from H. Schwengell, "British Enterprise Culture and German *Kulturgesellschaft*," *Enterprise Culture*, eds. R. Keat and N. Abercrombie, (London: Routledge, 1991), 136-51.

31 See also especially Fredric Jameson on the culturalisation and aestheticisation of everyday life, in which everything from shopping to leisure has become part of the "aesthetic sphere," which in turn has become fundamental to the "perceptual system of late capital." For Jameson here, the aesthetic as a separate sphere has become obsolete. (Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on Postmodernism, 1983-1998* [New York and London: Verso, 1998], 110-2.)

32 In his own words, "Maybe we're just at that point where money's an element of the composition [...] Maybe it's hard luck; maybe I was born at the wrong time. This is what I do. You're a conduit from art to money. It's getting closer and closer and closer. And if money becomes king, then it just does." Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 192.

33 Hirst has worked his way into the capitalist elite whom his work addresses, as collector, celebrity, restaurateur, entrepreneur, owner of a country home and general rich-list candidate. He is nonetheless linked still to the vein of the "popular" in his working-class origins.

34 I have in mind here Antal's account of Giotto, who is the foremost artist of his moment since he is the one most closely in sympathy with the rising values of the Florentine merchant elite, to the extent of becoming himself very much a part of this class. As Antal describes it, in fact, Giotto, "perhaps the only Florentine artist of the fourteenth century" is a strange precursor to Hirst. Like Hirst, Giotto was a shrewd and brilliant businessman, whose financial endeavours were not in the least limited to art production. Giotto, acting as a member of this elite class of Florentine capitalists and with a terrifying ruthlessness, hired looms to the poorest weavers at a fantastic profit, and stood as guarantor of loans, on which basis he was able to appropriate the property of those who could not pay. Giotto employed up to six lawyers at any time pursuing these cases. For Antal, the character of Giotto's work emanates from his ideological identity with the rising upper middle class. See Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background*, [1948] (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 160-1.

merely happened to us, arriving from outside, since we too are subjects of capital.

It is, above all, the discipline of Cultural Studies that has taught us to read the complexities, ambivalences and polysemies of the “culture society” of which Hirst forms a part. As such I see my own critical project as continuing to work through some of the implications for the analysis of contemporary art of the general understandings of cultural production and consumption which Cultural Studies opened up. There are many ways in which my own work here does not follow some of the core paths which Cultural Studies has taken.³⁵ What I primarily take from Cultural Studies are its challenges to more traditional ways in which art history set about thinking about the significance of cultural objects.

In particular, Cultural Studies taught us to understand the commodified products of the culture industry not just as the carriers of an ideological force imposed from above by the elite who control and finance it, but also as carrying countervailing lines of force, conditioned by the interests and desires of those who consume its products.³⁶ Such culture is ineradicably heterogeneous to

³⁵ My work is not, for example, primarily, sociological in its methodologies, and I do not attempt to think through Hirst in terms of such devices as analysis of audience response, though of course, there is much that could be written about Hirst and his contemporaries in this way. I have already mentioned here Angela McRobbie's *In the Culture Society*, which places the cultural production of the yBas within the context of a certain sociology of the new classes of producers who work in the entrepreneurialised and precarised economy of the cultural industries of our aestheticised commodity society. This understanding of Hirst as part of this social group, and of his trajectory as a creative subject through such an entrepreneurial cultural economy, is also important within my account, but is a resource on which I draw, rather than primarily one which my work duplicates. Similarly, Scott Lash and Celia Lury have more recently dedicated a chapter of their book on the global culture industry to the yBas, tracing the “transposition and translation, transformation and transmogrification” (5) of this corpus across the circuits of a globalised media culture, and analyse the transformation of such art, as it situates itself within the circuits of capital and communication, rather than the histories of art. (Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* [Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2007], 35-84.) This is also fascinating work, and there is much more that contemporary cultural studies could say about the yBas. My own work will, however, take a rather different tack.

³⁶ See in particular John Fiske's hyperbolic statement of the case: “Popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. It is therefore contradictory and conflictual to its core. The resources – television, records, clothes, video games, language – carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force in them that are hegemonic and that work in favour of the status quo. But hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within the social system. If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular. [...] There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves a struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology.” John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-2.

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Fig. 13: *Where Are we Going? Where Do we Come From? Is there a Reason?* 2000-4. Glass, steel, various animal skeletons. Installation view (above), and detail (below), Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photos Luke White.

itself, riven with contradiction.³⁷ It is the compromise formation of an essentially antagonistic capitalist society, and carries within itself the antagonisms out of which it is constituted. This recognition of capitalist culture's antagonistic nature is profoundly in line with Marx's analysis of the commodity, and in this sense is more fully Marxian than an ideology critique which merely recognises the ideological content of the products of the culture industry. Cultural Studies argued that this antagonism leads commodified culture to the need for a maximum of openness, ambiguity, overdetermination, and "unfinishedness," on which products depend for their broad appeal, and in order to allow their audiences space to inhabit and appropriate – to finish – the work of signification which the object opens; this is one of the key differences which certain writers in Cultural Studies have picked out between popular texts and the aspirations of "high art" to a more finished, self-sufficient form of meaning.³⁸ Unfinishedness and ambiguity are, of course, just the characteristics which Stallabrass bemoans so much in Hirst; and indeed, in Stallabrass, this appears to be precisely because of the antagonistic cultural purposes to which the work must be put, having a double address to the heterogeneous audience on which it depends: on the one hand the ultra-rich buyers of the art market, and on the other, a public of cultural consumption which attends its spectacle, and validates it as significant art.³⁹ For Stallabrass this is a disaster which befalls an art of full meaning, but for me it points to why it is that Hirst's work is so intriguing, and why it demands further exploration. Hirst's work is interesting not as a consciously critical project, but for the way that, indeed, at its best – like a "dreamwork" of capital – it *condenses* social conditions, contradictions, experiences and desires into complex, iconic, even troubling and haunting images.⁴⁰ It would be quite possible to claim for Hirst's work – now we are examining it as a cultural

37 Wolfgang Haug, writing in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, has made a particularly pertinent analysis of the antagonism between the interests of producer and consumer in the cultural commodity, and the consequent double nature of the commodity as carrier of socio-cultural significance. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Commodity Aesthetics Revisited: Exchange Relations as the Source of Antagonistic Aestheticization," *Radical Philosophy* 135 (2006): 18-24.

38 "Popular texts are inadequate in themselves – they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings (as some will argue highbrows texts to be)." Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 6.

39 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 65.

40 As Fredric Jameson writes, "all contemporary works of art – whether those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture – have as their underlying impulse – albeit in what is often distorted and repressed unconscious form – our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now and as we feel it in our bones it ought to be lived." Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 34. Earlier in the book, Jameson also writes: "We cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of works like these unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function as well, [...] that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs" (29).

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Fig. 14: Damien Hirst as part of the national preconscious. *Times Magazine*, 11 May 1996.

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Fig. 15: Lady and the Wimp, *Time Out*, 15-22 November 1995.

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Fig. 16: Steve Bell, If, *Guardian*, 1 - 12 May 1995.

commodity, a piece of “capitalist art” – what Robert Kolker has written of the Hollywood cinema of the 1950s. For Kolker, this work, “rich in ideological contradictions,” is fascinating because it “created the images in which a culture consented to see itself.”⁴¹ Surely, this is the importance of Hirst, too, in our own day: he is an artist in whose works – judging by the outpouring of media attention, the advertising pastiches and the satirical cartoons which picked up the Hirstean vitrine as a tool to depict the political circumstances of the day, and even the huge numbers who turned up to the Turner Prize or the Sensation exhibition⁴² – were accepted as the mirror in which a moment acquiesced to recognise itself in all its contradiction.

Towards a Hirstean Sublime – some historiographical implications

My argument in this dissertation is that a legacy of the sublime is one of the core elements within this rich ideological knot of contradiction in Hirst’s sculptures. The sublime reiterates itself in Hirst. Its recurrence weaves Hirst into a history encompassing not just the twentieth-century vanguardist or modernist movements (and their linear unfolding, as told in museums of modern art), but rather a longer history of culture spanning, like the history of the notion of the sublime itself, back across modernity itself, and beyond.⁴³

⁴¹ Robert Philip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-4.

⁴² For the latter, McRobbie cites a figure of 300,000 visitors. (McRobbie, *In the Culture Society*, 6.)

⁴³ Histories of modern art often root themselves in a moment of revolution. (Take for example either Peter Bürger’s famous account of the avant-garde, which circles the moment to the Russian Revolution, or alternatively T.J. Clark’s very different account of modernism in *Farewell to an Idea*, which begins with David and the French Revolution of 1789.) Stallabrass’s account implicitly measures the yBas against an avant-garde history which is imagined through the framework of such a narrative of the revolutionary avant-garde. But such stories of the avant-garde, in their proposal of a decisive break from the past at these moments, perform a disavowal of the relationship to a longer past, and to a condition of modernity itself, which spans back over centuries. What, furthermore, gets disavowed about avant-garde art is that it is still also a capitalist art. My own project involves a certain refusal of such narratives. Thinking about Hirst within the context of a history of the sublime, rather than one of a vanguard helps us escape from a narrow (Greenbergian) conception of “modernism.” It was such a conception of modernism, of course, in terms of which “postmodernism” defined itself (whether in the work of a radical such as Hal Foster or a conservative such as Charles Jencks). In the process of such a self-definition postmodernism, of course, accepted the terms of Greenbergian modernism’s self-definition. When, however, we start to think about art in terms of a longer modernity, both of these terms begin to dissolve. Thus Raymond Williams, some time ago, challenged the narrow definitions of “modernism.” (Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?,” *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* [London: Verso, 1989], 31-5.) More recently Jacques Rancière has also supplied us with resources for rethinking such periodisations. Instead of the modernist and postmodernist, Rancière offers us three (overlapping) aesthetic “regimes” which span Western art from antiquity to the present. The most recent of these, the “aesthetic regime of art” helps us think a continuity between the arts of the last two or more centuries. Rancière traces this regime back to Schiller, and hence to the moment of the French Revolution. For me, however, it seems important that the outlines of the aesthetic regime can already be seen emerging in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century France and England. This

I have already discussed very briefly my approach to the sublime: it is taken up not as a metadiscursive concept through which art can be described or explained. Rather, I approach the sublime as the object of a cultural history, and thus as a historically specific discourse. I am interested in the sublime in particular in terms of the cultural *practices* (both of production and consumption) which this discourse privileged and produced – and still privileges and produces. Rather than a single concept, I am faced with a complex “series” (in Norman Bryson’s terminology) of representational practices and theoretical articulations, held together not by an essence but only by family resemblances. The series is reformed around each of its instantiations (whether theoretical or practical) in its gathering of its predecessors around itself.⁴⁴

Once we look at it as such a historical object, “the sublime” appears as an irreducibly heterogeneous idea. A key term within rhetorical, critical, aesthetic, and even psychological, political and ethical debates for a period stretching across a century and a half – a period, moreover, of massive social, cultural, political and intellectual ferment – the notion of the sublime was subjected to innumerable articulations by authors with very different purposes, and it served as an enabling term for equally different forms of cultural production from Neoclassicism through the Gothic novel to Romanticism. Since the sublime was a highly valorised and valorising term, the matter of what is or is not sublime, and of how one has to define the sublime in order to come to these decisions, became subjects of heated contestation. It becomes impossible to draw from this heterogeneous mass of discourse a single definition of the

ties the development of the notion of the sublime in to Rancière’s aesthetic regime (as is, in fact logical, since it is such a primary concept in the development of the discourse of the aesthetic itself), but it also ties the aesthetic regime more closely in to the timeframe in which capitalism was being developed, and marks the “aesthetic regime of the arts” not just to revolutionary and democratic forms of artistic experience, but also to the economic regime of capital. Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy,” *New Left Review*.14 (2002): 133-55.

44 I borrow such a conception of the “series” from Norman Bryson’s work on still life. For Bryson, it is not possible to subsume all still lives within a single essence or concept. Rather, the link between them is a properly *historical* one. Forming a “series,” they respond to each other, refer to each other, and situate themselves in relation to each other, much as I would like here to suggest that the various theoretical conceptions and cultural instantiations of the sublime also do. For Bryson, “the series has no essence, only a variety of family resemblances. And it is not a linear series, like successive generations of computers or atomic reactors; rather the series (plural) regroup themselves around the individual work, the boundaries of the series fluctuate around each new case. It is a category, in other words, not only within reception and criticism, but within the historical production of pictures.” Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 11. It is worth noting that the implication of this approach for me is also that theories of the sublime no longer take up a metadiscursive position with regard to the practices of the sublime, but rather can be understood to be one relay amongst others, and are interesting not just for what they have to say “about” the sublime, but also for their direct *effects* on practice.

sublime which would hold for all its uses. We should hardly expect to find a core of identity which would unite the concept of the sublime as we find it in Alexander Pope's or Boileau's Neoclassicism, in the enthusiastic protestantism of John Dennis, the polite Whiggishness of Addison, the bourgeois empiricism of Burke, and in the system of transcendental Idealism developed by Kant – just to mention a few of the very different places in which it plays a vital part.⁴⁵

One approach to this heterogeneity, though not mine, has been to pull out (and, ideally, criticise and develop the implications of) a particular theory of the sublime (the Burkean or Kantian sublime, for example), and to use this as a concept through which to understand artistic or aesthetic experiences in general. This is primarily the approach of philosophy, "theory" and criticism.⁴⁶

45 In fact, Samuel Holt Monk, in his mid-twentieth-century survey of eighteenth-century theories of the sublime (a text which remains foundational for contemporary understandings), compares the chaos of discourse on the sublime to a mountain, which, as one approaches it, increasingly "becomes a formless mass" (2). He writes: "To reduce to any sort of order the extremely diverse and individualistic theories of sublimity that one finds in the eighteenth century is not easy [...]. Indeed the chief problem has been that of organisation. The necessity of imposing form of some sort has continually led to the danger of imposing what is essentially a false and artificial form." (Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, [1935], Ann Arbor Paperbacks 40. [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960], 3-4.) For a more contemporary discussion of the problem of ordering the disorderly discourse of the sublime, see for example Joanna Zylińska, *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 3. Zylińska argues that theories and histories of the sublime are always attempts to control the disorder and excess which the practices of the sublime produce, to turn the very unruliness which lies at the heart of sublimity into a manageable object. Similarly, David B. Morris, in "Gothic Sublimity," *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985) writes that "the sublime [...] embraces such a variety of historical practices and of theoretical accounts that the quest for a single, unchanging feature or essence is futile. There is no essence of the sublime. Instead, what we encounter is (in Wittgenstein's phrase) shared 'family resemblances'" (300). In her *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), Christine Battersby also emphasises that the word sublime was "slippery, denoting a concept that was subject to metamorphosis and flux," in particular noting the difference between the aesthetic of the nineteenth century, based on the failure of the understanding, and the mixture of pleasure and pain which was more central during the eighteenth century (1).

46 See for example Battersby, *The Sublime*; Nicholas Taylor, "The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City," *The Victorian City*, eds. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, vol. 2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 431-48; Brian Wolf, "When Is a Painting Most Like a Whale?: Ishmael, Moby Dick and the Sublime," *New Essays on Moby Dick*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141-79; Patricia Yaeger, "Toward a Female Sublime," *Gender and Theory*, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Julian Young, "Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime," *Inquiry* 48.2 (2005): 131-44; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Paul G. Beider, "The Postmodern Sublime: Kant and Tony Smith's Anecdote of the Cube," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 189-93; Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990); Scott Bukatman, "The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime," *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, eds. Lynn Cooke and Peter Wollen (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 254-89; Anthony J. Cascardi, "Aesthetic Liberation: Kant and the Ethics of Modernity," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 45.176 (1991): 121-37; Mario Costa, "Technology, Artistic Production and the 'Aesthetics of Communication'," *Leonardo* 24.2 (1991): 123-5; Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*, Oxford Philosophical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jacques Derrida,

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Fig 17: The Sublime as aesthetic technology of the subject:
Philip James De Louthembourg, *Visitor to a Moonlit Churchyard*, 1790. Oil on Canvas,
86.3 x 68.5 cm. Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Image
from *Gothic Nightmares*, 109.

My own approach, however, is more rooted in an understanding of the historicity of the sublime, and attempts to think the past and the present in their historical relation.

Literary and cultural histories generally approach the sublime more as a historically specific term, but these accounts tend to locate it squarely within the past.⁴⁷ Thus though they illuminate the embroilment of specific eighteenth-century cultural products (poems, paintings, novels, *etc.*) with the growing theories of the sublime, and though they help us understand theories of the sublime in relation to their broader discursive and social contexts, there is further work to be done in order to make sense of something which is

“Parergon,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 119-47; Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Cynthia Freeland, “The Sublime in Cinema,” *Passionate Views: Film Cognition and Emotion*, eds. Carl Plantinga and Gregory Smith (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 65-83; Timothy Gould, “Intensity and Its Audiences: Notes Towards a Feminist Perspective on the Kantian Sublime,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (1996): 305-15; Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1987); Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Patricia M. Matthews, “Kant’s Sublime: A Form of Pure Aesthetic Reflective Judgement,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 165-80; Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. Jean-François Courtine *et. al.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25-52; Brad Prager, “Kant in Friedrich’s Frames,” *Art History* 22.2 (1999): 159-83; Nita Rollins, “Cinaesthetic Wondering: The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Kitsch in Post-Metaphysical Film,” Ph.D., U.C.L.A., 1999; Hugh J. Silverman and Gary E. Aylesworth, eds., *The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and Its Differences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). The list is, of course, far from exhaustive. The basic variation on this is to look at two or three such theories and weigh up their adequacy, either in terms of their internal, logical and philosophical consistency, or with regard to the experience they set out to describe. An particularly clear example of such an approach is Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992).

47 Examples include: Meg Armstrong, “The Effects of Blackness in the Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 165-80; E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 12 (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthew Jordan, *Milton and Modernity: Politics, Masculinity and Paradise Lost* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Peter Klein, “Insanity and the Sublime: Aesthetics and Theories of Mental Illness in Goya’s *Yard and Related Works*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 61 (1998): 198-252; Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, edited and revised by Arthur Elton ed. (Chatham: W & J Mackay & Co. Ltd., 1968), esp. 81-109; Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, S.U.N.Y. Series on the Sublime (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Monk, *The Sublime*; David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: M.I.T. Press, 1994); Aris Sarafianos, “Pain, Labor, and the Sublime: Medical Gymnastics and Burke’s Aesthetics,” *Representations* 91.1 (2005): 58-83; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Gothic Studies and Dissertations, Revised ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

specifically an *afterlife* of these discourses, and to think about the insistence of such a discourse within our own historical moment.

My own project, in contrast to both of these approaches to the sublime, is to attempt to think about the relation of the present and the past; to understand the present historically, and to grasp the past as living presence in the here and now.⁴⁸ I will thus not be starting outside the present in a Burkean, Kantian or Longinian sublime, but rather with the proposition that there is a *Hirstean sublime*, constituted in practice and from the present. The task is articulating a history of the sublime around this point. The question – based on the assumption that the sublime is reiterated in Hirst’s work – becomes that of quite what series of the sublime it retro-activates.⁴⁹ What history of the sublime does Hirst gather together, respond to, reiterate or rework? And what function does such a reiteration serve?

Hirst and the Sublime Cultural Commodity

Starting from Hirst rather than from a set aesthetic theory of sublimity, the Hirstean sublime that I will thus be constructing (gathering itself as “pattern” around his work) is somewhat ex-centric to the most frequently told histories of sublimity. The Hirstean sublime is, for starters, a decidedly popular-cultural

48 As Fernand Braudel writes, “To the historian, understanding the past and understanding the present are the same thing.” Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century, Volume 2: The Wheels of Commerce*, [Les Jeux de l’échange], trans. Siân Williams, vol. 2, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 231. Benjamin, too, writing of how we are to think through the culture of the past, writes: “It is not a question of presenting works [...] in correlation to their own times, but rather, within the framework of the time of their birth, to present the time that knows them, that is, our own.” (“Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft,” *Gesammelte Schriften* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972] 3:290, cited in Julia Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy,” trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon Roudiez, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], 233-4.) Such is the point of approaching the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime through the lens of contemporary culture, rather than as an object within its own “proper” milieu.

49 This method, of course, precludes simply giving a definition of the sublime, which is understood as complex, historically variable and subject to disagreement. My method, however, which sets out to write a history around Hirst, means that I will also not be giving here an overview of the canonical histories of the notion of the sublime, and I will expect from my reader a certain basic familiarity with the histories and theories of sublimity. The classic history of the sublime in the British eighteenth century is Monk, *The Sublime*. It is useful to read this in conjunction with Ashfield and de Bolla’s collection of essays and extracts from this period, which help challenge the neatness of Monk’s narrative. (Andrew Ashfield and Peter De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996].) For the fate of the sublime in Kantian, Idealist and Romantic thought, see Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. Two good overviews of the history of theories of the sublime, which take in the historical scope of the discourse from Longinus to contemporary philosophy have recently been published: Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, *New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005). A shorter overview, oriented towards the visual arts is available on my own website (Luke White, “The Sublime: A Brief History,” June 2006, <http://homepage.mac.com/lukewhite/sub_history.htm>, visited 10 July 2008.)

affair. The imperative which forms Hirst's brief is that of the sublime of the cultural commodity – oxymoronic though such an expression seems when the sublime is usually discussed in terms of the high art of Romanticism. As a high-cultural entity, the sublime is generally accorded all the intellectual seriousness of the Kantian philosophy in which it found a place, but in spite of the context of a rise of high-brow interest in the sublime during the 1980s,⁵⁰ Hirst's borrowings from the sublime tie him more closely to contemporary products of the culture industries, which lean on sensibilities of the sublime every bit as much – more so – than an avant-garde ever has. Hirst's concerns with terror, horror, violence, intense affect, ecstasy, and death, his rhetoric of the grandiose, huge and overblown are more continuous with these products than with the formalist processes and attention to materiality which, for example, Lyotard, as we shall see, associates with the avant-garde sublime. Hirst needs to be understood amongst sensational news broadcasts,⁵¹ blockbuster movies,⁵² the

50 See for example Lyotard's influential interventions during the 1980s into the discourse of art criticism, which are discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3 below, along with the contributions, at much the same time, of Paul Crowther, each of which associate the sublime with particular canons of twentieth-century artists. More recently, Bill Beckley's collection *Sticky Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001) also centres around contemporary art. One of its contributors, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has written further on the matter in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999). Exhibitions on the sublime in contemporary art were held in 1999 at the Roseum Centre for Contemporary Art in Malmo (including Hirst, alongside Mike Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Wolfgang Tillmans, Hiroshi Sugamoti, Gabriel Orozco, and others) and at the Hayward Gallery in London (the catalogue of which includes essays by Jon Thompson and Christopher Kool-Want). Joanna Zylińska's *On Cyborgs, Spiders and Being Scared* discusses Louise Bourgeois, Laurie Anderson, and Stelarc in terms of the sublime. Gene Ray finds sublimity the key to Joseph Beuys (Gene Ray, "The Use and Abuse of the Sublime: Joseph Beuys and Art after Auschwitz," Ph.D., Coral Gables, 1997; "Joseph Beuys and the after-Auschwitz Sublime," *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray [New York and Sarasota: Distributed Art Publishers and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001], 55-74.) Philip Shaw discusses the sublime in Mariele Neudecker (Shaw, *The Sublime*, 7), Jake Chapman finds it in Sam Taylor-Wood ("No-One's Mother Sucks Cocks in Hell," *Sam Taylor-Wood* [London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1996]); Suzannah Biernoff in Stuart Brisley's performances ("The Corporeal Sublime," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 2.2/3.1 [2001/2]: 60-71); Luke Gibbons in Margaret Corcoran ("Engendering the Sublime: Margaret Corcoran's *An Enquiry*," *Circa* 106 [2004]: 32-8), Paul Beider in Tony Smith's cube sculptures ("Postmodern Sublime," 189-93.) This is not an exhaustive list, but will give the reader a sense of the explosion of discourse attempting to think contemporary art in terms of the sublime, and of the sheer variety of forms of art to which the concept is applied.

51 News reports are often keyed to the kinds of horrific but distant natural and unnatural disaster that Burke discusses in his *Philosophical Enquiry* as sources of the sublime. See in particular Burke's discussion in the *Enquiry* of the tourism of a future natural disaster which wipes out London in Part 1, Sect. 15 ("On the Effects of Tragedy"), 93-4. Luke Gibbons argues that such a response to distant horror as Burke theorises in his account of the sublime, and which in fact fore-echoes our own media, was central in Burke's political confrontation with the effects of colonialism, which took up so much of his career. (Gibbons, *Burke and Ireland*.)

52 Since *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, contemporary cinema has been increasingly dominated by an effects industry that aims at a "realism" that is ultimately fantastical, and the objective of which, just as in the case of Hirst, is a certain "jaw-dropping" affect. It consistently engineers this affect through recourse to the traits of the sublime object, with its huge scale, explosively dynamic forces, and its undertow of menace and threat. The very scale of the cinema screen speaks of

hushed tones of the National Geographic channel and its myriad imitators,⁵³ the jarring sonic landscapes and ecstatic states of popular and subcultural music,⁵⁴

a longer-term and more fundamental orientation of cinema to sublimity. The “jaw-dropping,” of course, is a rather inadequate description of the sublime compared to Kant’s much more complex and articulated definition of the sublime as a very particular aesthetic state; however, for the measurements of the effects of the sublime on contemporary commodified culture this rather more basic version of the sublime is probably more useful. The crudity of the definition would be just the point. “Realism” – to an absurdly literal degree – is, of course, also at the heart of Hirst, whose work always privileges the inclusion of the real over the representation, and where the real is unworkable, as it was with the cow’s head for *A Thousand Years* (1990), an entirely convincing simulacrum is fabricated. (See Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal, Essays in Art and Culture* [London: Reaktion Books, 2000], 87; Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 180-1.) Here, not reality, but the appearance of reality is paramount, and we are very much on the same territory which we have already seen Stallabrass identifying as the tendency of the media to the “increasing palpability” of its fantasies. *Jaws*, which in many ways marks the birth of new effects cinema, of course, like Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility* stars a monstrous shark. In a later chapter, I shall further explore the relation between the two. For *Jaws* and *Star Wars* as initiating the effects cinema of today’s movie industry, see Biskind, “Blockbuster,” 112-49. For more on the fantastical realism of effects cinema, see Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in the New Media Genres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Such a cinema, keyed to the legacy of the sublime, includes, in particular, the horror, thriller, action, conspiracy-theory, science-fiction and disaster genres. There is quite a body of writing which attempts to think through the “cinematic sublime.” For essays on the sublime in a range of cinematic contexts, see in particular Freeland, “The Sublime in Cinema,” 65-83; James Donald, “The Fantastic, the Sublime and the Popular: Or, What’s at Stake in Vampire Films?,” *Fantasy and the Cinema*, ed. James Donald (London: BFI, 1989), 233-51; Bukatman, “The Artificial Infinite,” 254-89; Meaghan Morris, “White Panic, or Mad Max and the Sublime,” *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsin Chen (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 239-62; Scott MacDonald, “From the Sublime to the Vernacular: Jan De Bont’s *Twister* and George Kuchar’s *Weather Diary*,” *Film Quarterly* LIII.1 (1999): 15-25; Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway*, (Seattle: University of Washington, 2000). PhD’s include A. W. Mullin, “Horror, the Sublime and the Limits of Representation in the Cinema,” Ph.D., Kent, 1995; Rollins, “Cinaesthetic Wondering.” A conference at Warwick University’s Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature (11 Feb 2004) was entitled “The Cinematic Sublime,” and centred on the films of David Lynch.

53 The sublimity of nature, furthermore, is an essential part of what we might term a “National Geographic” aesthetic, which spans print and televisual media, and on which, of course, advertising draws repeatedly. To the fore amongst the media’s evocations of the wonder – and terror – of the natural universe as revealed by science is the genre of the wildlife documentary, which I will discuss in relation to Hirst’s shark in Chapter 6. The hushed tones of documentary narration are themselves a signal that what we should be feeling as we watch is the awe which the sublime elicits. On the several channels which are now devoted to the National Geographic aesthetic, alongside these wildlife documentaries run “outer space” documentaries which not only centre on the Kantian mathematical sublimes of time and space as revealed by modern physics, but also on apocalyptic scenarios of the dynamical sublime, in which mankind is inevitably doomed by the kind of cataclysmic meteorite strike which destroyed the dinosaurs, or otherwise by super-volcanoes, or the heat death of the sun.

54 Dale Chapman has written of a technological sublime forming the aesthetic basis of drum’n’bass music’s dark, anxious soundscapes. Dale Chapman, “Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Paranoia and the Technological Sublime in Drum and Bass Music,” *Echo* 5.2 (2003). <<http://www.echo.ucla.edu/volume5-issue2/chapman/chapman.pdf>> visited 09/12/06. Of course, there is also the whole “illbient” genre. Rather different legacies of the sublime may be found in the ecstatic altered states of electronic dance music, or their analogue in the guitar-saturated negative bliss of self-loss in headbanging or the “mosh pit.” Heavy metal itself can be understood, like drum’n’bass to circle around a technological sublime, though the technology involved is one of a slightly prior moment within capitalism’s development. Rather than Drum’n’Bass’s mimesis of the impossible and vast spaces of the globalised economy and

the scale of urban spectacle,⁵⁵ and the breathless rush of consumption promised by advertising. All of this, too, relies on, and is, the sublime. The contemporary legacy of the sublime, however, pervades even deeper into the aesthetic texture of our sociality, penetrating the cultural forms of discourses which are not solely “cultural.”⁵⁶ It enters the discourses of contemporary war and politics, where military campaigns rely less on the physical annihilation of an opponent’s army, than the production of affects of “shock and awe” to bring about capitulation. Hirst’s notorious comments about the World Trade Centre attack as presenting an exemplary aesthetic spectacle, in recognising something of his own procedures in its spectacle, evidenced the extent to which his sublime is not best explained through the narratives of high art, but by its engrossment within this wider cultural logic.⁵⁷

Commodity Culture, the “Postmodern” Sublime, and the Long View

As a contemporary phenomenon, then, the recurrence of the sublime develops alongside the growth of the global circuits of a media culture of the spectacular consumption of images.⁵⁸ The sublime is a fundamental aesthetic

its electric flows, the drum beats and guitar sounds of Black Sabbath and Deep Purple were consciously formulated as an analogue of the sounds of the factories of the industrial Midlands within which both groups were formed, and in which their members had worked.

55 An architectural sublime, following Burke’s prescriptions, could equally be seen at the heart of globalised capitalism’s renewed and exacerbated penchant for increasingly hyperbolic skyscrapers and megastructures. See Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 2, Sections 10 (“Magnitude in Building”), 11 (“Infinity in Pleasing Objects”) and 16 (“Colour Considered as Productive of the Sublime”), pp.117-8, 122-3. For more on the sublime as an aesthetic of architecture, though not in the contemporary context, see Taylor, “The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City,” 431-48; Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, 87-107. For the question of mass, theatrical and sporting spectacle, one need only think of the aesthetic of Riefenstahl’s films, and the reiteration of this in contemporary displays.

56 I have in mind Jacques Rancière’s notion of an “*inconscient esthétique*.” For Rancière, the aesthetic patterns through which art represents reality also serve to structure the way that reality itself is perceived, and made visible, apprehendable, and finally knowable. Jacques Rancière, *L’inconscient Esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).

57 Hirst acknowledged the aesthetic power of the destruction of the World Trade Centre thus: “The thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of like an artwork in its own right ... Of course, it’s visually stunning.” Damien Hirst, “September 11 One Year On: Damien Hirst,” *B.B.C. News Online: In Depth*, ed. 2 September 2002, B.B.C., Available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/world/2002/september_11_one_year_on/2229628.stm>, 19 May 2008. This amounts to a self-recognition by Hirst, finding in the media images of the W.T.C. attacks – and in the “shock and awe” which circulated in the media – a mirror of his own artistic procedures and aims. Hirst’s aesthetic is the aesthetic of the media which circulated and staged these images, and through which a “War on Terror” was subsequently played out. See also “Hirst Apologises for 11 Sept Comments,” *B.B.C. News: Entertainment: Arts*, ed. 19 September 2002, B.B.C., Available: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2268307.stm>>, 19 May 2008.

58 I use the term *postmodernity* in scare quotes here – as will be clear, I do not understand the “postmodern” to be a radically new era, replacing the modern. However, I retain the term, since it is such a useful shorthand for the late-twentieth-century form of global capitalism, and the media and informational culture which pervades it. Nonetheless, I take the term as having the

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Fig 18: The sublime as an aesthetics of the politics of the globalised order. The American flag flies over the Brooklyn Bridge, on September 11th. Image from the calendar, *Glory to the Flag*, (New York: Workman Publishing, 2001), a calendar devoted to images of the American flag in the aftermath of the “9-11” attacks. The flag serves as a focus of “transcendent” nationalism in the face of collective trauma, in a motion of overcoming rather akin to the second moment of the Kantian sublime. But in this “American sublime” a concept (America the great, the glorious flag) is raised to the dignity of the Idea (freedom, the “absolutely great,” etc.).

axis of this culture within which Hirst so gleefully plays his part.⁵⁹ For Fredric Jameson, who has utilised the notion of the sublime in order to understand the cultural logic of such a globalised capitalism, the consuming subject is faced at once with the unmappable totality and unrepresentable violence of the capitalist system which produces this culture and which forms the co-ordinates of our existence. Such an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime plays to and exacerbates the “schizophrenic” fragmentation of this subject, who is thrown all the more deeply into a state of anxious but ecstatic “intensities.”⁶⁰

In my own work here, however, whilst wanting to retain an understanding of the specificity of the role of the sublime within this globalised culture, I will nonetheless want to emphasise the fact that the conditions of globalisation do not constitute a fundamental break from the modern past, as theories of “postmodernity” have it. Commodity culture, the media, capitalism, and even the problems of globalisation, imperialism and liberalism (“neo” or otherwise), after all, just like the sublime, each have a much longer history. Whilst taking on board Jameson’s analysis of the sublime as an aesthetic serving to express the nature and experience of our contemporary existence, I reject the fundamental novelty which Jameson proposes.⁶¹ Instead, my argument here is that the sublime has been, from the very outset, bound with the conditions of consumption of a transnational capitalism which is much older.

My Hirstean sublime, that is to say, involves a longer history of the sublime’s entwinement with capitalist culture. I shall be arguing throughout this dissertation that this is less a matter of the sublime’s belated (mis-) appropriation by consumer culture than something integral to the sublime from

continuing use – as well as the drawback – of carrying with it into the present work something of the controversies about the nature of history and of periodisation, and of our current, problematical relation to earlier forms of the articulation of a condition of “modernity,” which raged around it.

59 As *the* dominant cultural experience of our moment, such a media aesthetic also perhaps provides the basis of the return of interest in more academic and exalted cultural circles in the concept of the sublime itself.

60 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34-8. Joanna Zylynska makes a similar analysis, relating the rise of sublimity in contemporary culture to the experience of David Harvey’s “space-time compression,” where the intensification of communications and acceleration of life causes a sense of saturation and excess, and an increased uncertainty about the future and the nature of reality itself, which become “monstrous” experiences of doubt, chaos and internal disorientation and dislocation. Like the sublime, the future and reality fill the subject with a simultaneous sense of dread and of excitement. Zylynska, *On Spiders*, 2.

61 For Jameson, the postmodern sublime is marked as different from early modern predecessors in the shift from the natural object which dominates Burkean and Kantian discussions of the sublime and the “second nature” which, rather than the old first nature, now stands as the vast, unimaginable, unthinkable powerful and counterpurposive totality which faces the subject, and in relation to which he/she is constituted. However, my argument here, which I pursue most explicitly in the first Interlude, though also in my discussion of the motif of the shark in Chapters 6 and 7 (and throughout), will be that the “nature” of the Romantic sublime, is, in itself, already a screen onto which the experience of capital could be projected.

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Fig 19: Global capital as sublime object.

Andreas Gursky, *Salerno I*, 1990. Cibachrome, 188 x 226 cm. Image from *Andreas Gursky: Photographs from 1984 to the Present*, (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1998), 73.

its very inception at the end of the seventeenth century. The sublime, after all, was the aesthetic of that most formulaic and excitingly vulgar – not to mention commodifiable – of eighteenth-century literary forms, the Gothic novel.⁶² I argue here that even before the Gothic the sublime formed the backbone of an aesthetics of commodified culture. Such an account troubles high-art narratives, such as that of Jean-François Lyotard, which propose the sublime as a resistant alternative to the banality of modern commercial culture. I understand the history of the commodified sublime which I build around Hirst as serving as a *supplement*, in the Derridean sense of the term, to the more usual high-cultural histories of sublimity.⁶³ I will argue that even those attempts (with which the sublime is so often associated) to transcend the common flow of culture form not a route to the outside of the imperatives of the cultural commodity but in fact – in what such attempts set in motion – only a part of the dynamic of its very economy. The sublime is the aesthetic category through which capital's imaginary is formed, just as the sublime is formed in the capitalist imaginary.

The Sublime and the "Birth of a Consumer Society"

It is to early eighteenth-century British culture that I have felt myself repeatedly drawn in my explication of the history of the Hirstean sublime. There seems an elective affinity⁶⁴ between this moment and our own, which is attested by the rise, over the so-called "postmodern" period, of scholarly interest in this era. To the fore in this has been the work on eighteenth-century consumerism which has followed in the wake of McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's 1982 *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.⁶⁵ Indeed, once we locate Hirst

62 For the sublime and the Gothic, see for example, Morris, "Gothic Sublimity," 299-319; Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*; Fred Botting, *Gothic*, New Critical Idiom (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 38-44.

63 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 142-57. I discuss this notion in Chapter 1, p.70. The popular or commodified is precisely what theories of the sublime would close themselves off against in order to define themselves (in order, that is, to show that they deal with the sublime rather than the banal, the everyday, the crude and the common) and yet even inasmuch as they depend on such a category in order to constitute themselves, they will never be entirely rid of it; it serves as the "extra" which marks a failure of the discourse to close itself off on its own terms.

64 The term is, of course, the title of a novel by Goethe; however before this, it was used as a notion in chemistry to signal the tendency of certain compounds to react with each other.

65 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hutchinson, 1983). For the work which followed in their footsteps, see, in particular, Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); John Styles, "Design for Large-Scale Production

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Fig. 20: Gillray's satire on the taste for Gothic sublimity. James Gillray, *Tales of Wonder (This attempt to describe the effects of the sublime and wonderful is dedicated to M.G. Lewis Esq.)*, pub. Hannah Humprey, 1802. Etching. 25.5 x 35.4 cm. Image from *Gothic Nightmares*, 115. The Gothic novel, highly formularised, was a mass-produced system for manufacturing and delivering the affects of the sublime to an audience of consumers.

as a commodity artist, it makes sense to understand him through a historical relation between our own situation and this prior moment, in which art and literature, uprooted from traditional forms of patronage and thrown onto the market, were also urgently faced with their status as commodified objects, and with surviving within the wider market for cultural commodities which was rapidly expanding in the spectacularising urban culture of cities such as Paris and London. Such a moment of the exacerbation of the commodity nature of art, and of art's subsumption within a broader market of culturalised commodities, after all, seems to speak powerfully to our own "postmodern" moment.

Thus the now-voluminous discourse on eighteenth-century consumption has found in post-Settlement England a fascinating mirror image of our own contemporary "consumer" culture. The dangers of this discourse, as Mark Poster has argued, are that it delivers a "myth of origin" explaining the nature of contemporary life – and furthermore that such a myth, focusing on consumption rather than production, imagines society without the social antagonisms of capitalist exploitation.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, such a discourse has been important in reimagining capitalism at a moment when it has been once more transforming itself, and in a way in which consumption, as Marxist writers as well as liberals have argued, has become increasingly a central part of what drives and organises our world.⁶⁷ Under the weight of the changes brought by the late twentieth century, the dominant images of capitalist modernity

in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Oxford Art Journal* 11.2 (1988): 10-16. In the introduction to their collection, Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger situate "the birth of consumer society in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," (7), and paint a vivid picture of London awash with goods: "Northern Europe imported manufactured goods from the East on a wider scale than ever before – porcelain, silk, and colourful printed cotton goods. New foods and materials were drawn in from around the world: sugar; coffee, chocolate and tea; dyestuffs such as indigo; and exotic woods such as mahogany." (Berg and Eger, eds., *Luxury*, 1.)

66 Mark Poster, "The Question of Agency: Michel De Certeau and the History of Consumerism," *Diacritics* 22.2 (1992): 103-7.

67 See, for example, Antoni Negri's writings, which set out to rethink Marx after the disintegration of the Labour Theory of Value. Negri notes the increasingly blurry line between work and leisure, with "value" being produced throughout in what he terms the "social factory," and according to "real subsumption." See in particular Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano (New York and London: Autonomedia, 1991). Of course, critiques of "late modern" society which highlight the growing role of consumption in our consciousness have tumbled one after the other in the late twentieth century, from Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, through Jean Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. (Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [London: Black and Red, 1977], Marxists Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>> visited 21 May 2006; Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin [St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981].) For a more recent, Anglophone, pedestrian – yet nonetheless considered – account rethinking the role of consumption within the modern experience (and one which does not simply reverse what McKendrick calls the "productivist bias" of traditional accounts of modernity, but thinks consumption within a wider context of a system of exchange and production) see Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

– the factory, industrialisation and mass production – have started to look increasingly unfamiliar as representations of our own reality, and so it has been to other moments within the longer history of the development of capitalism that thinkers have turned in order to understand the conditions of our life under globalised capitalism. This is not – in my account at least – to replace one moment of mythical origin with another, but to open up the history of capitalism as the complex and heterogeneous set of phenomena that Fernand Braudel describes in his magisterial *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*.⁶⁸ It is not to exchange one “essence” of capitalism (industrial production) for another (consumption). Rather, it is to recognise the Protean nature of capitalism, and its tendency to the eclectic cannibalisation of its own past.⁶⁹

What the Hirstean sublime helps us understand, then, is how our contemporary globalised society is enmeshed in the longer history of capitalism. Placing capital and its antagonisms at the heart of the matter in this way, my project is a broadly Marxian one, but one which takes seriously the problem of *which* Marx we may require, and what part of his legacy is still vital.⁷⁰ The conception of capital that I build, less monolithic than Marx’s,

⁶⁸ Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, [*Civilisation matérielle et capitalism, XVe-XVIIIe siècle*], trans. Mirian Kochan, vol. 1 (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1973); *Wheels of Commerce* (cited above); *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds, vol. 3 of *Civilization and Capitalism. 15th-18th Century* (London: Phoenix, 2002).

⁶⁹ Such an atavistic tendency in capital has recently been noted, for example, by the Retort Collective, who, in their analysis of the Gulf War, write that “the twenty-first century seems an amalgam of the sixteenth and nineteenth.” Retort, “Afflicted Powers: The State, the Spectacle and September 11,” *New Left Review* 27 (May/June 2004): 12. See also Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, new ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 14-15. Retort unsettle any taking of Marx’s descriptions of the stages of development of capital literally. For them, Marx’s “primitive accumulation” is not a matter of a stage in capital “before” industrialisation and capitalism proper can take hold; rather, what the twentieth century has shown is that primitive accumulation is an inherent moment within the processes of capital, on which it depends, and to which it returns incessantly (*Afflicted Powers*, 10-12). Their book, in order to capture something of the resurgence of the baroque in the present, borrows its title, *Afflicted Powers*, from a line of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Milton, of course, was a key locus of the sublime for its first proponents such as Dennis or Addison; and the contemporary resurgence of the sublime itself, I am arguing here, is precisely tied to the resurgence of the forms of capitalism in the context of which it first emerged as a key discourse of Western aesthetics and criticism.

⁷⁰ To follow Marx in the present is to be faced with the paradox that on the one hand there is no other body of thought which is so richly explanatory of our current social conditions (indeed, in many ways Marx is more pertinent now than he was in his own time), and yet on the other that his writing was also produced within a framework of a particular form of industrial Victorian capitalism. It is through this Victorian form that Marx attempted to grasp capitalism’s essence, but this form has in many ways been superseded by our own globalised economy. In such a situation much of the core of Marx’s ideas – and quite how we should apply this to other forms of capitalism than the one which Marx himself observed – seems deeply problematical. I thus find it hard to extrapolate into the present many of the key abstractions in Marx’s thought which form his “ontology” of capitalism: in particular the Labour Theory of Value, which seems so key in his criticism of the exploitative and unfair nature of capital, but which seems such an inadequate way of thinking about the creation of exchange-values in today’s branded, semiotised, aestheticised, spectacularised economy. I am encouraged in such

borrowed eclectically from the many other approaches that have been made towards it from the standpoint of sociology, history, cultural and critical theory and anthropology.⁷¹ I draw in particular from Braudel, who displaces focus from the traditionally privileged moment of the industrial revolution, and helps make sense of our relation to the forms of capital which precede and post-date this moment.⁷²

Looking to the eighteenth century, then, and generally to pre-industrial forms of modernity, for an alternative mirror image of our own moment thus goes beyond the recognition of the role of consumption; it properly involves a recognition of consumption within the wider systems of capital. Early modern capital was highly concentrated in the hands of financiers rather than industrialists. What marks out such a capitalism, not rendered immobile in the “fixed” capital of plant, is its extreme liquidity; and what marks the societies subject to such capital is the exacerbation of their instabilities and the

a project by Derrida’s deconstruction of Marx’s materialist ontology of capitalism in *Specters of Marx*. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge Classics (New York and London: Routledge, 2006). A dimension of my own exploration of capital is also to trouble and extend the Marxian metaphor of the phantasmagoria.

71 Aside from the sources already cited on eighteenth-century consumption, important theoretical work, which supplements Marx, on the nature of consumption, the commodity and the capitalist form of exchange has been done, for example, in Benjamin, *Arcades*; Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and Kaethe Mengelberg, ed. David Frisby, 2nd enlarged ed. (London: Routledge, 1990); Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards and Anthropology of Consumption* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980); Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Baudrillard, *Critique*; Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Lash and Lury, *Global Culture Industry*; Marc Shell, *Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1982).

72 Braudel sees capitalism as an increasingly dominant force since at least the fourteenth century. For Braudel, “capitalism” proper is to be distinguished from the growth of market economies in this period, and is best defined (simply) as the “realm of investment and of a high rate of capital formation.” (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 231.) Braudel thus does not take Marx’s step of identifying this entirely with that which is extorted in the labour relation. Such high rates of formation, of course, cannot be maintained without some form of exploitation or another, and they cannot be maintained on the basis of a fair and transparent market. Capitalism thus forms a zone of the economy which sits above that of the open market, constituting “the zone of the anti-market, where the great predators roam and the law of the jungle operates” (229-30). The evidence of Braudel’s study of capital’s long economic history is that its industrial manifestations are local and particular rather than revealing the truth of an inherent destiny or tendency. The extraction of such accumulated value through wage labour is only one face of such a capitalism’s many ways to extort value from those with whom it does business. For Braudel, it is capitalism’s adaptability in its forms of extortion that truly marks it out: “On a world-scale, we should avoid the over-simple image often presented of capitalism passing through certain stages of growth, from trade to industry – with the ‘mature’ industrial phase seen as the only ‘true’ capitalism. In the so-called merchant or commercial capitalism phase, as in the so-called industrial phase (and both terms cover a multitude of forms) the essential characteristic of capitalism was its capacity to slip at a moment’s notice from one form or sector or another, in times of crisis or of pronounced decline in profit rates” (433).

traumatic upheavals which are unleashed, society itself becoming as fluid as the capital which increasingly dominates it.⁷³ The eighteenth century did not, of course, originate such a form of capital, which had been growing, and steadily replacing *ancien régime* forms of socio-economic order and regulation over the preceding centuries.⁷⁴ However, what we see in England in the wake of the accession of William and Mary is the rebuilding of the social order around new institutions and forces of capital which P.G.M. Dickson has dubbed a “financial revolution,” with the development of The Bank of England, Lloyds, long-term and tradeable national debt, the rise of joint stock companies (often granted state monopolies) and the permeation of credit through every level of society.⁷⁵ Such a moment marks, then, a certain zenith in the power of finance capital not surpassed until the twentieth century.

The best name for such a capitalism is “imperialist.” I draw the term from Lenin who argued that capital had reached a new stage after its industrial incarnation.⁷⁶ This was defined in just the terms of a shift of capital from the hands of industrialists, into those of financiers. Capital, highly integrated, and with the support of the state, became highly concentrated, and no longer bound by the rules of competition which Marx had argued still inhered in and structured the capitalism of the mid nineteenth century. This imperialist capital which Lenin describes, unrestrained and monopolistic, is highly rapacious, aggressive and speculative, accelerating processes of accumulation. I depart from Lenin, however, in his understanding of this as a phenomenon entirely new with the twentieth century. Following Braudel (and my discussion of eighteenth-century capital above), it becomes clear that something like imperialism has, in fact, been prominent throughout the history of capital.⁷⁷

73 For the effects of this hyper-liquid early capitalism on the social world, see for example, Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986), esp. 7-9.

74 Agnew traces such a shift from the mid fifteenth to the mid eighteenth century. But see also Braudel, who, though focusing on the 1400-1800 period, traces the rise of capital back even further into twelfth-century Italy, and beyond.

75 P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study of the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967).

76 Lenin writes: “at a definite and very high stage in its development, when certain of its fundamental attributes began to be transformed into their opposites. [...] Economically, the main thing in this process is the substitution of capitalist monopolies for capitalist free competition ... [which had been] the fundamental attribute of capitalism and commodity production generally.” Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” [Petrograd, 1917], *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1963), Marxists Internet Archive, 2005 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>> 10 July 2007.

77 For Braudel, too, what Lenin describes as imperialism appears to be a return to the more usual conditions of business that have inhered over the centuries of capitalism. Braudel in fact explicitly recognises in Lenin's “imperialism” the characteristics of what he would like to call, over its long history, “capitalism.” For him, Lenin's imperialism “does not seem to me anything new, but rather a constant in the Europe since the Middle Ages.” (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*,

Our own moment, too – with its vast multinational corporations, and with capital highly invested in hypermobile banking, hedge funds and the like – seems to mark a resurgence of a new kind of imperialist capital, an imperialism beyond the nation-state which Negri and Hardt have dubbed “Empire.”⁷⁸ Jean-Christophe Agnew has argued that from 1550-1750, “in many respects, the detached assets of England’s mercantile estate bore a closer resemblance to the mobile resources of late-twentieth-century finance capital than to the relatively fixed investments of nineteenth-century industrial capital.”⁷⁹ Today’s renewed, “neoliberal” forms of deregulated “flexible accumulation” and “post-Fordist” organisation throw us back to the perplexity and economic misery Agnew describes so vividly as having characterised the lives of so many in the throes of the transformations of the period he discusses. Just as today, in the wake of such a hyper-liquid capital came increased itinerancy of labour, falling wages, and a decrease in any stability of work for the poor.⁸⁰

This notion of imperialism, and the conception of a hypertrophic form of capitalism with which I associate it, will be of central importance within this dissertation. Hirst’s art, after all, is very much an art of imperial capital. Its own rhetorical hypertrophy echoes that of the economic form it subsists in, rising to prominence in the context of Thatcher’s restructuring of the British economy which made London once more a key hub of international finance.⁸¹ Hirst’s first show, *Freeze*, emblematically enough, was in a building in the Docklands “regeneration” Zone.⁸² Hirst’s client list reads as a who’s who of the global elite, with Russian oligarchs, Korean shopping moguls, media entrepreneurs and hedge-fund managers prominent.

My argument will be that the sublime itself is an aesthetic intimately tied with imperial capital, arising as it does at a moment of imperial upsurge in eighteenth-century Britain, with its growing and increasingly belligerent

229.) For further remarks on Lenin’s notion of imperialism, see *Wheels of Commerce*, 577-8.

78 For Negri and Hardt on Lenin and imperialism see Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Ma. and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 221-39.

79 Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 53.

80 Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 51-2.

81 For the refashioning of London during the 1980s as a home for deregulated neo-imperial finance capital, see for example, Jane Jacobs, “Negotiating the Heart: Place and Identity in the Postimperial City,” *The Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 38-69.

82 The building, significantly enough, was lent by the London Docklands Development Commission, and the catalogue sponsored by the company that developed Canary Wharf, Olympia and York. See e.g. Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 55. For more on the role of the Docklands development in the reinvention of London as home to finance capital, and the new digital forms of empire, see for example, Jon Bird, “Dystopia on the Thames,” *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird and et. al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 120-35.

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Fig. 21: The imperial sublime in the early eighteenth century. James Thornhill, Painted Hall, Royal Naval Hospital, Greenwich, 1707-27. Thornhill's ceiling depicts Peace and Liberty triumphing through the empire of William and Mary, and their successors the Hanoverians. Images of Britain's international power in trade, industry, science and technology, and its military/naval might pervade, and are depicted supporting the Pax Britannica, which spans the continents and opens onto the heavens themselves, harmonising with the very order of nature in the guise of the allegories of the seasons. Louis XIV cowers in defeat. Photo from Wikimedia Commons, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Greenwich_Hospital> visited 20 August 2008.

empire, and highly mobile, state-backed capital. My task will be to trace the echoes between then and now, in a figure which I call the Hirstean sublime.

Thus although my dissertation concentrates on art from London, this is not just parochialism. In tracing links between Hirst and a number of forebears from London, the aim is not to concoct an argument about the Britishness of British art (young or otherwise), or to construct such a national tradition. Rather, it is a matter of the recognition of London's historical role as a pioneering centre – now as then – in this hyper-aggressive form of transnational capital. Britain, of course, does not have a monopoly on imperialism; nonetheless, London has a special place in the histories of imperialism, and its art has, repeatedly, taken on the character of imperialist art. Thus there is little “new” in the “new British art” of the 1990s, its practices are almost as old as imperialism itself: the Royal Academy was a site of “sensation” from the outset, as we shall see in particular in Chapter 7, where I will discuss another commercially-oriented artist, John Singleton Copley's creation of a stir in its hallowed halls, with a painting of a shark no less, way back in 1778.⁸³

Historiographical and Methodological Concerns

Such an account of the Hirstean sublime is grounded in an understanding of history as involving forms of recurrence, repetition and reiteration, rather than an understanding of it in terms of an unfolding linear narrative animated by *telos*, as with more conventional, nineteenth-century models. There are a number of precedents for such a writing of history on which I draw.⁸⁴ These

83 John Singleton Copley was another provincially-born artist who would go on to produce a form of economically viable, populist art, with the support of the patronage of the financial elite of the day. Copley's *Watson and the Shark*, a huge and innovatively contemporary “history” painting created a stir in the same halls in 1778 with its journalistic, exotic and sensational – perhaps even salacious – imagery of a shark attack. It shares something of the same vulgar literalism and materialism as Hirst, and, as we shall see, like Hirst's shark, it envisions the entwinement of man within the global circuits of capital and empire. Copley, like Hirst, developed a complex economic strategy for his work, which combined popular showmanship and broad media distribution with grand artistic ambitions and the patronage of the most vigorously entrepreneurial city elite of his day. I doubt that Hirst was aware of Copley's shark when he produced his *Physical Impossibility*, and yet the artistic strategies of Hirst and Copley seem to stare at each other, like fascinated mirror images, across a history of imperial culture.

84 The most obvious (though not by any means the only) such alternative model can be found in “postmodern” critiques of history's “metanarratives.” The “metanarrative” is, of course, a term in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). For the way that such notions have been taken up in a “postmodern” historiography, see for example, Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). However, such challenges to historiographies of linear development were not new with the postmodern. Benjamin's critique of historicism in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” for example, serves as a powerful precedent, with its vision of a historical time which cannot be plotted according to the empty and neutral grids of a dateline, but which is full of the purposes and needs infused by the perpetual crisis of the present, and which throws up the historical past as a powerfully charged image which returns to us in response to our crisis. (Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the

provide me with a set of tools and a vocabulary to help think through cultural history's recurrences. There are in fact some discrepancies between the historiographical methodologies of the different authors on which I draw, but for me these are less important than the primary intuition which they share that history is best understood – along with our place within it – in terms of its repetitions.

I have already briefly brought up my debt, for example, to Norman Bryson's understanding of the "series," and Warburg's "afterlife" (*Nachleben*). In this work I will also be relying on the notion of the "figure," which I draw from Erich Auerbach's writings, and which provides me with a vocabulary of "(pre-) figuration." In classical thought, the *figura* referred to a form of similarity or resemblance which, rather than being constituted by a shared Platonic essence or identity, is "something living and dynamic, incomplete and playful," a plastic, concrete and shifting form produced in the productive flux of history, rather like family resemblances across generations, which requires an additional act of intellection or interpretation.⁸⁵ In such a vision, the identity and meaning of events are not complete in themselves, but are tied into the continuing forms of resemblance and repetition which time throws up, and into which we are ourselves bound as interpreting beings caught within history's play of resemblances. We find in Hirst a figure of the recurrence of the sublime, and we find in the history of the sublime a series of prefigurations of Hirst, which demand from us a further act of interpretation.

Most fundamentally, however, it is Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* which

Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, *Arendt, Hannah* [London: Fontana, 1992], 245-55.) So, too does Erich Auerbach's work, and his contrast of a "figural" history to a more conventionally positivistic and scientific understanding of historical time. (Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, Theory and History of Literature* 9 [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984], 59.) In addition, Aby Warburg's writings, and his notion of *Nachleben*, which I have already mentioned, also develop a way of thinking the visual image in terms of repetition and reiteration rather than the narrative implied in the unfolding spaces of the Western Museum. All these approaches predate by far the supposed "Postmodern turn."

85 Auerbach recounts how this sense of figural repetition, emerging in particular from rhetorical thought, became central within the theology of history of the early Christian Church. For the Church Fathers, the events of the Old Testament, though themselves concrete historical occurrences, served also to prefigure the New Testament, as a form of concrete prophecy. Aside from this, however, both of these sets of events carry a message about our own present, and our future at the Last Judgment. Each event transforms meaning of the figures of the past. Auerbach also discusses the opposition between this form of history and the more scientific, linear forms. For Auerbach it is only through the figural that history takes on meaning for us within history, and in fact it is the figural which is at the heart of Western historical consciousness rather than the scientific revolution. (Auerbach, "Figura," 58-9.) Auerbach's own great work, *Mimesis*, in fact proceeds on the basis of such a figural relation between works of literature and their predecessors. (Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, [1953], 50th Anniversary ed. [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003]). For more on Auerbach's "figural" history, and on its methodological implications, see "Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism" in Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 87-100.

informs my understanding of the nature of the time of non-linear repetition which is involved in Hirst's reiterations of the sublime. André Green has called the time of *Nachträglichkeit* a "*temps éclaté*" (shattered time), since its connections cut across and fragment the chronological continuum.⁸⁶ It is an untimely time of reappearance, anachronism, atavism, and supervention, where events and images from the distant past recur as if the intervening history had not erased the past from which they come. Furthermore in *Nachträglichkeit*, these events recur in a way in which they are transformed, and given new significance by the altered present. The words which have been offered to translate *Nachträglichkeit* – "afterwardsness," "retroactivity," "belatedness," "deferred action" – hardly capture (except when taken together) this doubling of temporal direction whereby not only does the forgotten past belatedly have its effect in the present, but also the past is reconstructed through the altered perspective of the here and now, given a new significance through its relation to the newly reiterated event.⁸⁷ In *Nachträglichkeit*, the image from the past returns to haunt us, like a *revenant*.

If Auerbach's notion of the "figure" helps us describe the non-essential, contingent and immanent forms of identity-in-process which emerge from the reiterations of a figure across historical time, it is *Nachträglichkeit* which helps us think through the processes which animate such figural iterations. It marks a certain "belatedness" which lurks in all experience, the lag between an event and its realisation in the symbolic, social, discursive and linguistic systems through which it can be represented, and through which we become conscious of it.⁸⁸ *Nachträglichkeit* suggests that a surplus-residue of experience which

86 André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects*, trans. Andrew Weller (London: Free Association Books, 2002). *Temps éclaté* was the original French title of this volume. There is also an excellent essay by Jean-François Lyotard which deals philosophically rather than psychoanalytically, with the time of *Nachträglichkeit*, and includes an excellent and lengthy exposition of the way that the time of *nachträglich* return and recurrence cuts across the continua of chronological time and memory. Jean-François Lyotard, "Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," trans. Michael Sanders, Richard Brons and Norah Martin, *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 23-45.

87 See for example Jean Laplanche on translating and defining this term, and how one might capture its reversible temporality, in Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche," *Post Modern Culture* 11.2 (2001): §12-25. <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt>> 20 April 2008. See also the translator's comments in Green, *Time*, 164, note 4.

88 I am taking a very particular "spin" on the concept here. It was, of course, introduced by Freud in order to think through the nature of childhood psychic trauma and its lasting effects on adult life (See Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 1 [London: Hogarth Press & Vintage, 2001], 353-9.) It has also been taken up within recent discussions of the literary representation of some of the last century's most traumatic events – military conflicts, genocides, terrors, civil war – as they are registered not on the personal level, but within the context of a broader culture which cannot find the means to represent these. See in particular

escapes representation, experienced nonetheless as an enigmatic “message,” returns to insist on its interpretation at the moment of an accidental – but hardly contingent – repetition.⁸⁹ Thus though *Nachträglichkeit* is articulated first of all around ideas of “trauma,” we do not need to understand trauma in terms of the “big” traumas either of childhood sexual abuse or of genocide, but rather of the small and constant traumas which constitute experience and subjectivity itself, the *tuché* of the Real with regard to which the subject is founded and which constantly haunts discursively constructed realities, always lurking as their enigmatic other and troubling the closure of their symbolic systems.⁹⁰ As some of the writers on the grand traumas of history have pointed out, art and literature have a special role within such a process, since it is here that a “figural” rather than logical form of discourse is at its most intensive.⁹¹ Such discourse, a discourse of “thing” or “image” rather than “word” or “concept” presentation, allows the introduction of that which has not been fully processed into the known and the speakable. Here we are brought to a somewhat different usage of the notion of the “figure” from that which Auerbach proposes: that dimension of the “figural” as other of (conceptual) discourse elucidated by Jean-François Lyotard.⁹² It is *Nachträglichkeit* which brings these two senses of the “figural” together and reveals them as interlinked.

However, although such a logic is generally apposite to the writing of (cultural and other) histories, I propose here that it has a special relevance to the writing of the histories of capitalist modernity, for it is capitalist modernity – the modernity of the imperialism I have discussed above – which above all is typified by a “shattered” time (*temps éclaté*).⁹³ Such a modernity is constituted in the traumatic break from past forms of order, signification and identity,

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For a counter to Caruth’s version of trauma and literature, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). I am not primarily concerned with either of these applications, but rather in the more formal understanding that it gives of forms of discursive and historical consciousness. I draw this more formal understanding of the concept in particular from post-structuralist appropriations of the term, in the wake of Lacan’s combination of psychoanalysis with Saussurean linguistics. Particularly influential is the section “Tuché and Automaton” in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 11* (London: Penguin, 1994), 53-64.

89 See Pontalis in Caruth, “Interview with Laplanche,” §23-63.

90 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 53-6.

91 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 22.

92 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1971).

93 In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida repeatedly uses the line from Hamlet, “the time is out of joint” to express the temporality of the modern world. It is a time in which things are made out of joint by the wrongs of the present, and which is itself broken by these wrongs, which create the spectres which return to haunt us from the past and from the utopian future when time might once more be in synch with itself.

and, as Marx describes it in the *Communist Manifesto*, capitalism by its very nature propels modern experience into a state of constant and cataclysmic upheaval, dissolving all forms of continuity.⁹⁴ It is capital itself which relies on the conjuration of the unruly excesses of discursive, economic and libidinal surplus which will “return.” The history of capital, furthermore, is a history of reiteration, of repeated rounds, each time different, of colonial, primitive, and imperial accumulations, in which the atavistic bubbles up repeatedly into the present. At the root of the traumatised state of modern memory and discourse is the violence and antagonism which is inherent to capital itself, and which drives the constant turmoil of its history, leaving it haunted with the fragments of the past with which it is never quite done.⁹⁵ The Hirstean sublime, deeply bound to such a capitalism, is a key locus where we can trace this reappearance of the sublime.

Inferential Criticism

The object of study of such a *nachträglich* history is no longer quite the work of Hirst in itself; rather, what I am interested in is something that *haunts* this work. This, of course, is not exactly a positivity; as a spectre, a figure which floats between returns, its ontological status is somewhat uncertain, its location in space and time, as a revenant, impossible. It is subject, not to an ontology but to a Derridean *hauntology*.⁹⁶ For such a phantom object, we can not produce a revealed or positivist “truth.” Discourse on it, rather, produces a schema for interpretation.

I take Michael Baxandall’s notion of “inferential criticism” as he outlines it in *Patterns of Intention* as providing a model of the writing of such an art history, and I take my own writing in this dissertation as a form of such an “inferential

⁹⁴ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” [1848], trans. Samuel Moore and Frederick Engels, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), Marx-Engels Internet Archive, 2000, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>> visited 12 June 2007, Chapter 1.

⁹⁵ For me, the kinds of literary response to particular historical or individual traumas that we find discussed in the more recent theorisations of trauma such as Caruth’s depend themselves on this prior structure of capitalist discourse and its historical consciousness. Trauma and historical consciousness further discussed in Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Cultural Memory in the Present, ed. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 317-68. Ankersmit makes much the same argument as I do in this paragraph, but does so without recourse to the growth of capitalism as the factor which marks out modern experience as radically split from the past. What concerns Ankersmit’s account of modern historical consciousness is that our identity is posited on a past from which we know ourselves irreversibly sundered.

⁹⁶ Derrida, *Specters*, 10, 63, 202. I discuss Derrida’s hauntology and the “spectral” logic which it attends, with particular regard to the particularly spectral quality of Hirst’s art, in Chapter 1, pp. 94-97.

criticism."⁹⁷ For Baxandall when we write about art, what we are in fact writing about is our *response* to it.⁹⁸ Such writing starts from our interestedness, and this interest in the cultural object *qua* cultural object involves us as social, historical and cultural beings. To put it in the terms of the *Nachträglichkeit* which I have so far been discussing, it addresses us as *haunted* beings, through that which haunts us.

It addresses us, furthermore, through our understanding of the work as intentionally produced by another human being (or human beings) in their own social, historical, and cultural circumstances. For Baxandall this involves us in a process of inference, which moves from our interest, through the properties of the work (primarily through the forms of similarity with other objects which we discover in the work, and through a sense of context) towards a construction of the "intentionality" in the work.⁹⁹ Such a process is inherent to our response to culture as it appears meaningful and endowed with human purpose.¹⁰⁰ Such a chain of inference is as inescapable as it is, ultimately, impossible, since "intentions" are not recoverable.¹⁰¹ Thus the "intentionality" with which we deal in "inferential criticism" is more akin to the Kantian aesthetic realm than any form of determinate or objective knowledge. It is not an actual "purpose" which we rediscover in art, but rather a "purposiveness" (a Kantian *Zweckmäßigkeit*), an appearance of purpose which is visible in the *patterns* which the mind schematises in the face of the object and its relation to context and other objects.¹⁰²

97 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also Michael Baxandall, "The Language of Art History," *New Literary History* 10.3 (1979): 453-65.

98 What is described is always a certain *thinking* about the object – the artwork "covered by description *in our terms*." (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 109. His emphasis.) Baxandall discusses the "ostensivity" of art writing: it does not so much describe the object, but merely points to it; but what it points to is not so much the object itself, but an interest which we have in the object. (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 9-10.)

99 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6-7; Baxandall, "Language," 457-9.

100 Baxandall writes: "Awareness of the picture's having an affect on us as a product of human action seems to lie deep in our thinking and talking about pictures [...] [W]hat we are doing when we attempt a historical explanation of a picture is to try developing this kind of thought." (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6.) And later: "We treat a picture as something more than a physical object. We treat it as something with a history of making [...] and a reality of reception to beholders" (7).

101 Baxandall writes that "the intention that I am committed to is not an actual, particular psychological state. [...] Rather it is primarily a general condition of rational human action, which I posit in the course of arranging my circumstantial facts." (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 41.) It is such a conception of intentionality which saves Baxandall's work from slipping into a crude positivism.

102 See for example Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* ([1790]), Project Gutenberg-DE, 2003, <<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm>> visited May 2004, §26, paragraph 2. He uses the word *Schema* in the original German text, as well as in English translations. Though Baxandall does not acknowledge the Kantian roots of such a notion of intentionality,

Baxandall's own writing has been criticised for a certain icy detachment from the present, and for treating the past through the delectation of the antiquarian, rather than through the pressing needs of the present.¹⁰³ However, his method, which always understands our perception of art as mediated through our own encounter with it, opens up a methodology of art-writing which, following the "interest" we have in culture, is consciously concerned with the affairs of the here and now, even as it pays attention to the past and the historicity of its objects. This is so in particular if we supplement Baxandall's insights with an understanding of the interest that culture has for us as being bound with the *Nachträglichkeit* which leaves us haunted by it.¹⁰⁴

Such, then, is the approach that I will be taking to Hirst, reconstructing the "patterns of intention" of his work. Approached in this way, Hirst – just as the other figures I discuss – becomes legible as a subject situated within a field of visual production, setting out to produce solutions to the need to create work which will fulfil the institutional and market conditions for art, according to the imperatives and resources which its visual histories offer, and which themselves form part of the "brief" which we might inferentially construct around his practice. The tradition of the sublime provides an important part

the play with words which he then embarks on clearly evidences an awareness of Kant's own grammatical play with the concept of a *Zweckmäßigkeit*, and the various ways that translators have attempted to render this play into English. Baxandall writes, "This [the intention which is not a reconstructed psychological state] can be referred to as an 'intentionality' no doubt. One assumes the purposefulness – or intent, or, as it were, 'intentiveness' – in the historical actor but even more in the historical objects themselves." (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 41-2.) He thus discusses such an intentionality as "the forward leaning look of things," a phrase which admirably captures the appearance of *Zweckmäßigkeit*, of things leaning towards our understanding and interest, just as our interest and understanding lean towards them to meet their half way. For further comments on Baxandall's disavowal of his theoretical resources, see Adrian Rifkin, "Brief Encounters of the Cultural Kind," Rev. of Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, *Art History* 9 (1985): 275-8.

103 "Baxandall's apparent distaste or distrust of our contemporary urgencies threatens to restrict the interest of his explanations to an antiquarian's delight in the relics of the past." Margaret Iversen, "Review: Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures by Michael Baxandall," *Oxford Art Journal* 9.2 (1986): 72. See also Rifkin, "Brief Encounters," 278. Rifkin finds in Baxandall's book "an argument for elegant conversation in the restricted codes of the old universities."

104 There is also a certain formal similarity between Baxandall's inescapable "intentionality" that lurks in art and the enigmatic message which Laplanche discovers at the heart of the *tuché* and its *Nachträglich* effects. For Laplanche, reality is *experienced* as a message whether it is "sent" or not, and is subject to the same Kantian "purposiveness" as Baxandall's "intentionality." In its enigma, it enacts what Laplanche terms a seduction – a seduction which creates the very economy and structure of the subject, formed as it is around the enigma. (Laplanche in Caruth, "Interview with Laplanche," §27-38.) Baxandall comes closest to recognising that there may be a form of *Nachträglichkeit* involved in an "inferential" approach to cultural history in his "Excursus against Influence," where he argues that artists also produce their histories, rather than being simply produced by them. (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 58-62.) However, in spite of the fact that Baxandall also recognises the importance of the viewing subject in the construction of the cultural object, he does not fully develop the implications which such a *Nachträglichkeit* has on the writing of history.

of these imperatives to which Hirst responds (as it does for other cultural producers across the last three hundred years): there is a structuring “need” for modern culture, in order to “succeed,” to “be” sublime and to offer us its affects and pleasures. The tradition of the sublime also provides the resources through which such an imperative might be met. It is in these terms that I shall set about (re)constructing an interpretative context for Hirst’s work.

Structure of this Work

What remains is for me to give a brief outline of the structure which my account of Hirst will take. It starts in the present with Hirst, and moves towards the histories of the sublime within which he is entwined.

Part 1 concentrates on the contemporary sublime. The first chapter looks in more detail at the sublime in Hirst, and at how the notion of sublimity is used in the critical literature on Hirst. I compare two critics, Laura Wixley Brooks and Gene Ray, who utilise the notion of the sublime for diametrically opposed evaluations of Hirst, but I discover within their positions a certain commonality in the lines which they attempt to draw up between the sublime and the debased and debasing procedures of a banal, commodified media culture. The central theoretical resource for such a procedure, as evidenced in the genealogy of these articles, is philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s intervention into the discourses of contemporary art, his essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,”¹⁰⁵ which itself is structured around a distinction between the temporality of the avant-garde sublime and that of capitalism. I am arguing against the use of the notion of the sublime to operate this distinction throughout the dissertation, arguing instead for an understanding of the sublime as *haunting* modern capitalist culture. Against Ray and Brooks, I thus make a reading of Hirst’s shark sculpture, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), which emphasises its spectral quality, as an object haunted by the discourse of the sublime.

In the following two chapters I thus turn to analyse in detail Lyotard’s essay, as both an influence on the debates on the sublime of the nineties, but also the site of their most full articulation. What I find fascinating in Lyotard’s essay is its deconstruction of its own ostensible argument. I argue this self-deconstruction reveals a far more subtle relationship between the sublime and capitalism than the simple opposition the essay seems at first to propose. Through comparison and contrast of Lyotard with arch-neoliberal economist George Gilder, and drawing on Peter de Bolla’s historical account of the formal similarities between the discursive logic of the sublime and that of the

¹⁰⁵ This first appeared as Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” *Artforum International* 22.8 (1984): 36-43.

discourses on the national debt in eighteenth-century Britain, I propose an account of the sublime as an aesthetic of capitalism, of the capitalist subject and of capitalist culture.

The recourse to de Bolla suggests that many of the aspects which Lyotard, Ray and Brooks associate with our own postmodern, media-saturated culture are already active in the eighteenth century, and form a continuous facet of the sublime. In Part 2, in order to explore a history of the sublime and its interrelations with capitalism and commodified culture, my focus turns to the prefigurations of Hirst in the archive of the eighteenth-century sublime. My understanding of the sublime as an element within capital's discursive logic is thus worked through historical example. It is in particular to the milieu of Alexander Pope that I turn, and to Pope's critique of the conditions of literary production of his day, written in the aftermath of the South Sea Bubble and in the context of the rise of an increasingly commercialised "Grub Street" literary culture. I look in particular at Pope's satirical prose piece, *Peri Bathous*, which attacks a commercialising modern literature, and the rise of the sublime within it, through an inverted parody of Longinus's *Peri Hupsous*, producing, for the moderns, not an art of soaring, but of sinking. I argue that for Pope this "sinking" (bathos) is not only a matter of literary failure but a more general metaphysical collapse brought about by the conditions of commodified cultural production and capitalist social relations. Pope pursues this vision in his mock epic *The Dunciad*, whose figure of "Dulness" I take as synonymous with bathos. But Pope's poetry is peculiarly ambivalent: on the one hand these works serve as satire against a certain vulgar Longinian poetics inherent in the commercialised culture Pope attacks, and serves as a document of the extent to which Longinus provided a "cultural logic" for an emerging commodified cultural production; but on the other, Pope's vision of Dulness is itself expressed in precisely the terms that later in the century will become clearly recognisable as those of the sublime. Pope's vision of the entropic "dulness" of the capitalist Universe itself amounts to an intuition of a sublimity which horrifies yet also awes and fascinates Pope.

In Chapter 5, I move on to discuss the central target of Pope's *Dunciad*, Colley Cibber, an actor and playwright who rose to be manager of Drury Lane Theatre, and then to the heights of Poet Laureateship. Cibber serves as an uncanny prefiguration of Hirst: a rather middle-brow, commercially-oriented – and in the end fantastically successful (at least in financial terms, and as a drawer of crowds) – cultural producer of popular spectacles. Like Hirst, Cibber was entrepreneur as much as artist, and, cultivating his highly theatrical public persona and courting controversy and outrage, was as much a celebrity (famous for being famous) as an artist. I use the insights of Cultural Studies and

Queer Theory into the subjectivities of the marginalised in cultural production and consumption, and draw from my observations in Chapter 4 about the Longinian orientations of commercialised culture, in order to elaborate on the function of commodified sublimity in Cibber's work. I thereby examine the manner in which both Cibber and Hirst are positioned, as cultural producers, in relation to the sublime, which is for them, as career artists embroiled in a market rather than "aristocratic" pursuers of art for art's sake, both an essential tool, but also a position to which full access, according to the mores of Western culture, is barred. Hirst's and Cibber's practices of the commercial sublime are always inevitably dogged by the spectre of bathos.

In this chapter my figural-historical method is most clearly demonstrated. Here, the repeating "figure" is not just an aspect of the artistic object. Rather, we are dealing with cultural producers – Hirst, Lyotard, Pope or Cibber – as themselves "figures" repeated in history.¹⁰⁶ Such repetition is an innate part of being a subject, and of the forms of self-identification involved in this: becoming a subject involves becoming a "character."¹⁰⁷ My approach is thus "characterological"¹⁰⁸ as much as figural; my work is structured around repeating "characters" of history, and the forms in which they take into their subjectivity history's figural repetitions.

Chapters 6 and 7 return to Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* and turn away from Pope's and Cibber's moment, concerning themselves with a wider historical spread. Around this, I develop an iconography of the shark in modernity, in order to bring to the surface quite what is condensed into this highly enigmatic image. Discussing Brecht, Spielberg, and John Singleton Copley amongst others, I develop an account of the shark as a figure of a terrifyingly counterpurposive nature which serves as a substitute in which the violence of the experience of capital is registered. I further develop the analysis of the subjectivities of capital, which I have been exploring throughout (especially in Chapter 5) and their basis in phantasy. In particular, it is through the phenomenality of the shark

106 I have one eye on the opening of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, [first pub.1852, in issue 1 of *Die Revolution*], trans. Saul K. Padover (London: 1869), Marx and Engels Internet Archive, 1999 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>> 14 August 2005.

107 The word *character* is useful in that it suggests a guise that actors take on, as much as it does the innate nature of a person; and χαρακτήρ, the root of the word, furthermore, suggests the "stamp" of a face on a coin, to be put into circulation. It suggests a form of repetition and recurrence in identity, just as between Hirst and Cibber, and, as a stamp, the force of circumstances to form similar figures across time and space, as if they have dropped from the same mold. (See the entry for character in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989.)

108 Though I mean by the term something rather different from what, for example, Erich Fromm means by his use of it. Erich Fromm, "Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Application to the Understanding of Culture," *Culture and Personality*, eds. S. Stansfeld Sargent and Marian W. Smith (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 1-12.

as a cultural motif that I carry out this work. I argue that the shark as cultural figure carries with it a spectral quality, a simultaneous excess and deficit of appearance which dramatises that of commodity relations themselves, and that it consistently serves as a motif through which the subject of capital is mapped into the spaces and flows of empire. The doubleness inherent to the commodity, folding together the poles of labour and consumption, desire and violence, animates the phantasy scene of the shark situating its user at once as subject and object of the forces of capital.

Amongst the unfolding of my dissertation's argument will also be two "interludes," each of which pauses to discuss certain images and texts in which the logics of the sublime I describe are at work. These serve both to present an "archive" of the Hirstean sublime and its histories, and also as arenas in which to test out the insights into sublimity and capital which the more directly argumentational chapters set out. The first of these, occurring within my discussion of Lyotard, traces visual and literary examples which prefigure his vision of capitalism, in order to discover its form as a literary or phantastical representation of capital, existing within a longer history of such. (I consider Bruegel, Piranesi, Mary Shelley's *Last Man*, and Wordsworth's description of London.) The second interlude turns to nineteenth-century Paris to trace the sublimity of capital as registered in Emile Zola's *Ventre de Paris*, and the peculiar fore-echo of Hirst in a butcher's shop-window arranged by Zola's fictional artist, Claude Lantier. Lantier terms this window his one true masterpiece, standing in a relation of adequacy to the sublimity of the markets of Paris by taking part within their mechanisms of visual display.¹⁰⁹

109 These "interludes," are, of course, parergonal to the arguments made, and yet, as Derrida describes, the parergon, in spite of its not bearing directly on the unfolding of an argument, is always, nonetheless central to the work at hand. Derrida, "Parergon," 17-147.

Part 1
Damien Hirst and the Contemporary Sublime

Chapter 1

The Sublime in Contemporary Criticism

At the end of the day, with all good art I just want to feel something about my existence or something. [...] I want to feel something. I just want to *feel*.

— Damien Hirst.¹

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger [...] is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

— Edmund Burke.²

Introduction

This chapter looks at the continued use of the notion of the sublime in art-critical discourse on Damien Hirst. That Hirst produces work which finds its place within such discourse is the most direct evidence that Hirst's work directly or indirectly aims itself at and functions through a legacy of the sublime. I map the outlines of this contemporary use of the sublime in art criticism: how is the notion being used to evaluate the work, and what does it tell us about the expectations through which the work is experienced? To explore this, I concentrate on two essays, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," by Laura Wixley Brooks, and Gene Ray's "Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst."³ These are chosen because they are the pieces of critical writing which deal with Hirst in terms of the sublime at most length, and also because their positions are typical of the range in the discursive terrain of the contemporary sublime in writings on Hirst, and in contemporary art criticism more generally. Taking diametrically opposed positions, Brooks's and Ray's essays between them define a contested field of shared significance – the sublime being used in Brooks's essay to launch an apologia for Hirst, but in Ray as a critical concept to contest the value of his work. These explicit uses of the sublime, moreover, indicate a larger pattern of expectations, sensibilities and ideas about the nature and purpose of art, nowadays not always explicitly articulated through a concept of sublimity, but nonetheless largely established in Western culture during a long eighteenth

¹ Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 19. Original emphasis.

² Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1 Sect. 7 p.86.

³ Laura Wixley Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, ed. Paul Crowther, Art and Design 10 (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 54-67; Ray, "Little Glass House," 119-33.

century under the aegis of notions of sublimity. It is in particular with regard to issues of authenticity, affect and the relation between contemporary art and a wider, commercialised, commodified, capitalist culture that the concept of the sublime is primarily mobilised. Jean-François Lyotard's work on the sublime, modern art and commodified culture stands at the heart of the concerns of these essays: it is a major direct and indirect touchstone, and serves as *the* substantial and extended philosophical articulation of the concerns around which the art criticism of the 1990s, in its use of the sublime to understand and evaluate Damien Hirst, revolved. In the chapters which follow this one, I will therefore move on to explore Lyotard's essays on art and the sublime further, in order to better understand the contradictions and paradoxes which emerge from Brooks's and Ray's essays.

Sublimity in Hirst and his Critics

Before moving on to discuss Ray and Brooks, I shall briefly establish that Hirst's work does indeed orient itself towards a legacy of the sublime. With Hirst, this legacy is not entirely straightforward, since we are not dealing with the kind of case in which an artist consciously picks up and utilises a theory or a concept to enable their work. From Hirst's voluminous body of interviews there is no evidence of his particular knowledge of or interest in the authors who have written about the sublime, or any of their key texts or arguments. (Hirst is, in any case, not the kind of artist who orients his practice around theoretical writings or concepts⁴). When the word *sublime* does crop up within this body of interviews, it is only in an offhand, untheorised fashion, hardly marking anything that could be considered a reference point for his work.⁵

That there is, nonetheless, a legacy of the sublime at work in and around Hirst's output can be most palpably felt in that the concept of sublimity is repeatedly wheeled out by critics in order to discuss, explain and evaluate Damien Hirst's work. Ray and Brooks are far from isolated cases. It may well seem anachronistic to apply a concept from Neoclassicist and Romantic criticism – and even before this from ancient rhetorical theory – to the contemporary world. Yet the word appears in everything from the most casual to the most considered usage.⁶ At the more considered end of the spectrum,

4 In interviews, Hirst largely steers clear of any particular reference to theorists or their essays, and does not discuss his work in terms of a body of developed concepts. His points of reference are more likely to be other artists (in particular Bacon, Koons, Manzoni, the minimalists), about whom he shows a largely anecdotal form of knowledge, and a greater interest in the work itself than any particular statements or writings by the artists.

5 See, for example, Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 219; Hirst and Beard, *Cradle*, fig. 39.

6 At the more offhand end of this spectrum, the term pops up with a certain regularity in the promotional literature which surrounds Hirst's work. The Sotheby's catalogue for the auction of

a major exhibition themed on the sublime in contemporary art, held in 1999 in Malmo, included Hirst.⁷ In his review of the Sensation exhibition in New York, philosopher-turned-critic Arthur Danto finds in Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) "the sobriety and majesty of a cathedral," and, putting it forward as a "very philosophical" work,⁸ goes on to claim that its "vision of danger from which we know ourselves to be protected is precisely what Kant meant by sublimity."⁹ Jonathan Jones, in an article for the *Guardian*, argues Hirst's work marked an art-world return to themes of sublimity, and for the sublime as the aesthetic category which underpins the work of the yBa generation.¹⁰ Jones writes: "Death, decay, the sublime were the themes of the British art that defined the end of the 20th century; the horror of a shark swimming towards you through formaldehyde, the terror of a house become a sealed tomb." He goes on to argue that the sublime today "is an awe of art itself, or at least a desire to experience that awe; to be knocked over by art, to be kicked in the teeth."¹¹ The notion of the sublime is even to be found, right from the outset of Hirst's career, as a theoretical axis of Ian Jeffrey's catalogue essay for *Freeze*, the show, curated by Hirst, that launched the yBas. In a rephrasing of Newman's famous essay title, the essay ends with the words "Freeze is now."¹²

objects from Hirst's Pharmacy restaurant, for example, claims that he is "infusing the everyday with a sense of the sublime and the absurd." (Hirst, *Damien Hirst's Pharmacy*, 23.) A similar claim is made later, though this time he is "Infusing the readymade with a sense of the sublime and the absurd" (86). Another similarly offhand claim is to be found in a review quotation on the dust jacket of Hirst's 2005 reduced edition of his book *I Want to Spend...* Here, Richard Cork calls the book "a dazzling combination of the sublime and the unthinkable." In his catalogue to accompany the recent Hirst mega-auction at Sotheby's. Even more recently, Michael Macaulay calls Hirst's *The Kingdom* (2008) "art with conceptual vigour and in sublime visual form." *The Kingdom* (London: Sotheby's, 2008), 11.

7 ... Om det Sublima ... / ... On the Sublime ..., Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, 23 Jan-21 March 1999.

8 Arthur Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 394.

9 Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," 397.

10 Jones, "He's Gotta Have It," 14. In the surrounding passage, Jones attempts to contrast the British art of the 1990s with the American art of the 1980s, and his assertion of sublimity as a theme for the yBas thus makes a clear implicit counter-argument to Lyotard's claims that "sublimity is no longer in art, but in [economic] speculation on art." Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 106.

11 Jones, "He's Gotta Have It," 14. Of course, the kick in the teeth would be a rather crude definition of sublimity as it was treated in Romantic philosophy, but it is at least indicative – already – of what "sublimity" might mean, in its "legacy" form, for the kind of contemporary culture to which Hirst's work belongs

12 Ian Jeffrey, "Platonic Tropics," *Freeze* (London: Olympia and York, 1989), n.p. This essay takes up the position that the works in the show take up a rather off-the-cuff, abject aesthetic of sublimity, in which a confrontation with light, space and materiality – a Newmanesque experience of the "now" – is staged through the low materials of a commercial and mass-produced everyday reality. The sublime "now" of *Freeze* however, also coincides with a

Within such criticism, the notion of the sublime appears with an insistence that makes it, whilst still far from the master term of critical discourse on Hirst, certainly a significant one, a presence which *haunts* such criticism, returning on it with the insistence of a psychoanalytic symptom. Underpinning this frequent recourse to the old notion of the sublime – in spite of Hirst’s lack of explicit articulation of the centrality of the sublime to his work – we are faced with a less obvious, but more fundamental historical relationship to the history of the sublime, existing at the level of practice. It is such a relationship which motivates the insistent return to the notion in criticism.

The argument which shall be elaborated throughout this dissertation is that what lies at the heart of this historical relationship between the sublime and Hirst, on a level of practice, is a version of the Longinian imperative, which commercially oriented culture such as Hirst’s has taken up since the first stirrings in the late seventeenth century of the discourse of the sublime, to compel, to overawe, and to carry off its viewer in a flight of transport or *ekstasis* which proceeds not through rational persuasion, but through an act of aesthetic force:

Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience.¹³

Such amazement, such compelling affect, – just the “kick in the teeth” of art which we have already seen Jones associate with sublimity – is very much the aim of Damien Hirst, who discusses his work in just these kinds of terms. According to Hirst, good art “knocks your [...] socks off.” It leaves you “fundamentally, like, knocked over sideways, leftways, backwards, forwards; with horror and enjoyment all mixed in, like in a funzone, like in a fairground.” (It’s no accident that the reference point of this Hirstean sublime is not the classics, but popular-cultural sites of entertainment). “I want to feel something. I just want to *feel*.”¹⁴ The transport of such a heightened affect does not itself amount to a subtle philosophy of art, but this is exactly the point: Hirst is not a subtle theoretician. We are dealing with a vulgar sublime, the sublime as it

media sensibility (the ‘freeze’ of a freeze-frame, or which a cop shouts at a robber), and a “contemporaneity” which is much more a matter of fashion and media spectacle. Curiously – is it intentional, I wonder? – the mixing in the essay of these two senses of the word “now” echoes each of the temporalities which Lyotard, we shall see in Chapter 2, calls the “new” and the “now,” and would prefer to have held rigidly separate. Does the essay in Freeze already point to a temporality of art practice which is both a matter of the new and the now, and of their inextricable intertwinement?

13 Longinus, *On Great Writing (on the Sublime)*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1991), Chapter 1, p.4.

14 Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 190, 94, 19.

seeps into popular and commercialised culture. Such strategies were attacked repeatedly in the eighteenth century as “false sublimes.”¹⁵ However, my argument will be that though such sublimes may be “false,” they have been nonetheless as much the actual outcome of the discourse of the sublime as its more high-brow products, and that there is a structural relation between the discourse on sublimity and the commercial culture which throws up “false” sublimes. These are not merely accidental by-products, but a necessary *supplement* to the (so-called) “true” sublime, which constitutes itself in its attempts to separate itself from false sublimity. I am drawing here on Derrida’s conception of the supplement. Such a supplement is not merely something added to a self-sufficient whole, but rather is something against which that whole defines itself, and which is necessary because of a lack of wholeness of the “whole” object. The Derridean supplement is utterly necessary to the thing to which it is usually thought to be “merely” supplementary.¹⁶ One of the marks of the supplement is its “maddening” effect to the subject who wishes to bring the concept to closure. The false sublime certainly seems to have acted as such a maddening presence to theorists of the sublime; in Hirst’s fake sublimity there remains a maddening presence to the category of art itself.¹⁷ This logic, and its maddening effect, will also be found at the heart of the spectrality of capital which I diagnose in further chapters as central to the commodified sublime.¹⁸

I am taking Hirst as indicative, then, of a wider field of cultural production – and consumption – which stretches into the present, and for which this rather debased, popularised sublime serves as a blueprint. Further evidence of this relationship lies in the prominence within the vocabulary used in critical discourse on Hirst of many terms closely associated with the sublime, marking the conventional series of affects associated with it – affects at which Hirst clearly aims. In his catalogue essay for Hirst’s 1992 show at the I.C.A., Charles Hall stressed the importance of “awe” and “wonder” in Hirst.¹⁹ An essay by Richard Shone is entitled “Damien Hirst: A Power to

15 See for example the discussion of the criticism levelled at the poet James Thomson’s attempts to utilise the effects of sublimity within his poetry in James Sambrook, *James Thomson, 1700-1748: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 49.

16 See especially Derrida, *Grammatology*, 142-157.

17 Derrida, *Grammatology*, 154.

18 For the phantasmagorical, see the discussion of Hirst’s “spectrality” at the end of this chapter (pp. 94–97), in relation to Lyotard in Chapter 3 (p.142), and also in particular the discussion of experiences of eighteenth-century capitalism in Chapter 4 (pp. 202–208).

19 Charles Hall, “A Sign of Life” in Hirst, *Damien Hirst*. See also, for example Anoushka Shani’s essay “Between Fact and Wonder” in Damien Hirst, *Damien Hirst: Romance in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: White Cube, 2003), 7-10. Here wonder is, as the title indicates, once again central.

Amaze.”²⁰ Sarah Kent latches on to the same attributes of the distancing of terror that Danto discovers as sublime (“By looking death in the face its terror is diminished”²¹). On the dust-jacket of the 2005 reprint of Hirst’s *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life...*, the cited critics’ responses use the same series of synonyms of the sublime to express their approbation: the book is ““dazzling” and “unthinkable” (Richard Cork), “strange and magnificent” (Ben Rogers), “magnificent” (Sarah Kent), and “astonishing [...] enormous, in every sense of the word” (*Esquire*).²²

This attention to the notion of the sublime and its correlates has its roots in an insistent orientation within Hirst’s work towards a cluster of the very themes, images, motifs and rhetorical devices which were established and valorised through the discourse of the sublime, and to the effects which these were expected to elicit. A flick through a Damien Hirst catalogue can look as if one is being presented with a practical demonstration of what art would look like if one were to take Edmund Burke’s famous writing on the sublime as a handbook for artistic production – which in many ways was exactly how it was intended. Hirst’s work, as with Burke’s sublime, seems to take the production of the pleasure of horror and terror as a central aim, understanding this as the height of art’s affective powers. Hirst focuses his pursuit of this affect of pleasurable horror on the representation of death: precisely that which Burke calls the “king of terrors”²³ and places at the heart of the sublime. Like Burke’s account, Hirst’s work focuses on power, scale, repetition and violence. His titles and motifs plunder the Gothic and Romantic art and literature that were spawned by notions of the sublime. The “Natural History” series (of animals preserved in formaldehyde) seem to have wandered right out of Frankenstein’s laboratory (via a Hammer B-movie studio). The reference to the literary and artistic tradition of Romantic landscapes of the sublime in titles such as *Standing Alone on the Precipice Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror* (1999-2000) is clear, and this work itself, a 9-metre-long, wall-mounted, mirror-surfaced cabinet, containing row upon row of neatly, geometrically arranged, individual pills, relies for its power to baffle and disorient its viewer precisely on the key characteristics of Kant’s “mathematically sublime” object: its overwhelming

20 Richard Shone, “Damien Hirst: A Power to Amaze” in Damien Hirst, *Pictures from the Saatchi Gallery* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2001), 83-7. This confrontation with terror and death – and its actual effect of affirming life – is also the central subject of Jerry Saltz, “More Life: The Work of Damien Hirst,” *Art in America* June 1995: 82-7. It is also at play in more explicit relation to the sublime, as we shall see, in Laura Wixley Brooks’s essay on Hirst.

21 Kent, *Shark Infested Waters*, 35.

22 All cited on Hirst, *I Want to Spend*, front dustjacket. It would be tedious to give more than a few indicative examples. A reader would not have to go far into the literature on Hirst to find many more of their own.

23 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 7, p.86.

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Fig. 22: *Standing Alone on the Precipice and Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror*, 1999-2000. Mirrored-steel cabinet with 18,000 individual pills. 236 x 871 x 11 cm. Installation at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photo by Luke White.

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Fig. 23: *Standing Alone on the Precipice...*, detail. Photo Luke White.

scale, the incommensurability of the detail and the whole, and the resulting impossibility of grasping its totality in a single perception.²⁴

An attention to such themes and tropes is, of course, hardly unique to Hirst. I have proposed that there is a larger, structural causation which brings the sublime back in Hirst. In this case, one would hardly expect it to be an isolated occurrence, but rather a more general tendency. And indeed, we see such a tendency in many works of Hirst's contemporaries, in which the sublime returns in a variety of guises from the lyrical to the spectacularising – from the shock tactics of Matt Collishaw's bullet in the head to the numinous landscapes of Tacita Dean, a range echoing and taking in the twin meanings of the word *sensation* through which the field was mapped in the 1996-7 Royal Academy exhibition.²⁵ Such sublimes, although they may draw from a tradition of high art stretching back through Newman to the Romantics, are also deeply implicated in the workings of the culture industry within which they sit. One need only think the echoes in Hirst of *Jaws* or Hammer versions of *Frankenstein*, but there are resonances between Hirst and the whole cinematic aesthetic. Cinema, like Hirst's work – like all mass-manufactured culture – aims to “knock your socks off.” One can also, for example, spot in Hirst's shark echoes of the concern with apex predators in wildlife documentaries, themselves part of a larger media obsession with a terrible, vast, awe-inspiring, often counter-purposive nature. I have suggested in my introduction that the sublime is the fore-runner of a generalised modern media aesthetic which permeates even our ways of doing and spectating politics, or war.²⁶

However, merely noting that this insistent reiteration of the tropes of the sublime exists across Hirst's *oeuvre* and the culture to which it belongs is not enough. This is the point at which questions are raised, rather than answered. What are these echoes – or in Aby Warburg's phrase, what is the

24 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, [1790], trans. James Creed Meredith, University of Adelaide Library Electronic Texts Collection, 9th April 2000 <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/k16j/k16j.zip>> January 2004, §25-7. The work could also be understood through Burke's discussion of the “artificial infinite” in Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 4, Sect. 11, p.168-9.

25 This range of ways in which the sublime inflects contemporary British art is echoed in the places that the concept resurfaces in the literature on it. In the quote with which I start the dissertation, Jonathan Jones associates the sublime not just with Hirst, but also with Rachel Whiteread, too. D.B. Brown and D. Young find an ironic if engrossing conjuration of the sublime in Mariele Neudecker's delicate, Caspar-David-Friedrich-inspired dioramas. (D.B. Brown and D. Young, *Mariele Neudecker: Over and over Again* [London: Tate Publishing, 2004], cited in Shaw, *The Sublime*, 7.) Paul Crowther has discussed Cornelia Parker's investigations of matter and the forces which animate it with the sublime. (Paul Crowther, “The Postmodern Sublime: Installation and Assemblage Art,” *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, ed. Paul Crowther, Art and Design, 10 [London: Academy Editions, 1995], 8-17.) Jake Chapman proposes a “degenerate sublime” in the work of Sam-Taylor Wood. (Chapman, “No-One's Mother Sucks Cocks in Hell.”)

26 See pp.40-42, above.

“afterlife” – of the sublime *doing* in Hirst’s work? Why these repetitions? What are we to make of the fact? In the answer which I will develop throughout this dissertation, I will be tracing the forms of repetition which are involved, and in particular examining the relationship between such a sublime, as it is reiterated in commercial culture, and the experience of the commodified culture of capitalism itself. However, to begin to examine more precisely the functioning of the afterlife of the sublime in Hirst’s work, and what’s at stake in this, I shall start by looking at Laura Wixley Brooks’s and Gene Ray’s extended essays on Damien Hirst and the sublime. Looking at these essays will begin to make clear the shared issues – and the polar positions – around which the sublime is taken up within critical responses to Damien Hirst.

Laura Wixley Brooks: Damien Hirst as exemplar of the contemporary sublime

Brooks’s “Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock”²⁷ is both the earlier of the two essays, and the one which sets the sublime up most centrally as the concept around which an exposition of Hirst’s work is performed. It also gives the simplest version of the sublime. Her somewhat jejune²⁸ application of the notion of the sublime to Hirst in an attempt to defend the work is a helpful place to start, since it is indicative of how the sublime is used in support of Hirst – either explicitly, or through more implicit recourse to the patterns of judgment which the discourse on the sublime fostered within Western culture. It is thus exactly where the piece is most naïve that it allows us a way in to considering the problems with the way that the concept of the sublime is frequently brought into play both within critical writings on Hirst and on contemporary culture in general.

Brooks’s essay appeared in a 1995 issue of *Art and Design*, themed around “The Contemporary Sublime,” with a subtitle echoing the title of Brooks’s own essay: “Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock.” The issue was edited by Paul Crowther, a prolific writer on the sublime during the early 1990s.²⁹ As a component within the larger volume, Brooks’s essay serves as part of an editorial argument attempting to set out the parameters of the contemporary sublime. As the title suggests, Crowther, in his selection of essays, is setting up an argument that there are two ways of understanding the contemporary legacy of the sublime: firstly in terms of the kinds of “shock” effects that art might

²⁷ Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 54-67.

²⁸ Gene Ray has, for example, criticised Brooks’s essay as one in which “the specifics of history are no impediment to a wide-eyed and apolitical boosterism.” Ray, “Little Glass House,” 130, footnote 38.

²⁹ As well as his editorship and essay in the volume of *Art and Design* in which Brooks’s essay appeared, see also Paul Crowther, “The Aesthetic Domain: Locating the Sublime,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989): 21-31; *Critical Aesthetics; The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*.

impose upon its audience (those effects of awe, horror and terror articulated under the category of the “sublime” most prominently by Edmund Burke³⁰); and secondly in terms of the idealist and Romantic legacies of a Kantian aesthetics of “transcendence.” The sublime in contemporary art, as reflected in this volume, is articulated around these twin poles, and this echoes the structure of Crowther’s own theoretical account of the sublime in his book of two years earlier, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*.³¹ Brooks’s essay on Hirst plays the role in the volume of the most forceful articulation of the pole where Burke’s version of the sublime is taken as the forerunner of a postmodernist aesthetic of shock. As we shall see, she leans heavily on Crowther’s own account of an “existential” sublime.

Brooks’s stated aim in the essay is to use the notion of the sublime in order not just to explicate Hirst’s work, but also to provide it a theoretical validation, defending it against the media discourse which treats the work as nothing more than its own self-publicity, and enacts a principled indignation at the “obscene” elements of Hirst’s oeuvre. Brooks, at the start of her essay thus writes:

if it can be shown that all this disgusting presentation is part of an on-going, well-established creative tradition, and that there is a strong and clear philosophy of the sublime to support this sort of work, then perhaps appreciation can take the place of moral outrage.³²

But a general problem with Brooks’s argument is already implicit in the above passage. Brooks is in fact setting out not one but two approaches she will attempt to use in order to authenticate the sublimity of Hirst’s work. Firstly it will be placed in the context of a “tradition,” a canon of similar work, and secondly, there will be an appeal to a “philosophical” basis for the work. The notion of the sublime, then, will have a dual function: first as a philosophical “support” to justify the functioning of the art, and second as a term which is bound up with a larger tradition of artistic practice.

There are, first off, well-discussed problems with the appeal to an already-established canon to fix the value of work.³³ Here as elsewhere, it means little more than establishing a respectability for the work, placing it within the

30 Burke, *Enquiry*.

31 In this Crowther first gives an account of Edmund Burke’s “existential sublime” and then argues for the ethical import of a Kantian “transcendental sublime.” (Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, see especially 115-152.) Crowther’s Burkean existential sublime is discussed below.

32 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 55.

33 How was this canon validated in the first place, and by who? What is included and excluded and how? Such questions became particularly pressing in feminist, postcolonial and queer approaches to the history of art. For a full and considered analysis of these questions of canon-building, see in particular, for example, Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London: Routledge, 1999).

narrative space of the museum.³⁴ This strategy, however, becomes paradoxical when one is arguing for a “tradition of shock”: to validate such work through the appeal to tradition is to familiarise it in a way which reduces its very capacity for shock.³⁵

But Brooks’s attempts to validate Hirst are further problematic. In its mixture of such canon-building with a search for a “philosophical” ground for the work, Brooks appeals to the sublime at once as the historical project of a broadly conceived avant-garde – a theory arising at a particular historical juncture which finds its purpose as the ground for an artistic tradition which responds to the modern world – yet also as something that is ahistorical: “Burke’s system of the sublime is still, after all this time, a viable proposition” argues Brooks³⁶ because of its appeal to the basics of “human nature,”³⁷ and to the “complex problems of finite embodied existence”³⁸ which guarantee it not just continued but universal relevance. To take such a double-pronged articulation of the notion of the sublime is not in itself entirely contradictory: after all, one might suggest that a particular historical project takes as its justification some kind of (real or imagined) universal or eternal truth, without a logical contradiction occurring, and this is probably what Brooks means in the curious appeal to a “strong and clear philosophy” which would

34 For an analysis of some of canons and art-historical narrative in terms of museology, see for example Carol Duncan, “Moma’s Hot Mamas,” *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 189-207.

35 Brooks is not, of course, alone in appealing to the “well-established tradition” in order to make recent art’s reliance on transgression of the boundaries of the body seem more palatable. See for example Cynthia Freeland, *But Is It Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In her introduction she warns us that “I will begin in the rather grisly present-day world of art, dominated by works that speak of sex or sacrilege, made with blood, dead animals, or even urine or faeces [...] My aim is to defuse the shock a little by linking such work with earlier traditions...” (xix). Freeland’s work thus engages in the paradox of at once championing “shock” but also at the same time defusing that very shock in discussing the work. The first problem, then, of attempting to place Hirst and his generation within a canon of the “shock of the new,” is that it can only be in this paradoxical way, where a “tradition of shock” seems necessary for legitimation, but where the building of such a practice into a tradition or a canon undermines the very work on which that canon is based. But furthermore, the appeal to both tradition and shock marks their (and our) distance from the moment of the historical avant-garde, which attempted to legitimate itself on the grounds merely of a shock aimed precisely at the canons and traditions of art. Fredric Jameson, of course, makes this point about the gulf between the avant-garde and the postmodern practices which continue the traditions of their strategies lying in the difference between the horror with which the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century confronted modernism, and the general acceptance of these same works as entertainment in the present. (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.)

36 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 65.

37 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 67.

38 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 58, quoting Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 130. Brooks also quotes Mark Quinn’s claim that he deals with “the basic questions one is confronted with just by being alive” as a parallel to Hirst, and only stops short of citing Hirst’s (in)famous phrase, “Life and death and all that stuff.”

“support” a tradition. However, the vague phrasing she uses (i.e. “support”) is symptomatic of a more significant confusion between the two strategies which permeates the essay. At the heart of this confusion seem to be the ways that an insistent grounding of the authenticity of the sublime on an ahistorical Burkean physiology serves to undermine each attempt that Brooks makes to argue for the particular relevance of sublimity to contemporary social and cultural conditions.

The question that Brooks begs is that of why it is in particular to Edmund Burke’s sublime and its physiology – a physiology which is now, to say the very least, dated – that we might be turning for a conception of the body as the ground of an artistic experience. Is it precisely because of the dehistoricisation which occurs in Burke’s image of the body as a neutral or passive receptor of phenomena? It appears to be the disarming empirical simplicity and the depoliticising Enlightenment universality which she finds in Burke’s body that draws Brooks’s account in: a pared-down physiology and abstractly “human” subject contrasting forcibly with the complex theorisations of bodily experience in many contemporary theorists, emphasising as they do social and historical contingency.³⁹ The sublime thus reveals itself as a figure (whether Brooks intends her essay to be so or not) in line with the general strategy of Hirst’s conservative supporters who praise his return to the “universal” problems of the human condition – to “life and death and all that stuff” as Hirst has put it so nicely – which free art so effectively from the negotiation of the contingent and changeable political present.⁴⁰

Having noted this set of weaknesses or contradictions in Brooks’s argument, and before moving on to explore them, I would like to suggest that in spite of the naivety of looking to Burke’s physiology for a “strong and

39 Brooks herself in fact indicates that her motives for turning to Burke are to turn away from complexity: she writes, “Burke’s theory can free us from the contemporary tendency to theorise art beyond all emotional impact” (Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 67). There is, however, a certain irony in her using Burke in this way, given Burke’s own distrust of the universalising pretensions of Enlightenment thought, in particular as it is expressed in his writings on the French Revolution. (See for example, Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2004), 118. Here Burke inveighs against the attempts of the new French state to designate rights to “man”, preferring instead the British solution, which accords not human rights *per se*, but “the rights of Englishmen.”) Thus Luke Gibbons draws a very different picture of Burke, whose body in pain and the sympathy it causes counters the universalism of Adam Smith’s sympathetic imagination, and allows a form of transcendent particularity. (Gibbons, *Burke and Ireland*, 83-120.)

40 For an example of such universalising rhetoric, see Hirst, *Damien Hirst’s Pharmacy*. This catalogue for the sale of the Pharmacy work by Sotheby’s repeatedly alludes to Hirst’s work as dealing with “the fragility and ambiguity that lies at the core of human existence” (20), with “the big issues of existence” (48) and “the existential dilemma facing us all” (49). This inflation of the universal in Hirst’s work might function both to guarantee its lasting value for an investor, and also to appeal to those whose stake in the current system of things would ask for a vision of this as an unchanging order...

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Fig. 24: *This Little Piggy Went to Market, this Little Piggy Stayed at Home*, 1996, detail.
Steel, GRP composites, glass, pig, formaldehyde solution, electric motor, 2 tanks, each
120 x 210 x 60 cm. Photo Luke White.

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Fig. 25: *This Little Piggy Went to Market, this Little Piggy Stayed at Home*, 1996, detail.
Photo Luke White.

clear philosophy” to support anything, there is nevertheless a certain value in Brooks’s argument. If we ditch Brooks’s appeal to the mere existence of a “well-established tradition” as grounds for legitimation, and if we reject her embrace of a solid ground of ahistorical truth on which she wishes to “support” this appeal, it *does* seem useful to me to see the sublime in terms of a historical “project” (in Brooks’s term a “tradition”), within which Burke has been a highly influential writer. This project has involved the forging of a Bourdieusian “habitus”⁴¹ – a sensibility, taste, habitual ways of engaging affectively and intellectually with images, with ideas and with the world, and of positioning oneself with relation to these; ways of enjoying one’s embodiment and one’s experiences. It is a project involving the very production and reproduction of “modern” forms of subjectivity. This, however, is not as coherent a genealogy as my use of the term *project* – or for that matter Brooks’s essay – might suggest: it would be a plural project, with multiple, often contradictory and competing strands, discontinuous and sporadic in its appearance, and certainly not always aware of itself as a project. If this project does in fact have any more existence than in my own gathering of it into a figure, it is a project within which both art and philosophy have been important discursive practices amongst others, and in which, with the sporadic insistence which marks Freudian repetition, the notion of the “sublime” crops up again and again. However, the “project” would have to be a wider, more diffuse undertaking than just the philosophical and critical discourse on the sublime and the works which are produced consciously in relation to these. The sublime takes its part within a broader set of cultural imperatives – imperatives which I will go on in this dissertation to link to the development of capitalist culture itself, and which takes in the products of the culture industry and its modes of consumption, as well as the history of vanguardist art. There is thus some logic in placing Hirst’s appeal to a thematics of death, violence, menace and bodily horror within such a genealogy, whether or not Hirst’s version is a “good” or “bad” incarnation of this thematic, and whether or not this thematic itself might be thought to ensure any kind of intrinsic artistic value.

I shall now elaborate Brooks’s attempts to set up the authenticity of this bodily sublime in opposition to the inauthenticity of modern mass culture, and thus her attempt to propose a historical dimension to the importance of the Burkean sublime. Her argument closely follows Paul Crowther’s account of the Burkean sublime,⁴² which centres on the moment where Burke articulates its psycho-physiological function. For Burke, the sublime supplies (mildly) violent

41 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72-95.

42 Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 115-133.

shocks to the nervous system, which serve to stimulate it, and guard against the mental atrophy caused by the languor to which we entropically tend, and which Burke diagnoses as a cause of “Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder.”⁴³ Crowther argues that this aesthetic has become central to modern sensibility. He connects the Burkean sublime to Benjamin’s account of the psychology of the modern urban individual who, due to the constant and repetitive shocks of modern life and labour, undergoes a defensive closing and deadening of the self to outside stimuli.⁴⁴ According to Crowther this closing off of the self, though now imposed from without rather than stemming from the natural tendency to entropy of an organic system, amounts to just the kind of atrophying languor which Burke was concerned with. The Burkean existential sublime, then, becomes increasingly important as a counter to the deadening experience of modern life.⁴⁵

Taking up Crowther’s schema, Brooks applies it to the characteristics of “postmodern” rather than modern culture – to the fast pace and deadening repetition of the “ersatz experiences” of the mass-media:

Postmodern life, with all its manically intrusive, infinite variety of administered experience and ideologies, ironically becomes a tedious continuum of monotony, where choosing how to divert oneself from one’s actual life is in danger of becoming a greater task than actually living it. This enforced lassitude of course deadens our sense of being alive.⁴⁶

For Brooks, the genuine terror she posits as the proper experience of a Hirst (its “existential sublime”) serves as an antidote to all this simulated, repetitive, administered stimulation. It entails that true confrontation with death and “embodied existence” which can return to us a genuine sense of our being alive. At the centre of Brooks’s account of Hirst, then, is a claim for “authenticity”. In contrast to the superficial, predictable offerings of the mass media, she claims the works *do* confront us with our mortality and with the “complex problems of finite embodied existence.” According to Brooks, the works are quite unproblematically “terrifying to behold” and “capable of producing strong nausea or deep fear.”⁴⁷ One needs to be far more sceptical

43 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 4, Sect. 6, “How Pain Can be a Cause of Delight,” 164.

44 See in particular Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992), 83-107, 152-197. Crowther is in particular interested in the “grinding,” “paralysing,” “stifling” and “suffocating” effects of monotony and repetition, figured as a violence against the individual. Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 126.

45 What remains obscure to me is how the economy of the shocks of the sublime would be, in any clear sense, different from that of the other shocks and assaults with which modern life confronts us. What would make them ultimately invigorating rather than merely adding to the trauma of everyday life, and thus a matter of an increasingly psychically rigid, defensive self?

46 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 57.

47 Brooks, “Damien Hirst,” 55.

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Fig 26: Top left: George Stubbs, working drawing for The Second Anatomical Table of the Muscles of the Horse, 1758. Pencil, red chalk and brown ink. 48.4 x 61 cm.

Top right: George Stubbs, finished study for The Third Anatomical Table of the Muscles of the Horse, 1758. Pencil. 36.6 x 50.5 cm.

Bottom left: George Stubbs, finished study for The Fourth Anatomical Table of the Muscles of the Horse, 1758. Pencil and black chalk. 36.2 x 50.5 cm.

Bottom right: George Stubbs, finished study for The Fifth Anatomical Table of the Muscles of the Horse, 1758. Pencil and black chalk. 36.7 x 50.5 cm.

Images from Royal Academy website.

than Brooks about this. Though the sculptures certainly signal fear, terror and death as their subject, it seems highly unlikely that anyone is really confronted with intense terror or nausea in front of them. Brooks seems to mistake the works' literalism, staging real bodies rather than their representations, with a lack of mediation as such. Are the shock-affects delivered by Hirst's works not still as carefully "administered" as the rest of the media discourse which Brooks castigates as leading only to the monotony and lassitude of inauthentic experience?

This kind of claim is the crunch point for accounts of Hirst: it is around this question of whether the works do open up such a genuine confrontation that the line is drawn between those who wish to defend or attack Hirst. For his defenders, like Brooks, Hirst's work is life-affirming in returning us to reality;⁴⁸ for his detractors (for example Julian Stallabrass or Gene Ray) the fault of Hirst's work is precisely that it only pretends to do this, that it offers only simulations, second-hand and clichéd representations of the real, which can in no way be differentiated from all the simulacra and stereotypes of the media. It is around just this issue that the notion of the sublime is introduced as a term either to affirm or to mark a shortcoming in Hirst. But how would we know, for sure, how to locate Hirst? If the sublime is a matter of aesthetic intuition, it is not something given to reason directly; we have no unmediated access to affect or sensation. Furthermore, the sublime has generally involved a somewhat roundabout, ameliorated version of extreme experience, revolving around what Burke terms – precisely with the utmost imprecision – "certain modifications" of "danger or pain" which mean that they do not "press too nearly" to overwhelm any form of aesthetic pleasure with merely unpleasant pain or fright.⁴⁹ The paradox of such a sublime, which is at once "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,"⁵⁰ but also a matter of distance from that powerful emotion, thus exacerbates the problem of evaluating the "sublimity" or otherwise of Hirst's sculptures in relation to some powerful affect.

48 The same pattern of Brooks's use of the sublime to discuss Hirst as an providing an enlivening existential encounter can be seen, for example in Kent, *Shark Infested Waters*, 35. Kent writes: "By looking death in the face its terror is diminished." This is also the central argument of Saltz, "More Life," 82-7.

49 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 7, p.86. Kant similarly insists on the difference between sublimity and mere terror itself, lying in a mediation through representation: "One who is in a state of fear can no more play the part of a judge of the sublime of nature than one captivated by inclination and appetite can of the beautiful. He flees from the sight of an object filling him with dread; and it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained." Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §28.

50 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 7, p.86.

Gene Ray's "Little Glass House of Horrors"

An argument which sets out, in contrast to Brooks, to condemn Hirst as offering only a false sublime is Gene Ray's essay "Little Glass House of Horrors," which focuses on Hirst's sculpture *A Thousand Years* (1990), in which a colony of flies live out their life cycle in a vitrine, feeding on a decapitated cow's head, laying their eggs, and meeting their end in an insectocutor hung above it.⁵¹ Although Brooks's only presence is in a brief and dismissive footnote, Ray's essay can be read as a response to her use of the sublime to affirm Hirst's work. The sublime again operates as a central concept, only now Ray sets out to ask of the experience of the work: "Was this the hit of the sublime or the *frisson* of the ridiculous?"⁵²

Ray's essay brings into play a somewhat more complex theorisation of the experience of viewing a Damien Hirst, as well as more critical reflexivity about this viewing experience. Ray, like Brooks, describes a strong experience – this time "horror, disgust, indignation, anger, sadness" – in front of Hirst's work, and finds that indifference is not an option with regard to it.⁵³ Now, however, the significance of this strong affect becomes questioned: Ray is concerned with contextualising these experiences, and with discussing the political and ethical possibilities which open up from the encounter. Ray concludes that Hirst's work, in aestheticising and spectacularising real violence, leaves the viewer passive and unreflective towards the links between the work and the social conditions it may reflect, and towards their own lives.⁵⁴

For Ray, Hirst's work, although it may act as a powerful allegory of the barbarism of contemporary life, runs the risk, in its conflation of natural life-cycles and images of the technical domination of society, of naturalising this violence, universalising it as a "human condition," and replacing the critical function of art's representation of the negative conditions of contemporary life with an ironic and detached acceptance of these as inevitable.⁵⁵

Ray frames his diagnosis of these problems in terms of the notion of the sublime, drawn this time not from Paul Crowther but from Lyotard's seminal essay, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." On the first page of his essay, Ray sets out the aim of his analysis, a reassessment (in the light of the role of terror

51 Gene Ray, "Little Glass House," 119-33. A version of the essay has also appears in Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 73-88.

52 Ray, "Little Glass House," 130.

53 Ray, "Little Glass House," 130-131.

54 Ray, "Little Glass House," 131.

55 Ray, "Little Glass House," 128. Ray is, of course, drawing from Stallabrass's analysis for this argument. Though Ray makes extensive use of Stallabrass, he nonetheless retains an admirable criticality towards him, just as he does towards Hirst.

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Fig. 27: *A Thousand Years*, 1990. Steel, glass, flies, maggots, MDF, insect-o-cutor, cow's head, sugar, water. 213 x 426 x 213 cm. Installation view at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photo by Luke White.

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Fig. 28: *A Thousand Years*, 1990, detail.

and horror within recent political discourse) of “Hirst’s work and its sensational effects.” His concern is to differentiate the sublime from the cheap thrill:

The sublime hits but the cheap thrill merely bothers. If the difference between the two can be clarified by a close look at what seems to be his strongest installation [...] then Hirst will have justified the effort of a critical response.⁵⁶

Ray returns to this in the final part of his essay, quoting Lyotard in order to distinguish between the sublime and the cheap thrill: “The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies innovation.”⁵⁷

The frame of reference for his conception of the sublime is thus essentially that difference laid out by Lyotard between the “new” and the “now.” The *now* characterises the work of Barnett Newman and other “avant-garde” artists. It involves genuine existential terror, the anxiety that “nothing might happen,” produced by foregrounding the experience of the “event” (*Ereignis*) of the appearance of the fact that there is something rather than nothing, as opposed to the subsequent appearance of that something *as* something-in-particular. Its logic is that of the question, “Is it happening?” In contrast, the *new* characterizes the production of capital’s (false) “innovations,” constituted by a difference which belongs not to the moment of the “is it happening?” but to the point at which the event finds a place within an already-constituted discursive order and the question “is it happening?” gives way to an answer and to the ability to give a name to the event.⁵⁸

Ray mobilises this opposition between the now and the new in order to understand Hirst’s lack of criticality in terms of its imprisonment within the “new” – delivering the mere thrill which leaves everything in its place, rather than the sublime which erupts into discourse to disturb and relativise all of its terms:

The hit of the sublime, to redescribe Lyotard’s distinction in a more explicitly psychoanalytic register, is a trauma that disturbs our immersion in noise and instantaneity. It is the disturbance of real questions, in which everything – who we are and how we live together – is still at stake. Anything less is the illusion of disturbance.⁵⁹

There remains a question as to whether Ray’s version of the “now” as constituting the political “real questions” of our identity and our means of living together can be simply conflated with Lyotard’s account (whose politics

⁵⁶ Ray, “Little Glass House,” 119.

⁵⁷ Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 106, cited in Ray, “Little Glass House,” 133.

⁵⁸ I deal with the distinction between the new and the now in much more detail in Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ Ray, “Little Glass House,” 133.

function more through an ontology of the encounter with the otherness of being beyond language), and how Lyotard's Newmanesque instant of the "now" can be equated with Ray's demand that art forge "reflective links to daily practice."⁶⁰ But what concerns us here is that the same line between the inauthentic life (pre-programmed by a culture industry) and the authentic moment which cuts across this (and to which art should aspire) is being drawn by both Brooks and Ray through their very different appeals to the notion of the sublime. The two merely disagree about which side of this dividing line Hirst belongs.

There is little intrinsic to their theories of the sublime, however, which actually helps decide whether Hirst does achieve any real penetration of the banal or not, beyond the writers' appeals to their own judgments of the piece. We have already noted that Brooks's attempt to distinguish the sublime from the cheap thrills of media society relies on taking Hirst's literalism as a matter of a lack of mediation *per se*. If we abandon this, we are left with the question of why Hirst's work offers a "genuine" and "life-enhancing" confrontation with death, whereas the many representations of death in the media – for example, in violent movies – remain part of the "monotony" of administered experience. Even when this question is raised in Brooks's essay, it is simultaneously erased: she notes, but does not further discuss, the fact that the "need" for a life-affirming confrontation with negation both "forms the basis of a multi-trillion dollar industry, and, in terms of art, can be employed as a contemplative exercise."⁶¹ The difference, Brooks's argument seems to suggest, is that the (genuine) "art" confrontation with mortality is "contemplative," whereas its (false) cinematic cousins are not. But this does not take us much further: how is contemplation guaranteed? By institutional positioning, rituals of viewing? Some – here undefined – quality in the work itself? (Its literalism?) Is it, once more, left to the viewer to decide whether they have had a contemplative (and thus authentic) or a merely administered experience? And how might this viewer know? Above all, why does "contemplation" make the difference? And why does it line up neatly along the lines dividing art and a culture industry?

When it comes to his attempt to locate Hirst in relation to the difference between the shock of the sublime and the frisson of administered culture, Ray also relies somewhat on the literal. In order to make his argument, Ray sets up, in contradistinction to Hirst's sculpture, Jochen Gertz's *Miami Islet*

60 Ray, "Little Glass House," 131. The contrast between the Newmanesque, minimal, and primarily aesthetic work which Lyotard takes as exemplary and the more explicitly politicised work, such as Jochen Gertz's *Miami Islet*, which Ray champions in this essay, or for example Boaz Arad, who he champions later in *Terror and the Sublime* (121-34), also marks a certain divergence of Lyotard's own position from the work which Ray wants him to do in this essay.

61 Brooks, "Damien Hirst," 58.

(1988/9) which, he argues, attempts to provoke audience participation in collusion with officially-sanctioned aggression and so poses the spectator with the moral question of the potential they have within themselves for violence and complicity. Hirst in contrast places the viewer in the position of a (mere) spectator. For Ray, this difference between active participation and passive spectation marks the line between work which presses the viewer to examine their complicity and one that allows them a certain comfortable distance from the work's violence. However, it is not at all clear that the act of participation means any greater degree of reflexivity, nor does our position as a (mere) spectator mean that we are necessarily any less likely to reflect on our complicity with a spectacle staged for our benefit.

Ray pursues his account of the experience of *A Thousand Years* through an observation of other viewers in the gallery, and their responses carry a significant weight of the evidence for his claim that the work provides the *frisson* rather than the sublime. It is the cheering of a group of these other spectators at the moment of the execution of a fly by the insectocutor, and his own consequent revulsion, that suggests to him that the piece offers a choice between fascination and refusal, either propelling us into the spectacular or pushing us away from engagement in a way which forecloses a critically reflective aesthetic experience of the piece. To take issue with Ray, who takes this cheering as evidence of a simple and unreflective collusion with the violence of the work, the inward mental processes behind the outward behaviour of the viewers, mediated as this is by the social norms of behaviour in a public space, could be interpreted in a number of ways: for example as a defensive response to public exposure to an uncomfortable or even mildly traumatic situation, rather than as the displaced expression of a general hostility to culture which Ray perceives. We will, of course, never know anything about what passes through the minds of these characters about their experience as they walk home that evening, or how they may reflect on their behaviour as they lie in bed that night; whether they have a conversation about it afterwards; or whether it has any echoes in their minds as they arrive in their offices the next day (offices which, perhaps, in their minimalist design, echo the pristine surfaces of the work's vitrine); whether they remember the work the next time they swat a fly or see an insectocutor at a kebab house. Ray may be right: they may never think about the work again, they may lose interest and move on to the next distraction – no link to the daily practices of their lives may be forged – but I'm not sure that his observations are a sound basis for a conclusion as to the possibilities inherent in the work, even for this very particular audience. Once again, in spite of the intention of the authors, we seem without recourse to a way of distinguishing between the sublime and the *frisson*, except on the

slippery ground of a subjective response.

The Experience of a Hirst

Such critical responses as Ray's and Brooks's, whether affirming or disaffirming Hirst, do so whilst taking for granted just what the "experience" of a Hirst is. On the one hand, descriptions, such as Brooks's, of an author's experience of terror and horror in front of a Damien Hirst remind me, in the history of the notion of the sublime, above all of Addison's overblown description of his feelings in the Coliseum in Rome: "an amphitheatre's amazing height, / How fills my eye with terror and delight."⁶² Has anyone truly been filled with terror at the height of the Coliseum? It seems unlikely to me.⁶³ Such accounts of unmediated sublimity are suspect inasmuch as they might well be produced as much from an imperative of the terms and conventions of critical discourse itself as from the experience it claims to describe.⁶⁴ However, the equally simple disavowal of the possibility of such an experience by other critics hardly penetrates further, and may equally be determined by the terms of their discourse.⁶⁵

Any account of experience or affect is, of course, on immensely slippery ground. Ray notes as much in his essay, and it has to be said that his account is a brave attempt to deal with his own experience. Such accounts are always mediated by discourse – discourses moreover that, as well as providing a filter through which a flow from experience to description must pass, may also act as a template lying between the world and our experience of it. Such accounts are, furthermore, (again, as Ray notes in relation to his own grapple with Hirst) complicated by the fact that experience is necessarily not entirely present to consciousness, and that conscious discourse can only grasp it through a retrospective process of reconstruction or rationalisation. Taking these observations into account, it is hardly surprising that artworks elicit from critics quite varied responses; but above and beyond this ordinary level of the unreliability of our access to experience, the claims made about Hirst's work are interesting exactly in that they *are* quite so strongly polarised about the kinds of experience that they posit around the work. What kind of an account of the work might be able to explain these polarised responses? Is some kind

⁶² Addison, "A Letter from Italy," *Works*, I, (London: Bohn Standard Library, 1903) 33, cited in Monk, *The Sublime*, 56.

⁶³ Monk, for one, suggests that Addison's hyperbole is "rather ludicrous." (*The Sublime*, 56.)

⁶⁴ I am reminded of Wittgenstein's maxim: "I cannot accept his testimony because it is not *testimony*. It only tells me what he is *inclined* to say." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd ed., (London: Macmillan, 1958), 386. Wittgenstein is thinking of religious conviction, but discourse on aesthetic experience seems to be subject to quite the same objection.

⁶⁵ An extreme case of this is found in Julian Stallabrass's discussion (cited on p.23, above) of the ritual of viewing Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) at the Tate.

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Fig. 29: A fascination with flesh. Viewers at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photo by Luke White.

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Fig. 30: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), detail. Photo Doug Kanter / A.F.P. / Getty Images.

of synthesis possible? Is there something in the work, which might cause such different accounts of experiences to be constructed?

Given the circularity between suppositions and conclusions in both affirmative and critical accounts of Hirst, and given the symmetrical failure of both Brooks and Ray to satisfactorily ground their opposing judgments as to which side of the divide between sublimity and *frisson* to situate his work, it seems hard to finish by accepting either verdict, or to take either as the definitive counter to the other. Neither, furthermore, would seem to do justice to the complexity of my own experience of the work, to which I will now turn in order to try to open up a way of talking about Hirst's sculpture beyond the verdicts which contemporary criticism levels at Hirst; and also to suggest a reason why the work elicits such polarised responses. My response is not ventured in the spirit of evaluation (deciding whether Hirst "is" sublime or not) but rather in order to think through how the sculpture works, and how it engages us with such judgments of its value according to the sublime.

In contrast to Brooks's and Ray's accounts of Hirst, it seems to me that what is interesting in the work – and what allows it to produce such opposing readings – is precisely that it plays a strange *fort / da* game of "peekaboo" with us. What strikes me is that the "experience" of Hirst's best work – for example his seminal *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), which I saw for the first time in the Saatchi Gallery many years ago – is just so very elusive. The important thing is not so much either that Hirst is a good artist because he offers us an alternative to the clichéd images of mass culture, or that he fails artistically because he cannot do so: rather, Hirst's work is emphatically built of clichés piled up upon each other, images which are always already so mediated that as we stand in front of the work we are faced with something of an eerie feeling, either that we have seen this all before or that we are still not actually quite in its *presence* as such, here, now, in front of this work (in spite of its excessive and emphatic physicality). One is never sure, it would seem to me, if one is to be honest, whether one has ever "felt" something in front of a Hirst, or merely *read*, in its overderetermined language, so packed as it is with the exaggerated semiotics of conventional pathos, that the feeling is present to the work. In the confrontation with a Hirst, if it can be called a confrontation (it seems to me that I rarely ever come to a point where I am face-to-face enough with one to call this a confrontation, or even an encounter), we are suspended between the *deja-vu* and its opposite – a missed encounter with the real (with all the implications this phrase conjures up⁶⁶)

66 See "Tuché and Automaton," in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, 11 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 53-64.

which might in turn reflect, in Zizekian terminology, an “unbearable closure of being” in the contemporary, symbolically-saturated world.⁶⁷

Such, at least, seems to have been the experience I have had in front of *Physical Impossibility*. A (non-)experience which slipped through my fingers, but which returns to haunt me nonetheless. And if I say I am not sure what happened in front of the sculpture, this is not, I think, just an accident of my poor memory. “Missing” an encounter with the work has been the pattern for me ever since; not that kind of absolute “missing” that would leave me with a lack of any sensation, without being aware of having missed something, but precisely this positive sensation of an absence. Rather than an arbitrary event, the missed encounter is intrinsic to the nature of the work itself, and the discourses around it, which already structure an expectation of a set of possibilities, and make it easy to project – as Brooks and Ray both in fact also do – any of these things (either retrospectively or in advance) into that moment in which one stands in front of the tank of formaldehyde. It is not, after all, accidental that I had already heard of Hirst, nor of this particular sculpture, which came to the work’s audience (not just to me, I’m sure) first off as a rumour (about the guy who’s pickled an enormous shark and called it art), then as an image in newspapers, art magazines and even on television, before one had ever stepped into the gallery. The “conceptual” form of the work,⁶⁸ which allows it to be summed up in so few words and still to carry a complex of connotations ensured this, as did the calculatedly photogenic simplicity of its iconic form, the anecdotal charm of the stories and rumours of its cost, commissioning and process of production, and the careful manipulation of a media whose concerns and myths the work echoed, and whose punchy visual language it spoke.

The work, then, structurally, cannot simply be located in the gallery; this is not where it “takes place.” Rather it occurs for us, if it occurs at all, in the non-space of the relation between the gallery and its other sites of representation: the newspaper, the magazine and the television screen.⁶⁹ The work thus seems absent to us in our physical confrontation with it in the gallery; it constitutes a peculiar spatio-temporal disjunction from its own image, producing in me, I think, a mild vertigo of absence and dislocation from myself. The piling up of clichés in Hirst’s work (like the debris which Benjamin’s angel of history

67 See Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 127-70.

68 By “conceptual” I mean to refer to the way that a brand is marketed through a “concept” rather than to the way that the term is used to refer to a late-twentieth-century art movement

69 Perhaps this is what Jon Thompson meant in his perceptive observation that Hirst’s vitrines do not really function as sculptures at all, but rather, their glassy surfaces are the equivalent of a cibachrome transparency. See his essay in Juliet Steyn, ed., *Endgames*, A.C.T. 3, (London: Pluto, 1997).

finds piled up in front of it), heaps of the all-too-familiar, stock-in-trade images of media culture, serves to exacerbate this; as a result the “meaning” of the work is always prior to it, and comes to us only as an uncanny return. And the emphatically visceral physicality of the work, demanding an imaginary identification between our bodies and its dead flesh, also only serves to make the work more absent to us: this physicality is so much in excess of the work’s “message” – just as that message presents an excess of the overdetermination of easy meaning in relation to the physical presence of the work – that the two registers seem always to slip past each other, never quite meeting, always at odds, each presenting the other with a remainder that disturbs its smooth function.

The work, then, functions according to what Derrida terms “spectrality.”⁷⁰ With the spectre, as here in Hirst’s sculpture, it is precisely the antinomies of presence / absence, and material / ideal which disintegrate, each proving a supplement of the other.⁷¹ In the spectre there is no closure in the final reduction of one term to the other. With the spectral, one cannot speak simply of what is absent or present or of what “is” or “is not,” as ontology does. Derrida suggests that instead one needs to think in terms of a “hauntology”, which deals with that which is neither simply there or not – much as is the case with that with which we are (not) confronted in Hirst.⁷² In this regard, both Brooks’s and Ray’s attempts to discuss Hirst’s work are fundamentally ontological, and cannot get to grips with just how haunted it is. Like other ontology, they attempt to cleanse the work of its spectrality in order to distinguish the work’s phantoms – the phantoms of a culture industry and a universe of commodities – from its reality, in order to be able to say what it “is” and what it “is not”, which is to

70 This is the key term expounded throughout Derrida, *Specters*. Through the last paragraphs, a series of terms and themes which take on particular significance within Derrida’s works have come to the fore – haunting, the play of presence and absence, the remainder, the return, and so on.

71 The spectre marks, as Warren Montag puts it “the ideality of the material and the materiality of the ideal.” Warren Montag, “Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*”, in Michael Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 71. Which is just what a “conceptual” work made up of something as emphatically substantial as a fourteen-foot tiger shark also seems to evoke...

72 Derrida, *Specters*, 63. Interestingly, Derrida brings in the notion of “hauntology” in a discussion of the paradoxical (non-)presence of telecommunicational media. I have just been discussing the way that Hirst’s work also sets its spectrality in motion through its participation within such media, which not only create the unreal presence of that which is distant, or only a representation, but also start to turn the physical reality in front of us itself into a representation, dematerialising the very material world in which we live, making it non-present to us... But hauntology is not only for Derrida a matter of the media; the spectral is also a matter of the commodity itself, and of our modern time (which is “out of joint”), and perhaps, in its other forms, even older than that, with roots in speculative theology, the abstractions of reason, and religion itself. See e.g. Derrida, *Specters*, 202.

say, whether or not it “is” sublime.⁷³ But the issue is not whether Hirst’s work is sublime or not-sublime; it is neither (and both): it is *haunted* by the sublime; by its histories, by its images, by its affects.⁷⁴

Such a spectral phenomenality is not unique to Hirst. It has been central in the culture of the modern period (and, as Derrida emphasises, such a phantom phenomenality has been exacerbated by the forms of telepresence of late-twentieth-century media which I have here proposed as a key context within which to understand the absence-presence of Hirst’s work).⁷⁵ But spectrality is also, Derrida reminds us, above all to be associated with the phenomenality of capital and commodities.⁷⁶ His term is drawn from Marx’s insistent set of metaphors, in which the landscape of capitalism is a “phantasmagoria,”⁷⁷ a gathering of spooks in which tables get up and dance, cloth speaks, goods possess and ventriloquise economists, and capitalists are

73 For a discussion of such a relation between ontology and the spectral see for example Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations*, 59.

74 We are also being pulled back in another way into the gravitational field of a discourse on the sublime. For the spectre – by its definition – presents us precisely with something unrepresentable, and the sublime has been defined as the presentation of an unrepresentable. (The terms are Kant’s, with “presentation” a translation of *Darstellung*. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §23.) If Lyotard, as we shall see, understands the sublime as an irruptive “event”, Derrida also describes the spectre as an “event”. (Derrida, *Specters*, 10, 44-5, 98.) The appearance of such a spectre, in its extreme indeterminacy and unfinishedness raises the Lyotardian question “Is it happening?” It is never certain what ghost is visiting, or whether we are experiencing a return at all. Hirst’s work is an exemplar of just such an experience, where the vanishing of the work into the in-between space of mediated representation, and the indeterminacy of cliché and actual felt presence, presents us with the anxiety of the “privation” of the event, the anxiety that *nothing* may, in fact, happen at all. Hirst’s work, just as Barnett Newman’s, may well find us in this state, even if a rather different form of contemplation may well be elicited in each case. Part of the difference may be that the “now” at stake with Hirst is one which is directly historical in its nature: it is the “now” at the edge of the occlusion of the “Real,” the eclipse of experience performed by the “mass-media” culture of late capitalism, by the increasing totalisation of its capture of reality in representation. However, this unrepresentability – should we call it a “spectral sublime”? – is no longer a matter of a sublime which can be held out, as both Ray and Brooks wish to do, in opposition to the illusions and machinations of capital and the commodity, its mere cheap thrills. Such a spectral sublime is a matter of a logic of capital itself. It involves and ties together in its economy of appearance and non-appearance both the Lyotardian “new” and the “now.”

75 “The medium of the media themselves (news, the press, telecommunications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity [...]), this element is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralises. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life and death. It requires, then [...] *hauntology*.” Derrida, *Specters*, 63.

76 See in particular Derrida’s long discussion of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form. Derrida, *Specters*, 186-221. This forms the climax of Derrida’s book.

77 The phantasmagoria was a popular entertainment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a variation of the magic lantern show, in which a procession of moving and transforming supernatural images were projected in a dark room, along with an atmospheric soundtrack. The term was coined by its inventor, the showman Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, and probably derives from the combination of the Greek terms *phantasma* (phantom) and *agoreuein* (to speak in public; the term is also related to the *agora*, the market and city’s gathering place.) Terry Castle, “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (1988): 29. For more on the phantasmagoria, see pp.202-208, below.

undead vampires.⁷⁸ Hirst's work's spectrality does not mark itself off from this realm of commodities as belonging to a separate sphere of art. Rather, Hirst's sculpture absorbs itself in the spectral logic of commodities. If it has any special value beyond that which we seek in other more humdrum cultural commodities, it is in the extent to which in an exaggerated mimesis it *stages* its own spectrality, brings it more clearly to the surface of experience, even if not actually to consciousness itself. (After all, Hirst's work does not quite amount to a deconstruction, let alone a critique.) Questions of the value of Hirst's work aside, we should in any case remember that Marx himself proposed that the commodity is a "social hieroglyph" (full of society's "metaphysical subtleties") which requires careful reading and interpretation; this is what is at the very least due an art such as Hirst's.⁷⁹

This hieroglyphic quality of the culture of the commodity, as it is articulated by Derrida, has further implications for a reading of Hirst. The commodity's phantasmagoria is not only that which makes the appearance of reality shimmer as if in a heat haze,⁸⁰ it also involves a temporality of haunting historical revisitation. The spectre, after all, is, in French, a *revenant*, the ghost which returns. It is bound into a *Nachträglichkeit* in which events and images are never sufficient to themselves. Their meaning is always (already) deferred, to be completed in another reiteration. The coming and going of such spectral figures – as we shall see in particular in the Part 2 of this dissertation – is bound in to the fractured historical time of capitalism and its traumatic breaks and upheavals. Even work such as Hirst's is bound in to the recurrence of the history of a violence which haunts the commodity. Furthermore, as Derrida articulates the notion of the spectral, the *revenant* is not only a figure returning from the past, but also an intimation of a desired utopian future. In his analysis of Derrida's book, Fredric Jameson understands this as a form of messianic rather than progressive utopianism which haunts the moments where the

78 See in particular Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Richard Dixon, *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 35 of 50, (Moscow and London: Progress Publishers and Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), available online at the Marx and Engels Internet Archive, 2000 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume35/index.htm>> 04 March 2007, Volume 1, Chapter 1. But whilst Marx (like Ray and Brooks) aims to dispel the spectral to return us to the material facts of existence, Derrida's contribution has been to show how the logical effect of such an attempt at closure is always to multiply the supplement on which closure in fact relies. Marx's exorcism of the ghosts of capital is an act as magical as any conjuration of them. See in particular Derrida, *Specters*, 57-60.

79 Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 1, Section 4.

80 I borrow this vivid metaphor of the shimmering effect of appearance in capital from Fredric Jameson's essay on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker, Radical Thinkers (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 38.

grounds for hope are looking decidedly thin.⁸¹ Hirst's moment, in which Neoliberal ideologues proclaimed an end of history, was one of these times. Such a logic marks a political resignation in Hirst, but also the messianic force of the spectre which can be found, however weakly, in the commodity itself, and – why not? – especially in the most commodified forms of our culture, the points at which we would expect the “symptom” of capital to appear. Especially, that is to say, in the work of Damien Hirst.

*

It is to Lyotard that I will next turn, in order to start to think through the relation between capitalism and the sublime. Lyotard's essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” forms a key touchstone for both of the essays I have been discussing here. It also stood as a central resource in the “return” to the notion of the sublime in art-critical writings in the eighties and nineties. This essay, like Ray's and Brooks's, is ostensibly an attempt to separate and distinguish the mode of the sublime from that of the commodity form, and it raises the spectre of the sublime, just as I do here, to investigate the problem of art and culture under capitalist conditions. Lyotard's essay subjects the logic on which Ray and Brooks rely to a much more in-depth philosophical exploration. I shall be arguing that the value of the essay does not lie in its ostensible aim to separate sublime art from commodified culture, but rather in the rich texture of its argument, often woven as it is of contradiction and paradox. Through this texture, Lyotard draws out the logic by which we can understand the sublime not just as a cultural mode set against capitalism, but also as the expression of a logic of capital itself. In Lyotard's essay's self-deconstruction of its terms, the paradoxes and contradictions of Ray's and Brooks's essays on Hirst start to become clear.

⁸¹ Jameson, “Ghostly Demarcations,” 60-4.

Chapter 2

The New and the Now

... Right now the world is different from every other time there's ever been. And what if, just maybe, this is the first time money's ever become important for artists? And maybe for ever after this it will be. Maybe we're just at that point. Where money's an element in the composition.

Maybe it's just hard luck; I was born at the wrong time. This is what I do. You're a conduit from art to money. It's getting closer and closer and closer. And if money becomes king, then it just does. But there's a point where you've got to take it on.

— Damien Hirst¹

Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art.

— Jean-François Lyotard²

Over the next two chapters, I will be turning to Jean-François Lyotard's 1984 essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in order to throw light on the contradictions I have found within the "sublimes" of the essays by Brooks and Ray on Hirst, on both of which Lyotard's work has been enormously influential.³ Lyotard's writing on the sublime was instrumental to the prominence of the sublime in art theory during the 1980s. Although after Lyotard's death, and with the turn against a "postmodernism" with which he is largely (though problematically) associated, his work has now been somewhat eclipsed by Zizek's more currently fashionable essays on the topic,⁴ Lyotard

1 Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, "The Naked Hirst (Part 2)," *Guardian* 6 October 2001: 138, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,564027,00.html>> visited 12 Jan 2005.

2 Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Inhuman*, 106. Further quotations from this essay, though first published in *Artforum* 22 (1984), will be from the version of the essay in *The Inhuman*, and where the source is clear, for the sake of space, with quotations from *The Inhuman* I shall merely include the page number within the body of the text itself. This version of the essay includes a series of revisions made by Lyotard for the delivery of the piece at a conference in Cambridge in 1984. Though Lyotard wrote it in French, since its first publication – and the primary context for its "intervention" into art discourse – is a primarily Anglo-American, English-speaking art-world, and since this is the context in which I am tracking its influence, I feel justified in dealing primarily with the English text, rather than Lyotard's French.

3 With Ray the influence is direct and clear, whilst with Brooks, the influence is via Crowther, whose work can be read as a reply to Lyotard, who receives quite some treatment within those of his works on which Brooks draws.

4 See especially Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*; Zizek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*; Slavoj Zizek, "Modernism and the Stalinist Sublime," *Parkett* 58 (2000): 6-9. Within my own account, I have largely passed over Zizek. I have chosen to concentrate on Lyotard instead, for a number of reasons. First, I am approaching the sublime in terms of a history which focuses on Hirst and on a particular moment, which Zizek's theory seems to slightly post-date. Lyotard's sublime seems, in contrast, more useful in order to

was nonetheless the figure most associated with the revival of the notion of the sublime in “theory” during the eighties and nineties. Lyotard has written prolifically on the sublime,⁵ but it is primarily “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” which became a central touchstone in discussions of the sublime in relation to contemporary art, partly because it is the essay in which he most clearly treats of the two together, and also because its original publication, within the art magazine *Artforum*, made it an *intervention* into the discourses on contemporary art production. Since contemporary art is at the root of my own interest in the sublime, I shall focus on this particular essay, rather than

understand this particular moment. It is Lyotard who is both the influential force and typical exemplar of the way that the sublime enters the critical discourse of the early nineties. Lyotard’s concerns are also closer to my own interest in Hirst, centred as they are on the relation between the sublime and capital. Zizek’s sublime, furthermore, seems to come from a very particular tradition of thought, and is as much keyed around Lacan’s conceptions of sublimation and symptom as they are around a tradition of theories of the sublime. Zizek’s expositions of Lacan are also rather doctrinaire, focused around the display of a mastery of the material which Lacan’s own deliberately enigmatic style of writing resists. My decision has thus been to ignore, within this dissertation, this strand of contemporary thought on the sublime, as both less relevant and less interesting for my project. For an alternative version of the Lacanian sublime to Zizek’s, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature* (London: Palgrave Press, 2001), 73-83.

5 Lyotard’s references to the notion of the sublime are too many to be worth listing in full here, however, for particular relevance, see the essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism?” for his earlier comments on sublimity. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 71-82. The discussion of the sublime is 77-82.) Although these remarks, due to the notoriety of the book, are perhaps even more cited (at the very least in the broader academic sphere) than those in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” they are also much more brief, and “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” can be understood to elaborate on them. Also perhaps centrally significant in Lyotard’s corpus on the sublime is Lyotard’s, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. In this, a detailed, if “strong,” reading of Kant’s Third Critique, Lyotard gives his lengthiest account of the sublime. Coming somewhat later in Lyotard’s career, and as a piece of abstract thinking, much less aimed at discourses on art, it has been less influential on these, and moves away somewhat from the concerns of the current essay. More relevant are the other essays in *The Inhuman*, the collection of Lyotard’s work in which “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” found its place, many of which also touch on the question of the sublime and modern/contemporary art. See also Jean-François Lyotard, “Complexity and the Sublime,” *Postmodernism*, eds. Lisa Appignanesi and Geoffrey Bennington, I.C.A. Documents 4-5 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), 19-26. In “Post-script to Terror and the Sublime,” in *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, eds. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992), 81-86, Lyotard explores further the relation of the sublime to Kant’s later political writings, questions of terror and totalitarianism, fascism and capitalism, and the work of the avant-garde’s “anamnesis,” as not exactly a “politics of the sublime” but rather “an aesthetics of the sublime in politics” (85), as a resistance both to nazism and globalised capitalism. A further interesting take on the sublime is in the as-yet untranslated essay, “La Peinture Du Secret à L’ère Postmoderne: Baruchello,” *Traverses* 30-31 (1984): 95-101. Here Lyotard suggests the possibility, which for him is realised in the work of Gianfranco Baruchello, of finding an alternative sublime to that of the Romantics, and which will be more suited to a “postmodern” era: one which can be understood in terms of a “babbling” of images, rather than the Kantian prohibition of representation. Such a sublime, constituted by an infinite profusion of fragments, is rather more playful and less over-serious than the Romantic sublime, and, suggests Lyotard, might serve as a “laxative” for philosophy. This essay, from a slightly earlier stage in Lyotard’s work on the sublime, opens the way to an art of the ridiculous sublime, in opposition to the more serious work on Newman, which places an altogether more constipated sublimity of the avant-garde in opposition to the bathos of capitalist culture...

Lyotard's broader philosophical corpus in which an ethics and aesthetics of the sublime is developed. I will engage in a close reading of this particular text, bringing in Lyotard's other works as and when they are relevant. My approach to Lyotard is motivated in particular by an interest in what the essay proposes about a relation between the sublime, contemporary art and the culture of capitalism, a concern which we have already seen emerge in the critical literature on Hirst. These are also the concerns in general of the essays collected in Lyotard's *The Inhuman*, the collection within which "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" found its place, and it is primarily within the arguments of this volume that I will be contextualising the essay. Being determined by this objective and by this object of study, my discussion of Lyotard will take a rather different focus from many of the readings that have been made of Lyotard's sublime, which generally start from a disciplinary alignment with philosophy. The goal of such papers is usually to think through the relation between Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime and the ethics of his late works, or his relation to a tradition of continental thought spanning from Kant to Heidegger and Adorno.⁶ Given my concern with the Hirstean moment, it is also not my aim to argue through the ways that Lyotard's philosophical project may (or may not) have been superseded by those philosophical writings since his death which have taken a rather different philosophical tack.⁷

The present chapter will thus start with Lyotard's differentiation – which we have already found at work in Gene Ray's essay – between the temporality of the sublime "event" (an experience of the "now") and the mere *frisson* of the "new" that the world of commodities provides us, a distinction which Lyotard uses to contrast the temporal logic of the avant-garde to that of capital. In the current chapter, a detailed examination of Lyotard's arguments will serve to investigate whether the opposition between the two temporal logics, set up in terms of the opposition between high art and mass culture, sustains itself.

6 See, for example, Richard Beardsworth, "On the Critical 'Post': Lyotard's Agitated Judgement," *Judging Lyotard*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1992), 43-80; Anthony David, "Lyotard on the Kantian Sublime," *International Studies in Philosophy* 29.4 (1997): 1-9; M. Drolet, "The Wild and the Sublime: Lyotard's Post-Modern Politics," *Political Studies* 42.2 (1994): 258-73; Stuart Sim, *Lyotard and the Inhuman*, Postmodern Encounters (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001); Wilhelm S. Wurzer, "Lyotard, Kant, and the in-Finite," *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 201-12.

7 I have already mentioned Zizek. There is also a critique of Lyotard's sublime in Jacques Rancière, *Malaise Dans L'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2004). The other author of central prominence in European thought whose ideas may form an interesting counterpoint to Lyotard's is Alain Badiou, whose theory of the "event" contrasts starkly with Lyotard's own. (See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham [London: Continuum, 2007].) Rancière's and Badiou's work has been important within a larger challenge to the kinds of approach of Lyotard's generation to thinking about identity and the ethical relation to the "other," and to the question of the possibilities of the political. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there has been, perhaps, a certain rethinking of the radical left's relation to a legacy of Marxism.

The question of the relation between high art and the culture industry is a particularly pertinent one in the case of Hirst, whose work so uneasily straddles the two.

I will argue that such a difference between the new and the now collapses at a number of points in Lyotard's essay – but this, rather than the essay's failure, is its very strength. In the detail of its argumentative texture it performs a self-deconstruction of its own premises. The essay's movement against its own conclusions, marks it out as a piece of genuinely rich philosophical thought – which is, like the thought which Lyotard himself champions in this essay, a matter of an "agitation" (90) quite in excess of any programme, project or position. Such thought, fecund in contradiction, demands further interpretation, and is fertile ground for such endeavour. The problematic but rich thinking in Lyotard's sublime is more valuable than his conclusions, which open into an attractively familiar (but for that all the more problematic) leftist, post-Marxist territory: on the one hand a grand, if chilling – should we even say sublime? – vision of the evils of capitalism as a form of instrumentalising rationality, and on the other hand the outline of a "proper" mode of resistance through intellectual and aesthetic work, which can only be the more seductive to those, like me, whose livings and lives are invested in such domains. Attractive as this position may be, the detail of his argument – and the way that his objectives come apart within it – shows that these conclusions are in fact both the most intellectually banal and the most problematic things about the essay.

I will be arguing here that the implication of the essay, read against its own grain, is that the new and the now are in fact moments within a single, pulsing economy of representation. It is this yoking together of the two that forms a temporal and cultural logic of capitalism itself. Thought in this way, the "event" of the sublime no longer inherently resists capital, but forms an integral part of its general economy. This raises fundamental questions about how we should evaluate Lyotard's diagnosis of capital as a totalising "monad in expansion" (94), and opens us to understanding it not just as a monstrous, all-devouring machine, but also as a system which functions through constant crises and uncertainty. Thinking further about the implications of such a reconsideration of Lyotard's monad, however, will be the focus of Chapter Three.

Lyotard and the Temporality of the Sublime

Lyotard sets up the "new" and the "now" as opposing temporal logics of the movement of discourse. The "now" involves a break in the flow of discourse, an "event" where institutionalised discourse is forced to confront its other (in Lyotard's terms, something like the *différend*, that which cannot be

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Fig. 31: Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-1. Oil on canvas. 242 x 541 cm.
Museum of Modern Art New York.

spoken, a muteness outside language⁸), a moment in which the speaking and knowing subject is faced with the very aporia from which discourse comes into being: a moment of “Is it – is *something* – is *anything* – happening?” rather than “*Such-and such* is happening,” or even “Is *this thing* happening?”

The new, in opposition to this, Lyotard associates with discourse under capitalism, and is associated with notions of *innovation* and *information*. It involves a more sure-footed movement of discourse through the known, the already-knowable, and the already-speakable, a movement which seems to cover over, to colonise or erase the moment of doubt from which Lyotard suggests speech must spring. The difference is essentially one which is familiar in the tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics as that between the indeterminate judgement of the aesthetic, and the determinate judgements of the understanding as it subjects the particulars of sensory experience to the “universals” of its concepts.⁹

Lyotard starts his investigation of the temporality of the sublime “event” with Barnett Newman, and the moment of presence – without representation of another, external time or place to that of the encounter of the artwork – which Newman theorises in his now-famous article, “The Sublime Is Now,” and stages in his paintings through the encounter between the viewer and the direct materiality of the flat, non-representational surface of the picture.¹⁰ Lyotard then traces the philosophical and artistic provenance of this “nowness,” spiralling through a series of different philosophical and historical contexts, first discussing it in terms of a general theory of the temporality of discursivity and its confrontation with that which escapes it; then turning to a history of the emergence of a rhetorical and philosophical grasp of the temporality of the “now” in writings on the notion of the sublime, tracing forms of this “now” as sublime from Longinus through Boileau, Burke, and Diderot to Kant; and then tracing his lineage of the logic of the “now” into twentieth-century avant-garde art’s successive “ex minimis” revolts against any formulation

8 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Theory and History of Literature 46 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

9 This distinction stems centrally from Kant’s exposition of aesthetic judgement in the third *Critique*. However, Lyotard seems to be writing in particular within a heritage that reads Kant through Nietzsche and, in turn, especially through Heidegger’s reappraisal of Nietzsche’s reading of Kant. It is Heidegger that Lyotard cites as his source for a notion of the aesthetic as an “event,” an *Ereignis*. For Heidegger, such an aesthetic event involves an ethical relation to the otherness of the world which will not submit it to the violences of conceptual and instrumental reason, to technology, and constitutes a kind of openness to and “being with” (*Mitsein*) what we are not. See especially Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell, vol. 1, *The Will to Power as Art* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961), 107-114.

10 Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now,” *Art in Theory 1900-90: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 572-574. Originally published as Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now,” *Tiger’s Eye* 1.6 (1948): 51-3.

of the requirements for artistic experience. He finally turns to the “attacks” on this avant-garde tradition, as one which preserves the uncertainty of the event within a modern world in which it is not generally welcome, first by the totalitarian states of the first half of the century, and more recently (“directly”) by “market economics.”¹¹ It is in this final section Lyotard most emphatically sets the temporality of the now against the “new,” associating the former with the avant-garde, and the latter with the workings of capital and the culture industry. My first task shall be an explication of this section of Lyotard’s essay, in order to tease out quite what is at stake, in particular with respect to the relations between the sublime and commodified, capitalist culture. To unpack this, I shall then go back and place it in the context of the more general theory of the temporality of discourse’s confrontation with its other, which Lyotard sets up towards the start of the essay.

The Temporality of the New

Lyotard identifies the logic of the new with three terms: *information*, *innovation* and *capital*. In fact, for Lyotard the temporal logic of the new stems from the conjunction of the three under the socio-economic and technical conditions of late capitalism. Under the temporal regime of the new, these three things are incorporated into a single system – at once cybernetic, economic and communicational – within which information, innovation and capital have become *exchangeable* for each other. At the heart of the new lies a single temporal logic tying together flows of capital, information and (scientific, technological, linguistic, artistic and commercial) innovation. Not only do these things flow in a similar way, but they flow together, stimulating each other and exchanging for each other.¹²

For Lyotard this temporality is precipitated by the development of the late capitalist information economy, as “work becomes a control and manipulation of information” and “the availability of information becomes the only criterion of social importance” (105). “Information” and economic value have become inextricably linked, inasmuch as information itself has become a form of capital – perhaps the primary form of value in late-twentieth-century society.

Within such an economy, information is bound to newness by the brevity of its life: it is “information” only for the brief moment of exchange in which it is unknown to its recipient; as long, in other words, as it is not that which can be taken for granted, an “environmental given” (105). In capitalism’s information

¹¹ Lyotard, *Inhuman*, 104. Lyotard places the word “directly” in scare quotes.

¹² See also, Lyotard, *The Differend*, 173., where Lyotard makes it clear that capitalism is to be understood as the hegemony of the phrase “genre” of economic exchange: everything is to be reduced to its exchangeability, all phrases are to be subjected to this law of exchange.

economy, in order to preserve one's investment in information – in order for one's investment not to evaporate along with the novelty of the information – that information, in its brief lifespan, needs to produce further (new) pieces of information, which can in turn be invested.¹³ The time of information is thus not simply that of a unique event, but of the dynamics of the movement between one piece of information and the next. Movement from one piece of information to the next must proceed quickly, and with maximised certainty of a result.

What is at stake in this movement of information – and the nature of the intimacy between capital, information and innovation – becomes clear in Lyotard's account of the burgeoning art market of the 1980s, which produced a "formula" for profitable innovation, a formula which Lyotard understands in terms of just this kind of information theory.

In order to be a "success" (106) contemporary art must strike a balance between providing some form of "innovation" and giving the audience something familiar through which to start to make sense of this "new" thing. In Lyotard's informational terms, the artist must mix " 'Strong' information", irreducible to the audience's "code," with that which is familiar and manageable within that code. He writes: "The secret of an artistic success, like that of a commercial success, resides in the balance between what is surprising and what is 'well-known', between information and code" (106). Lyotard goes on to use this to account for the eclectic, citational nature of the art of the "transavantgarde":¹⁴ "This is how innovation in art operates: one re-uses formulae confirmed by previous success, one throws them off balance by combining them with other, in principle incompatible, formulae, by amalgamations, quotations, ornamentations, pastiche" (106).

The image emerges of an art reduced to speculation in the realm of artistic gestures – echoing the Neoliberal hyper-entrepreneurialism of the nineteen-eighties.¹⁵ There is a certain "investment" at once in the images of the past, and also in the artistic "innovations" which will (hopefully) guarantee the

¹³ It is, of course, here that Hirst's shark is an apt image. A number of commentators on the image have noted the now-almost-conventional equation between the shark, which needs to be in constant movement to keep living, and the nature of capital itself, the value of which would also collapse if it were to come to rest. An economy based on investment needs to give a return; it must necessarily be an economy of perpetual growth; it is condemned to the perpetual restlessness of the mythical shark; a restlessness whose uncanny reminder we are faced with as we walk around the faces of Hirst's huge tank producing the illusion that the shark is momentarily set in motion.

¹⁴ "Transavantgarde" was a term coined by the critic and curator Bonito Achille Oliva in order to gather together and champion a loose group of artists working in the 1980s, whose work returned to painting, to the figurative, and to a play of eclectically chosen signs and historical reference. It marked a turning away from the Greenbergian project of a progressive, formalist modernism.

¹⁵ For a portrait of this economic context, see, for example, Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991).

profitability of the new product.¹⁶ It need only produce the movement, the flow (of dollars, images, information and innovation) which capital with its logic of investment – and information with its brevity – demand.¹⁷

Lyotard's description of such a logic, and the appeal that he makes to cybernetic, information and systems theory, also needs to be put in context of the broader project of the essays in *The Inhuman*,¹⁸ which gather themselves together through a shared concern with the possibilities of resistance to an "inhuman" (cybernetic) system of late twentieth-century capitalism, and to what Lyotard understands as its drive to reduce everything to its terms and its ends, annihilating or erasing anything which does not fit into its project of infinite expansion.

This "system" has obvious overtones of Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal analysis of a "dialectic of Enlightenment," in which the development of reason (especially the techno-scientific, instrumental reason developed during the Enlightenment) to conquer nature and liberate humankind from the thrall of its necessity also, however, operates by a symmetrical subjugation of humankind's "inner nature" and ends up subjugating what is truly human in us to the new imperatives of Weber's "iron cage" of reason: efficiency,

16 A similar logic of the creation of capital through an informational temporality is diagnosed, for example in Tessa Morris-Suzuki's essays, which charted the erosion of Marx's Labour Theory of Value – though not, of course, of exploitation and domination of a labour force – under the conditions of an information economy. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Robots and Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1.147 (1984): 109-21; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Capitalism in the Computer Age," *New Left Review* 1.160 (1986): 81-91. Such an analysis of the movement away from a capitalism based on the Law of Value, towards one which depends on exploitation of and through informational flows is also the subject of the analyses made by Antonio Negri. See for example Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, esp. 220-350. For the plight of "creative" workers in such an economy (temporary work with lack of financial security, the perpetual need to re-skill, working for cheap in the hope of progressing their career, etc.), see Angela McRobbie, *Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (London: Routledge, 1998), esp. 175-189.

17 One of the frightening things about the image with which Lyotard presents us is that for this art – as a machine to multiply value through the circulation of images, signs, information, novelty, and of course capital – "content" or "substance" can be entirely arbitrary, though it might be well to note that it was not perhaps merely the "arbitrariness" of such an art that caused left-leaning critics of the time problems with it. Hal Foster's *Recodings*, for example, makes it clear that the kinds of sign that come to the fore in such affirmative forms of the "postmodern" art and architecture of pastiche are precisely those of Western hegemonic tradition: a resurrection of national myths (in an unpleasant echo of fascist art), primitivism, gendered stereotypes, etc.: in short, expressions of the hegemonic ideologies of Conservatism that supported the Reagan-Thatcher revolution. As we shall see, it is also perhaps not quite just this arbitrariness which Lyotard seems to find problematic, although at this point, Lyotard's opposition between "noise" and "'strong' information" seems to suggest such a position.

18 The essays collected in the volume are in fact all pieces produced to respond to particular contexts and invitations. As Meaghan Morris has pointed out, Lyotard has been primarily a writer who responds to particular invitations and circumstances. His pieces all have something of the 'tactical' about them, and the different bodies of work, adapting themselves to the different contexts into which they are intervening, have taken on quite different stylistic qualities. (See Meaghan Morris, "Postmodernity and Lyotard's Sublime," *Art & Text* 16 [1984]: 49.) Nonetheless, there is a set of shared concerns which echo throughout the essays.

control, productivity, and so on.¹⁹ Under such a system of instrumental reason, human beings become themselves mere instruments. In Lyotard's account, this system of instrumental reason, under the auspices of late capitalist information technologies, has only become the more inhuman, taking on the terrifying guise of a cybernetic organism – hence the appeal to theories of information and cybernetics.

For Lyotard, then, humanity has been “pregnant” (65) with this monstrous cyborg-child of capital and its “techno-scientific apparatus” (67), which he describes in Leibnizian terms as “the most complete monad” (65): “Leibniz could have said of this process that it is on the way to producing a monad more complete than humanity itself has ever [been] able to be” (64).

Furthermore, the purpose and functioning of this monad are no longer at the service of the human; it proceeds by a logic neither of whose “aims nor origins” are properly ours. This monad is a “monad in expansion” (67): its only purpose is to grow, totalising itself and bringing itself to the point where it can completely master the future. To do this the monad must master time. It does so through the rationale in capitalist exchange whereby a good or service is provided to another only on the understanding that a reciprocal transaction is *certain* to happen in the future “to such a point that it can be considered to already have happened” (66). The present is thus collapsed into the future. This also means the development of a system of information by which the monad can already know and control the future; it must invest the resources of the present into prediction in order to foreclose the contingency of any “event” that might reduce its control of the future. As Lyotard writes: “the more complete the monad, the more the incoming event is neutralised. For a monad supposed to be perfect, like God, there are in the end no bits of information at all. God has nothing to learn. In the mind of God, the Universe is instantaneous” (65). The “monad in expansion” seeks to be such a God-like, omniscient and precognisant

19 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, Verso Classics 15 (London & New York: Verso, 1999) This reworks, in Marxist terms, Freud's argument in “Civilisation and Its Discontents,” about the increasing demands of repression which civilisation requires of us: demands which increase in proportion to the growth of the complexity of society, and in particular in proportion to the demands of industrialisation. (See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock, The New Penguin Freud [London: Penguin, 2002].) Lyotard himself nods back to Freud in his introduction to *The Inhuman*, noting that “Discontent grows with this civilisation” (2), and going on to discuss the tyranny of the system in terms of castration (4-5). Paul Harris has, for example, gone as far as to suggest that *The Inhuman* might have better been titled “Thought and Its Discontents.” See Paul Harris, “Thinking @ the Speed of Time: Globalization and Its Discontents or, Can Lyotard's Thought Go on without a Body,” *Yale French Studies* 99 (2001): 133. In thus dubbing it, Harris suggests perceptively that Lyotard's essay's innovation in the reiteration of this theme is to make “thought” primary to this process of repression and discontent, rather than “civilisation” or “capitalism” It is emphatically a (philosophical) form of thought or discourse which is centrally the problem and which causes a violence which is centrally also a violence on thought itself.

being.

For Lyotard, the price which “humanity” pays in the present – or, rather, which another form of the inhuman, one directly opposed to the inhumanity of the cyborgian monad, an inhumanity similar to that which Freud identifies as the *id*,²⁰ pays – is awful: Lyotard asks:

Where can [the imperatives of the monad in expansion] come from, if it is true that these results are not always profitable to humanity in general, nor even to the fraction of humanity supposed to benefit directly from them? Why do we have to save money and time to the point where this imperative seems like the law of our lives? Because saving (at the level of the system as a whole) allows the system to increase the quantity of money given over to anticipating the future. This is particularly the case with the capital invested in research and development. The enjoyment of humanity must be sacrificed to the interests of the monad in expansion. (67).

Indeed, as Lyotard notes a few pages later, “When the point is to extend the capacities of the monad, it seems reasonable to abandon, or even actively to destroy, those parts of the human race which appear superfluous, useless for that goal. For example, the populations of the Third World” (76).

The project which gathers together the essays in *The Inhuman*, then, is on the one hand an analysis of this totalising temporality of the “monad in expansion,” and its destruction of that which is “unharmonisable” with its function. It is also – in the name of the *id*, human enjoyment, and people such as those of the Third World – to identify and preserve that which opposes or resists this logic of the techno-scientific-capitalist monad.²¹

The difference for Lyotard between the haste and sureness of result involved in the movement of artistic statements under the regime of the monad, instantiated in the imperatives of the art market, and those which might be properly avant-garde, can be understood as that between two modes (determinate and indeterminate) of thought’s relation to the future coming-into-sense of its material: this is the distinction between “a senseless difference

20 Lyotard writes that there are “two sorts of inhuman. It is indispensable to keep them dissociated. The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage [...] [an] unknown guest which is agitating [thought], sending it delirious but also making it think” (2). The purpose of Lyotard’s introduction is to oppose the “inhumanity” of the system whilst escaping a humanist rhetoric, and thus it is that it is another inhumanity which is pitted against it. The logic of humanist arguments, for Lyotard, has itself been transformed into (or turns out to always have secretly been) the means by which the inhumanity of the system propagates itself.

21 Thus in his introduction, Lyotard notes that, “I do not like this haste [of the monad’s form of discourse, which hastens to determination]. What it hurries and crushes, is what after the fact I find I have always tried, under diverse headings – work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, thing – to reserve: the unharmonisable” (4).

destined to make sense as opposition in a system” and one which is “*promised* to the becoming-system” (4, emphasis Lyotard’s). The meaning and future value of the art of the new is calculated in advance, along with the certainty that it will produce new artistic statements after it, if not precisely within the same code (for innovation in the code remains part of the programme²²) then at least within the same game of altering the code.²³ But what is the actual content of such a figuratively colourful pair of words as “*destiny*” and “*promise*”, and does the opposition between them really hold up? We have here, already, a signal of the shakiness of the distinction on which Lyotard’s opposition of the sublime and capitalism rests, a matter to which we shall shortly return.²⁴ First, however, I shall look at the “*now*” in more detail.

The New and the Now

In opposition to the “*new*,” Lyotard sets up the logic of the “*now*,” the logic proper to the aesthetic moment and the avant-garde.²⁵ This logic is an instance of the “*unharmonisable*” which Lyotard champions, an important moment which must be preserved. The logic of the now is that novelty’s system of onward movement is halted. Something occurs which is not determinable in advance; the speculations on the future of techno-scientific, informational capital are endangered. Lyotard further underlines the difference:

Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation ‘works’. The question mark of the ‘*Is it*

22 The new is not simply interested in following given rules (as with Greenberg’s “*Alexandrianism*” in Clement Greenberg, “*Avant-Garde and Kitsch*,” *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1992), 530.) Instead, it *must* produce new products. But this imperative towards the new means that it must set up some *procedures* which will produce these new products, or new forms. (We are talking then, not the “*codes*” of a semiotics, but the pragmatic “*rules*” of a language game). But the economic and cybernetic stakes of the system are also that it cannot afford to fail to produce the new; it cannot afford the risk of nothing happening. It must thus close over the aporia of the “*Is it happening?*” This places it in opposition to the now, where this aporia is welcomed. Following the tripartite scheme of Greenberg’s analysis, the new of kitsch is thus a regime different from both the Alexandrianism of the past and the avant-garde.

23 “*Innovating* means to behave as though lots of things happened, and to make them happen” (107).

24 To give an answer which would affirm Lyotard’s position somewhat would revolve around Lyotard’s earlier work, which is rather outside the scope of the present analysis. It is in particular *Discours, Figure*, where, in less emotive or colourful language than “*promise*” and “*destiny*”, he opposes the “*differences*” we find in the world to the set of “*oppositions*” that signification imposes on them. For a summary of these arguments, see Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics, Critics of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Christopher Norris (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 13-17.

25 In my discussion of Gene Ray I have already quoted Lyotard on this temporality and its opposition to the new: “*The occurrence, the Ereignis* has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies innovation” (106).

happening?' stops. With the occurrence the will is defeated (107).

Such an event opens into the heterogeneous and heterologous, creating space for the return of what the "system" might exclude from coming to representation.²⁶

But Lyotard himself has to acknowledge – in spite of his own argument – that the differentiation which he sets up between the temporalities of the new and the now (in other words, capital's temporal logic and that of the avant-garde) is inherently unstable. There is a "collusion" (105) between the two, and Lyotard notes that "The correlation between [market economics] and the sublime is ambiguous, even perverse" (105).²⁷ For Lyotard, modernism, with its pursuit of the sublime, may stand in opposition to instrumental, "positivist" rationality; however, in a number of places, even as he attempts to expound the difference between the two forms of thought, they start to slip and slide into each other.

Lyotard himself notes a first reason for this: the form of thought proper to the avant-garde is in fact reliant on the economic, social and cultural form of capital. To break away from an Alexandrian obeisance to an eternal set of "rules" of art, the avant-garde relies on the "force of scepticism and even destruction that capitalism has brought into play" (105). It is this that encourages in artists "a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles and with ever new materials" (105). The logic of the avant-garde is that which Marx identifies with the perpetual-revolutionary spirit of the

26 It is also worth noting that in this, Lyotard is proposing the art and the aesthetic of the sublime as a model for philosophical thought, which is also faced with the ethical imperative to attend to the aporia of the event, to the unspeakable and unharmonisable. The essay, then, has a double function: both as an injunction to artists with regard to the form of art they should produce (and, in extension, to critics, with regard to how they should judge art), but also to philosophers with regard to the kind of philosophy they should practice. This latter function of the essay would seem to be the prominent one, when we consider that it is on the level of "thought" that Lyotard – whose vision of capitalism is somewhat idealist – seems to locate the nature of the inhuman system and the resistance to this: thought which either ossifies into self-perpetuating, sealed systems, or which welcomes the event. For an account of Lyotard's placing of "thought" at the centre of the problem of capitalism, see for example, Harris, "Thinking," 129-148. On the central stake of Lyotard's essay being a *philosophy* which takes the aesthetic of the sublime as its model see Wurzer, "Lyotard," 201-12, esp. 201-3.

27 To note the ambivalent relation between the avant-garde and the bourgeoisie, or capital is hardly a new thing; to note, as Greenberg does in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," that the avant-garde is tied to the bourgeoisie by the "umbilical cord" of money (Greenberg, "Avant-Garde," 533) is a commonplace in Marxian criticism. For such criticism, there results a complexity in the social function of avant-garde art: it rebels against the rational order of modern life, and so keeps alive the promise of happiness which remains a utopian image to counter the unfreedom of the present. And yet the avant-garde are also producers of (the ultimate) luxury commodities for the bourgeoisie (ultimate because they have no use-value, only exchange-value), which, in Bourdieu's terms, serve to provide them with the "cultural capital" which reinforces their hegemony through the appearance of the naturalness of their superiority.

bourgeoisie in the *Communist Manifesto*.²⁸

This element of Lyotard's analysis is reinforced if we consider that these very characteristics of "avant-garde" art – experimentation, scepticism, heterodoxy – were fostered within the shift away from a system of patronage towards a "market" economics of art in which the artwork is a commodity and the relation between buyer and seller is impersonal and abstract. This severed the ties which held the work of art in the thrall of tradition and the stable order of things. Commodification is in fact very much the other face of art's autonomy itself.²⁹ Such commodification, following a logic of the new, is thus the precondition of the emergence of the concern for the "now" in modern art.

But this shattering of patronage, and the growth of the market in art is not an event which falls into neat chronological alignment with the birth of the avant-garde as Lyotard, following the canonical histories of modern art, implies. This discrepancy brings to the fore a curious convolution within Lyotard's historical schema of the avant-garde sublime. Lyotard's avant-garde, defined in terms of an "ex minimis" attack on its own foundations and institutions, is located through a fairly conventional modernist canon stretching from Cézanne to Daniel Buren, and thus begins in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. But the birth of this avant-garde is somewhat belated in relation to the decline of patronage and the commodification of art, which stretches back to the earlier modernity of the eighteenth century, at least – a fact I shall be exploring in particular in the second section of this dissertation.

In *Painting for Money*, for example, David Solkin traces the transformation

28 Marx, "Communist Manifesto," Chapter 1. But as we shall shortly see, "destruction" as an operating principle of capital also nods towards Bataille's theory that behind what appears to be the "restrictive economy" of liberal economic theory, ostensibly oriented towards growth and production, lies a "general economy" in which the ultimate destiny of all activity is not the stockpiling of energy, but its discharge; not production but consumption. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, La part Maudite (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1: Consumption, 3 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1988). esp. Part 1, "Theoretical Introduction": 19-41.

29 Post-Romantic aesthetics, has consistently, from Kant onwards, understood artistic autonomy or freedom largely as a freedom or autonomy in regard to the realm of labour and the marketplace – see for example the definition of art as "free," as opposed to handicraft (or "industrial art") which is made for profit, in §43 the Third Critique. However, it is just this passage from which Derrida starts in "Economimesis", an essay in which he teases out the way that covertly the political and economic ideology of liberalism animates Kant's discourse (and vice versa). If (free) fine art is ostensibly a point beyond the economic and outside economic calculation and its labour relations, in fact it is the lynchpin of a complex ideological justification of the notion of freedom which guarantees the subject of bourgeois exchange. The essay starts: "Under the cover of a controlled indeterminacy, pure morality and empirical culturalism are allied in the Kantian critique of pure judgements of taste. A politics, therefore, although it never occupies the centre of the stage, acts upon this discourse [...] Politics and political economy, to be sure are implicated in every discourse on art and on the beautiful." Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11.2 (1981): 3. For the relation of artistic autonomy to the development of its commodity form, see also, for example, Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 8-9.

during the eighteenth century of practices of painting under the pressure of the new forms of commerce to which art was already becoming increasingly subject in Britain, and the ensuing new markets, audiences and forms of appreciation.³⁰ Solkin understands the central dilemma for eighteenth-century art as how to reconcile a notion of the “public” constituted by the market, with a notion of it as a political, civic or national “public” (or in other words with the notion of the “public” expressed in phrases such as “the public good”). He traces the permutations of eighteenth-century British art’s different solutions to reconciling these imperatives to create an art within a commercial culture which plays a political (usually nationalist-ideological) function. In these terms, the new conditions of capitalism and the nation-state’s imperial dreams are generative of a profusion of new forms of art and of its display throughout the eighteenth century – which, if we extrapolate from Solkin’s account, culminate, as the nineteenth century develops, in the growing separation of “serious” art from increasingly spectacularised entertainment cultures, each with their own resolution of the antinomy between the two notions of the “public,” but each of which only resolves the contradiction through its difference to the other. Solkin’s account is obviously indebted to the classic formulation of the notion of the growth of a “public sphere” by Habermas.³¹ The interest of Solkin’s account for me lies precisely in the way that the double notion of the public (as individual consumer and as collectivity) becomes so apparent in it. Habermas himself, when discussing the “public” of art, seems to downplay any connotations of the public as consumer, in order to privilege the constitution of the public as critical, political entity,³² and in his idealisation of the public sphere, dissociates it from the almost-ubiquitous nationalist function of the term. Although Solkin over-stresses the notion of the invention of the public sphere as a radical break with past artistic practices, the question he raises of how eighteenth-century thought had to negotiate, as one of its fundamental ideological contradictions, this figure of the “public” as both constituted by a political collectivity with its ethical demands, and by the collection of individual interests, is of much use to me. If these tensions between the political and the commercial still structure the possibilities of modern and contemporary art, then this would make further sense of the long history of the sublime at which Lyotard’s essay hints.

Lyotard’s essay is marked, however, by a vacillation between two

30 David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1993).

31 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

32 See esp. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 34-43.

timescales: a narrower modernism set against a broader modernity. He takes up at one moment the one timeframe, only to take up the other the next. Thus in spite of his immediate concern with the history of a modern art, Lyotard also wants to understand this as the proper expression of a history of the sublime which spans back to disruptive social and cultural transformations beginning in the late seventeenth century. Lyotard traces the sublime from Boileau through to Burke and Kant, in order to identify the roots of the avant-garde. He suggests that in this history the stakes were “the destiny of classical poetics”, which “were hazarded and lost [...] aesthetics asserted its critical rights over art [...] romanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed” (92). Lyotard here conflates the development of Romantic aesthetics and the birth of the avant-garde, together marking a break from Neoclassical concerns with art as a rule-bound activity. This revolution is equated with the appearance of a particularly modern sensibility and subjectivity, which can only, within the logic of Lyotard’s account, be identified with the unleashing of the aforementioned forces of scepticism, destruction, and experimentation which mark the birth of capitalism and its discursive, cultural and economic logics that brought to an end the stable order of the *ancien régime*.

But the historical gulf between the eighteenth century – about whose art we hear very little from Lyotard – and the twentieth seems to undercut the conflation of the two. This contradiction is a symptom of Lyotard’s attempt to propose, quite anachronistically in terms of what he himself argues, that it is only with the contemporary entry of the “transavantgarde” that the world of art becomes subjected to the laws of commerce, a move which allows him to disavow the logic of capital in the avant-garde itself.³³ This disavowal serves in its turn to allow Lyotard to imagine the avant-garde, and its temporality of the “now,” as forming an opposition to the “new” of commodified culture. But even if Lyotard claims it is only in the late twentieth century that finally “sublimity is no longer in art but in speculation on art” (106), we only have to remember that already with the sale of André Level’s art investment club *La Peau de l’Ours* on March 2 1914 it had become clear that avant-garde art was a better investment than gold or real estate. The significance of this obvious profitability to the structure of the market and institutions of twentieth-century art can hardly be denied.³⁴ Its impact on the possibilities of sceptical, experimental, anti-traditional forms of art practice can only be a matter of conjecture, but surely the avant-garde has always been much more keyed into the economic

³³ This is a classic disavowal, following the structure of “I know... but...” – the disavowal takes place even though he has already admitted the avant-garde’s reliance on modern forces of scepticism and destruction.

³⁴ See Yve-Alain Bois, “Painting: The Task of Mourning,” *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: M.I.T. Press, 1986), 37.

imperatives of its market than Lyotard admits.

In fact, the registration of and accommodation to the forces of scepticism and the destruction of tradition which Lyotard tends to discuss as a primarily twentieth-century phenomenon have been central to the art and culture of the entire period which his essay discusses, from the birth of the discourse on the sublime with Boileau in the late seventeenth century onwards. As we shall see in Chapter 4, novel and innovative forms of cultural production were already coming to be branded “Modern” – though usually pejoratively – as early as the Battle of the Ancients and Moderns. Such is the thrust, we shall see, of Alexander Pope’s satirical poems, whose target, just like that of Lyotard’s essay, is “the new.” Such commercialising literature and art seemed to commentators such as Pope to be augurs of dark and de-forming forces of commercialisation, threatening in their very quest for novelty (for the “new”) to erode all forms of traditional value or order, and to precipitate the world into that state of chaotic de-differentiation which Lyotard terms “entropy,” and associates with the “monad in expansion,” but which for Pope was called “Dulness,” and “bathos”: the death of thought under the totalising logic of market economics.

To understand the continuities which lie between the culture of Pope’s day and that of Lyotard is to challenge the division of art into the “modernist” and “postmodernist” to which Lyotard’s account remains beholden.³⁵ Instead, I am taking up a somewhat wider frame of art-historical reference. What is of value for me in Lyotard’s essay is thus not its orthodox history of modernist art, but that broader framework which he introduces in the return to the sublime, which already starts to problematise the narratives of modernism. The turn to the sublime involves taking up an understanding of contemporary art within the culture of a broader (social and historical as well as artistic) “modernity” that extends back into the eighteenth century and beyond.³⁶

35 The basic split between an avant-garde artistic modernity and something which comes after it holds in Lyotard’s essay, even if he nonetheless avoids the term “postmodernism” itself, attempting to reserve it, in his discussions of art, for something more positive within modernist art itself. See Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?,” trans. Régis Durand, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 71-82.

36 It is to a similarly expanded frame of reference that, for example, Jacques Rancière has recently attempted to turn the project of thinking about art, with conception of an “aesthetic revolution” in art breaking away from the older “partitions of the sensible” – the “ethical regime of images” and the “representational regime of the arts” – which defined the classicisms of the *ancien régime*. See in particular Rancière, “Aesthetic Revolution,” 133-55; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York and London: Continuum, 2004). Within such a framework, what late twentieth-century art broke with was not a condition of artistic modernity itself but rather, “what’s fallen apart is just a very partial and belated interpretation of what I call the aesthetic mode of art.” (Jacques Rancière, “Politics and Aesthetics: Interview with Peter Hallward,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 8.2 [2003]: 206.) Rancière locates the start of the dominance of the “aesthetic regime of art” with Schiller and the French revolution, but in the light of my own interests, it seems

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Fig 32: Joshua Reynolds, *George Augustus Elliott, Lord Heathfield*, 1787. Oil on Canvas. 142 x 113 cm. National Gallery, London. Image from Estelle Hurl, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Gutenberg etext, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19009/19009-h/images/image_11_2.jpg>.

Reynolds and the academicians were faced with a problem: they espoused a history painting which would elevate the profession of painter above the crude materialism of the cultural commodity. However, painting was, nonetheless, a commodity; and so it was through portraiture – in academic thought a relatively minor art, devoid of the intellectual content and moral power of the history – that Reynolds had to make his living, since there was simply no demand for history painting in a privatised art market. Reynolds's painting of Elliott serves as portrait, but also brings in the “sublime” historical events with which Elliott had been bound up, adding a touch of seriousness and importance to the genre. Of course, the desire for such respectability is itself a matter of the market, for through the claim to such transcendent artistic and intellectual value, the economic value of art and its forms of labour rises above that of other goods.

Because of Lyotard's disavowal of the intimacy of the avant-garde and capital which he unearths, there are other slippages in the essay's attempts to set up a stable opposition between the temporality of the avant-garde and that of the commodity. For example, when Lyotard attempts to account for the difference between market-led artistic innovation and genuinely avant-garde artistic practice, to do so he brings in the distinction between two kinds of interruption to the stable "code" of discourse: (mere) "noise" and "'strong' information" (106). However, he almost immediately collapses the two into the single term "information", as if within the terms of his argument he cannot clearly distinguish between the two sorts of interruption of discourse, whilst still maintaining both as actually being interruptions within it. If the new does involve something which cannot be reduced to the terms of the known and knowable, the already-spoken and already-speakable (his conception of information as that which is not already known to and speakable by its recipient would suggest that this is so), what does distinguish it from the now?

The place to look for Lyotard's answer would seem to be the passage close to the start of the essay, where Lyotard has gone through some of these questions already, though in a different register. In this final passage of his essay which I have been discussing, he has returned, in terms of the particularity of capital, to what he has already discussed more generally towards the start of the essay in terms of a general theory of the event's relation to the flow of discourse. Bringing these two parts of the essay together, capital appears as a particularly extreme or exemplary form of a "cosmic" informational process.³⁷ In the earlier section, Lyotard contrasts two kinds of movement of discourse. The first of these is a movement which, from the perspective of the later passage, can be identified with the temporality of the new and with capitalism. It is one which seeks "to determine that which has already been thought[, ...] in order to determine what hasn't been[. ...] One can determine this something by setting

significant to emphasise the development of the aesthetic throughout a long eighteenth century – a development within which the discourse on the sublime played a central role. (For this role of the sublime in the development of the discourse of the aesthetic, see Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*, 1-16.) Understanding the birth of the aesthetic mode (within which we still function) in this way also helps us connect its slow development to that of the capitalist conditions of culture themselves.

37 There is a Freudian metaphysics here, which goes beyond Adorno and Horkheimer's formulation of a more general pattern of the development of instrumental human reason embodied in modern society. Whilst Adorno and Horkheimer's account leans heavily on *Civilization and Its Discontents* for an account of the increasingly repressive nature of technologically advanced society as it borrows libidinal forces from the individual in order to keep its ever-more elaborate structure organised, Lyotard adds to this a cosmicised vision of entropic and negentropic energetic forces borrowed not just from thermodynamics, but also from Freud's accounts of *eros* and *thanatos*. Furthermore, once again, it is worth noting the echoes of Bataille's attempt to understand capitalism in terms of a cosmicised economics of energy, an account of which will be developed below.

up a system, a theory, a programme or a project – and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something.” Lyotard contrasts this form of discourse to another which “imagine[s] the remainder, and allow[s] the indeterminate to appear as a question mark” (91).

The former kind of thought – normal, institutionalised discourse – sets up rules for the movement from one statement to the next (whether these statements be in the form of writing, painting, or music). This is the kind of determinate movement of thought which Lyotard’s “monad in expansion” (and hence the art market) must ensure. Lyotard notes the violence of this form of thought: if it is our “daily bread”, it is also “the bread of war, the soldier’s biscuit” (91); it is a “thought which must be disarmed” (90), since this is the thought of the inhuman monad which seeks to eliminate everything outside its project.

The violence of this form of thought and its self-closure against the event, expressed in all these military metaphors, is understood later in the essay in terms of the homology between capitalism and the totalitarianisms of the mid twentieth century: capitalism is simply a more “direct” form of the totalitarianism of thought (104). They both share a need to annihilate that which doesn’t fit within their totalising “project.” Both rest on an exclusion of the *différend* of the event from discourse, one which also involves the exclusion of the other. Both are the expression of a fear of the *différend*, and hence inimical to the eventive art of the avant-garde. Lyotard goes as far as to characterise both as a continuation of one and the same attack on the thought preserved in avant-garde art (104-5).

In opposition to this totalitarian mode, Lyotard posits a practice which welcomes in the anxious indeterminacy of the “Is it happening?” and resists the closure of systematised thought, opening it to the heterologous.

But in spite of the seemingly radical difference between a form of thought which constitutes a process of opening outwards, and one which follows a movement of closing-down, throughout Lyotard’s account there remains between the two modes of thought an intimacy which belies their opposition. Lyotard’s evocation of the intimacy between the two modes, rather than his argument for their opposition, is the achievement of the essay. All thought, Lyotard reminds us, even that “of Schools, of programmes, of projects and ‘trends’ ” (90), depends on the “agitation” caused by the fact that “something remains to be determined, something that hasn’t yet been determined” (91).

The *différend*, the abyss in thought of the “Is it happening?”, is thus entirely immanent to ordinary, determinate thought, as a moment within its movement, even if this is a moment that determinate thought repeatedly closes down, whilst the indeterminacy of aesthetic thought keeps this abyss open.³⁸

Given all this paradox, there are, unsurprisingly enough, further hints within this passage that the two forms of thought do not stand simply as opposites. In Lyotard’s account, it appears that the indeterminate is destined to become determined either way, that the aesthetic only holds indeterminacy open for so long, and that there is not so much difference after all between the “destiny” and “promise” of a difference’s place in ordered discourse. The aesthetic moment of indeterminacy becomes an essential part of the process of determination, and not its opposing other. Lyotard himself, in “Newman: The Instant,” only proposes the event as a temporary break in the discursive order: “Occurrence is the instant which ‘happens’, which ‘comes’ unexpectedly but which, once it is there, takes its place in the network of what has happened.”³⁹

38 The problematic of the nature of the event, and the difficulty that Lyotard has in marking it as a different kind of irruption into discourse from that involved in novelty is embodied in the repeated metaphor for the irruption of the event of the *point d’interrogation*, which is both, of course, the “question mark”, and also the point where the question emerges (esp. 90-2). The event is a questioning awaiting a question, an absence under the sign of the question from which a question may appear. But this also starts to seem a mere moment of *punctuation* in thought, a momentary halt in its flow, a gap across which thought makes a quantum leap, rather than, as Lyotard would seem to wish to propose, a locus from which a question can emerge. A lot in the essay hinges on the something that the nothing of the question mark is, and the enigma of how from this nothingness an autonomous thought might emerge, one not determined by the system of discourse into which it will enter, but from outside that discourse. Much depends on the mysterious way this nothingness is on the one hand punctuation, and on the other something like a Kristevan *chora*, which Lyotard often seems to imagine underlying and agitating the more regular movements of discourse and structures of language, a world of indeterminate, pre-representational, largely libidinal, though also perhaps physical, forces. (“We borrow the term *chora* from Plato’s *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation.” Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 25. Kristeva’s emphasis.) For Lyotard, what emerges from such a choric space is the *différend*, which is a phrase of the “other” of discourse. Lyotard does not explicitly answer these questions about the question mark; it would in any case be very much against the logic of the essay that we might be able to know this unknowable point in discourse.

39 Lyotard, *Inhuman*, 82. This essay is the one which (although post-dating it chronologically) precedes “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in the chapter-organisation of *The Inhuman*. In both essays, Lyotard is drawing for this working of the determinate and indeterminate on a long history of aesthetic philosophy. In Kant, the indeterminate judgement of the aesthetic is just such a judgement in suspension, where the Understanding does not intervene to supply a concept to which the presentation of the Imagination will be subjected; rather, there continues a “free play” between the Imagination and the Understanding, in which neither dominates the other. This is taken on in particular in Schiller’s, “Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man,” [1794], *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian*, ed. Paul Halsall, The Harvard Classics, 32. (New York: Collier, 1910), Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook, January 1998 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/schiller-education.html>> 12 August 2002. In Letter 26, he proposes the aesthetic involves an experience of freedom,

The inevitability of the return of a state of indeterminacy to one of determination – and the intimacy of the two temporal modes of discourse – is also inscribed in Lyotard's history of the avant-garde (102-4). Each generation of avant-garde artists sets up anew an art which breaks the codes of existing art to confront the viewer with an indeterminacy which cannot be reduced to the certainty and sense of that system; but each generation in turn finds its efforts codified and absorbed into an "artworld" and this necessitates further avant-garde ruptures in order to recapture an experience of indeterminacy. This would seem as close to the temporality of the new as the now. This version of art history, far from supporting avant-gardism as a viable and continuing resistance to capitalist modernity, points up its failure as resistance; even if the "indeterminate" is to be kept open as a resistance to capital, the "ex minimis" procedures of the avant-garde are not an adequate way to do this. Lyotard has to admit, after all, that "There isn't an enormous amount of difference between an avant-garde manifesto and a curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts" (91).

Seen this way, the difference between the new and the now is not so much one of quality as of quantity, a relative rather than absolute difference of opening or closure. In this case, even the discourses of capitalist innovation involve an opening into the heterogeneous which, if relatively more managed, is not as *radically* different from the irruption of the Lyotardian sublime as Lyotard cares to admit. If the indeterminate and determinate are ultimately moments within the same discursive movement, then it is a matter of the angle from which we look at it – the emphasis we give on either moment – that determines how a given discourse is seen.⁴⁰

The monad already starts to look less monadic, and more heterogeneous. Its movement begins to seem like a weaving together of the movements of the new and the now. Not only, as we saw with the avant-garde, is the "now" dependent on a logic of the new, but the "new" itself is dependent on the "agitating" energies of the now. The two, to use a concept from earlier in Lyotard's *corpus*, are "blocked together": the event – now understood to be

and suggests a "play" instinct at work at its heart – the ludic movement of the imagination unrestrained by (any heteronomous) law. Strands of the legacy of this move through twentieth-century European aesthetics, with on the one hand Heidegger championing the aesthetic as an ethical relation to alterity which does not seek to impose on it the violence of determination and the instrumental, and on the other hand Adorno championing the autonomous play involved in art (the freedom of the imagination) as an image of the freedom which is denied us in contemporary society. These two strands of the legacy of Idealist aesthetics are gathered together in Lyotard's reading of the sublime.

40 See for example also "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in Thomas E. Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996), 3-38. Crow makes a similar kind of argument about the dynamics between mainstream culture and "resistant" subcultures, and their mediation through various moments of modernist art. This involves circling between rupture and reabsorption. Crow stresses that this process looks different to different critics according to which of these two moments they privilege.

constituted at once by its eventhood (“it happens”) and also its meaning (“what happens”) – is simultaneously immediate and mediated, ruled by both of the temporalities of the new and the now.⁴¹ Such a “blocking together” starts to explain the intimacy of the two forms. There remains, of course, a difference between the “movement” within this double temporality of capitalisation, in which the event of thought or art is subjected to the law of exchange and of profit,⁴² and the movement of the “now” which opens thought up to otherness (including “life” or “being”), but given that the two temporalities are “blocked together,” neither can be thought in isolation, or without taking into consideration their mutual relation. The event of the sublime, though itself a moment in which there is the possibility of the rupture of the order of capitalism, is nevertheless tied into a system of which it forms, in the end, an integral part.

As it emerges from Lyotard’s account, the temporality of capital is thus a single discursive system, constituted by a pulsation between the new and the now. Rather than a “monad in expansion” capitalism can be understood – very much as Marx imagines it in the *Communist Manifesto* – as a system of repeated crises and transformations; such “events” within its system are structural to its processes and its dynamism.⁴³ Such a monad is riven with contradiction, founded precisely on integral antagonism.

In the next chapter, I shall go on to think further about the implications of such an understanding of Lyotard’s explicit and implicit visions of capital, comparing and contrasting these to the Neoliberal ideological self-images of late-twentieth-century capitalism which formed its context. In what remains of this chapter, I will return to the implications of the argument I have made for an evaluation of Lyotard’s positions on contemporary art, and the usefulness of his sublime for articulating oppositional aesthetic practices. For what most obviously falls apart with the distinction between the new and the now is the clear opposition between the resistance of “sublime” art and the complicity of a

41 See Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, 126. Readings argues that in the works which were to follow *The Inhuman*, Lyotard increasingly developed a clear articulation of such a double temporality of the event, as he turned further to think about the “immemorial,” “anamnesis” and the “*Nachträglichkeit*” of the event. Such a traumatised time is increasingly in line with the kind of temporality that I am, overall, tracing in the historiographical approach I have taken in this research. For an example of the growth of such concerns in Lyotard’s later work, see in particular Lyotard, “Emma,” 23-45.

42 The yoking of thought or discourse to the law of capitalist exchange is a central plaint of Lyotard’s *The Differend*, which was written in parallel to the essays in *The Inhuman* during the mid nineteen-eighties.

43 “The Bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the means of production [...]” (Marx, “Communist Manifesto,” Chapter 1.) See also Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993). For Baudrillard also, the “symbolic,” a logic of the incalculable gift, remains buried within the heart of capital and its rational exchange of equivalents.

transavantgarde – or of an artist such as Hirst.

Much is explained about Lyotard's essay when we understand it as a "tactical" intervention into contemporary art discourse. It serves as an assault on the transavantgarde, and on a general "slackening" in late twentieth-century intellectual endeavour.⁴⁴ The transavantgarde was indeed a cynically commercial and fundamentally conservative form of art (like Hirst's). Lyotard's partisanship against them played an important role within art-critical debates of the nineteen-eighties, and within attempts to rethink the politics of art within a commercialising art economy. Lyotard makes a powerful plea for a seriousness in art beyond its market value, at a moment of that market's ascendancy. However, Lyotard's "tactical" intervention takes the form of a universalising and prescriptive account of what can constitute the seriousness of art, and how modern art, in general, ought to function. Such an interpolation of the universal from a particular circumstance, however, is intellectually unconvincing, and lies at the root of the convolutions or contradictions of Lyotard's historical framework as I have described it above. But even when we consider Lyotard's essay in its context, there remain troubling questions about his vision of the sublime as the proper oppositional mode of contemporary art.

At the heart of this is the *formalism* of the version of the sublime which he opposes to the transavantgarde's (bad) "postmodernist" play of eclectic signification. The formalism of Lyotard's sublime draws on a rereading of the role of the sublime in Kant's Third Critique.⁴⁵ Lyotard's turn to Kantian aesthetics takes place within the context of a general turn in Lyotard's late writings towards questions of ethics and justice.⁴⁶ The kinds of indeterminate judgement that Lyotard values in the experience of art become central to the ethical task of thinking, in particular where different forms of thought must confront their "others." Thought, the site of arbitration between different "phrase regimes" must proceed without a set of fixed rules, for to fix these in advance, to judge determinately, is to impose a particular way of phrasing on the discussion between the two sides – a set of possibilities which moreover can never be universal and will always silence one of the parties.⁴⁷ Thus aesthetics,

44 Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 71.

45 See especially Lyotard, *Lessons*.

46 See especially Lyotard, *The Differend*.

47 A good illustration of this is given in Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, 118. Readings discusses Werner Herzog's film *Where Green Ants Dream*, which narrates a legal battle over land rights in Australia between an indigenous group and a mining company. In this, the court is an inadequate tribunal; it enshrines a discourse of "property" which is entirely alien to the aborigines, and its finding in favour of the colonisers is inevitable. The complaints of the aborigines, which belong to a quite different genre of phrase, are reduced to silence in the legal discourse of the West, where they are quite simply un(re)presentable. Thus a double violence is done upon them: they lose their land, and they are further robbed of the power to articulate the

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Fig. 33: Daniel Buren, *Inside (Centre of Guggenheim)*, 5th International Exhibition, Guggenheim, New York, 1971. Image from Foster, et. al. eds., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

with its mode of indeterminate thought – and the sublime in particular as an aesthetic of disharmony – becomes a model for ethical thought, and the true stake of the sublime turns out to be not art at all but a mode of philosophy and justice which takes the aesthetic as its model.⁴⁸ As with Kant, the aesthetic, though not a mode of ethical thought itself, provides a model which will teach us the *form* of ethical thought. This Kantianism insists on art taking merely the *form* of an ethical mode of thought, rather than being properly a site for ethical judgements themselves. It leads to an insistence on formalism in art.

But whilst this formalism – a retreat to a quasi-Adornian defence of artistic autonomy – involves a vision of art which runs counter to the work of the transavantgarde (which had, indeed, jettisoned autonomy, embracing the market and promulgating a conservative ideology), it leads Lyotard's sublime into a double "blindness" with regard both to the actually oppositional art of the eighties, and also to a capitalist art such as Hirst's.

It is striking in Lyotard that not only is the transavantgarde excluded from the continuing mission of avant-garde art, but so, too, by the logic of his essay, is the "oppositional" art of the very moment in which Lyotard was writing, with its specifically political and critical projects of the critique of contemporary culture from marginalised positions (articulated especially around questions of class, gender, race, colony and sexuality). This was the very art which actually was at that moment actively setting itself in opposition to the depoliticising effects of the logic of the art market, and seeking alternative means of production and distribution that would allow a voicing of the concerns of those marginalised by the very expansion of late capitalism which Lyotard laments. The politicised art of the seventies and eighties – in contrast to Lyotardian "ex minimis" formalism – was pursuing a line of action which involved the "deconstruction" of the semiotics of capitalism, and taking polemical positions against it. But such an explicitly politicised art, both present and past, is extirpated from Lyotard's avant-garde canon, which, in line with his Kantianism, focuses on a lineage of formalists. Unsurprisingly there are no

wrong that has been done to them. The only kind of tribunal that would be able to adjudicate over such a *différend* between two utterly alien genres of phrase would be one that judged indeterminately, without fixed rules.

48 See for example, Wilhelm Wurzer, who writes, that in Lyotard's Kant, "it is a matter of [...] organising philosophy around an aesthetics of the sublime, not another philosophy of art, but a certain manner of judging itself." Wurzer, "Lyotard," 201. For an extended account of the role of "judging" (indeterminately) in the ethics and politics of the late Lyotard, and the role of his turn to the aesthetic of the sublime in articulating this, see Beardsworth, "The Critical 'Post'," 43-80. Beardsworth discusses this as an answer to Habermas's theories of communicative reason, and to posit communication as a form not of consent, but of "dissensus," envisioning a community which is always only "still to come." More combatively, Eagleton attacks Lyotard's attempt to base ethical and political action on the aesthetic as a sign of postmodern failure, open to the dangers of "intuitionism, decisionism, consequentialism, sophistry and casuistry," if not a downright fascistic "aestheticisation of politics." Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 398.

women artists in his canon, nor any black or Asian artists, and all the figures he cites are European or American. It was precisely such formalist tactics which radical artists were rejecting at this moment, finding them useless for their ends. This art eschewed the attentiveness to the abstract aporia of the Lyotardian event, and worked through more determinate procedures of speakable discourse.⁴⁹ What disappears in Lyotard's prescriptive formalism – along with the work of a generation (and more) of oppositional artists – is the possibility of what Hal Foster, in contrast to the co-opted postmodernisms which embraced the cultural logic of late capitalism, calls a “critical” or “oppositional postmodernism”.⁵⁰

Lyotard's sublime also suffers philosophically from its formalism, ultimately sitting uncomfortably with his ethics. For if the sublime is a *différend*, it is so in a manner which chimes uneasily with the *différends* which Lyotard discusses elsewhere,⁵¹ in that the Lyotardian sublime is a *différend* emptied of the particular political contexts and antagonisms with which we are faced in concrete (political) situations. We might speculate on what an oppositional sublime might be like, if it took these more directly ethical and political works as its model, but to develop an account of this would take me in a rather different direction from that which I will need to pursue in order to understand Hirst.⁵²

49 These artists engage in what Lyotard, in his essay “Critical Reflections” (*Artforum International* 29 [1991]: 92-3), defines, in opposition to the aesthetic, as “cultural work.” For Lyotard, they thus confuse this with the “fundamental task” of the avant-garde, its aesthetic resistance to the rationalising forces of capitalism through “bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible.” (Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 93.)

50 “...Postmodernism is publicly regarded (no doubt vis-à-vis postmodern architecture) as a necessary turn towards ‘tradition’. Briefly, then, I want to sketch an oppositional postmodernism [...]. In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status-quo and a postmodernism which repudiated the former in order to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction.” Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1985), xi-xii.

51 See Lyotard, *The Differend*.

52 One model might be the work of the film-maker Chris Marker. In *Sans Soleil*, repeated confrontations are staged with unknowable others – other peoples, other languages, other animals, nature, time, death, technology, the density of language and visual representation themselves – which are staged precisely in their unrepresentability, and in order to stage the ethical relation of such a (non-)meeting, rather than in the more conventional genre of the anthropological or zoological document, where the other is laid out as an object of determinate scientific knowledge for the gaze of the knowing, Western subject. Perhaps the archetypal moment of this version of an ethico-politicised Lyotardian sublime occurs in the passage of the film where Marker presents us slowly, frame by frame, with the film he takes of a woman from Bissau, looking for the precise moment, only a twenty-fourth of a second, in which she returns the camera's gaze, a moment which is stilled, and in which she takes on a density, an unknowability in which the representational mechanism of the cinematic breaks down, becomes opaque; we are left with her image as a rebus, an “event” the content of which we cannot determine, and we are thrown into a reflexivity which is both that of our thought as viewers, and that of cinematic representation itself. But it is no longer simply the abstract opacity of

The other side of Lyotard's "blindness" to contemporary art concerns the role of the sublime within capitalist culture. Such a role seems at first precluded by Lyotard's position, with the sublime standing in opposition to the very logic of capitalism; but if, as I have argued here, Lyotard's essay in fact reveals the ways that the new and the now are intimately connected, we would not be surprised to find the sublime inscribed in the discourse of capitalist art itself.⁵³ And indeed, there is surely more interest in producing the kinds of effect of the sublime, and in introducing the "inexpressible" into discourse, throwing us into the "now" in a capitalist art such as Damien Hirst's than in those late-twentieth-century artists who deliberately sought to resist capitalism's totalisations. In the

sensation which Lyotard finds in Newman that is at stake. Now the "presenting" of the medium of film, and the testimony that is paid to the fact that there is an unrepresentable, has become the presenting of a whole cinematic apparatus with a history and a social usage, an apparatus which is, moreover, an apparatus of representation, an apparatus bound into a history and a (global) politics, a medium in which the *differénds* between different cultures and peoples (and different people), between genders, and all the *diffférends* which are less directly "political" but are inscribed in our relations to our bodies and to our environment (the forces of internal and external nature) are all at stake.

There is, however, something still problematical in this attempt to imagine a Lyotardian ethics of the sublime opening into a postcolonial image. Marker is still a white, European man, and the gaze that we encounter in his films remains one which looks out from this traditionally central locus at the world which Europe once dominated; it constitutes a sort of bracketed repetition of a colonialist visual trope. Its enactment of this in the mode of the sublime might point us to the continued afterlife of such colonial attitudes within an ethics and aesthetics of the sublime. If we are to look for an alternative "post-colonial" form of the sublime, where the "post" in question is configured rather differently from the melancholy repetition of empire that we meet in Marker, we may find that we have to turn towards work such as Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004), which he describes as involving a "contaminated sublime." In the film, the figure of a black woman wanders through a harsh but ravishing arctic landscape to the accompaniment of a voice retelling the true-life story of Matthew Henson and Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole. (Henson and Peary were a black and a white man respectively.) The work emphatically returns the question of race to the arctic landscape, a landscape usually imagined as silent, empty and sublime. The search for "true north" amongst the virginal white and deadly snows is one of the key figures of a colonialist-exploratory imagination. Julien insists on the landscape as a place – and the sublime as a figure – which is already haunted by "others." The sublime landscape is not empty: it is always-already raced and gendered, populated with alterities. Julien's arctic pole might, after all, be a rather good figure for the Lyotardian sublime or *diffférend*: it can seem on the one hand a figure of uncanny and terrifying, pure, virginal blankness, as that which discourse has not spoken and cannot (yet) speak; but in fact it is a zone of alterity always already occupied ("contaminated") by a plurality of othernesses. Lyotard's sublime risks reducing the latter to the former. It could be imagined as having been the project of a number of black British artists working with the "postcolonial" – Julien for one, but we might add in Keith Piper's raced technosublime, or Steve McQueen's terrifying geo-historical sweep in *Carib's Leap/Western Deep* (2002) – to reinhabit and reinvest the landscape of the sublime with these pluralities. For an alternative attempt to formulate such an ethical sublime, on the grounds of Lyotard, but thinking the matter through questions of gender, see Zylinska, *On Spiders*. Christine Battersby has also recently rethought Lyotard's sublime, criticising, as I do here, his formalism and lack of attention to particular identity politics and positions. Battersby, *The Sublime*.

53 The relation between the new and the now is thinkable in terms of the Derridean spectrality which I have discussed in Chapter 1 (pp. 94–97) as central to thinking about capitalism and the sublime. The new and now are not "ontologically" distinct; rather they "haunt" each other. I further discuss the "spectrality" of capital below, in Chapter 3.

rhetoric of an artist such as Damien Hirst, the desire to “blow us away,” to place us in a contemplative state of speechless wonder beyond words,⁵⁴ is much more pronounced than in the more solidly left-wing of his contemporaries, who have tended to suggest that their aims are to return an audience to a critically rational state. There is a *desire* for the sublime inscribed in the machinations of the art market: sublime awe is highly marketable.

The overt position of Lyotard’s essay does not help us know what to do with the concern for sublimity in Hirst’s sculptures, except to consider it bogus. But the analysis I have embarked on throughout this chapter suggests there is a complex ambivalence at play: the sublime is – even if not actually achieved – an orientation or limit within the affective economy of capitalist art. Hirst’s is the apotheosis of the kind of production most feared and disdained by Lyotard: it is highly accommodated to the market; it functions through the rehashing of old styles and cultural references, mixed in with a certain *frisson* of the new, borrowing more from the “conceptual” language of advertising than from conceptual art; it is entertaining and spectacular, and blurs the lines between itself and popular culture; it is turned out on a production line, like – in Deleuze and Guattari’s much-quoted formulation – Ford cars or Prell shampoo.⁵⁵ Hirst’s work, at the heart of capitalist discourse, unlike his more radically oppositional contemporaries, does not amount to a “resistance” against capital that we might champion. However, my analysis of Lyotard’s essay also suggests that it would be quite reasonable to expect that even – especially – in the work which is most accommodated to capitalism, the sublime should form an orientation for cultural production. An art of capitalism, after all, would be looking for the disruptive event, in order to capitalise upon it.⁵⁶ Such an event would be quite ambivalent in its relation to the system of discourse which it will disrupt and transform but within which it will take its place. To look at this from the other side, such an event, however much the system may attempt to manage it, will always carry a certain amount of unpredictability, and the continuing movement of the system of capitalist discourse depends on this. Capitalist culture is always at its root antagonistic.

In this chapter, I have been opening up the ambivalences and ambiguities which Lyotard’s essay traces in the relation of the sublime to capital, and I have proposed that what appears at first a clear distinction between the new and the now breaks down to reveal a complex dynamic in which the two temporalities

54 See Chapter 1, above (p.69).

55 See also Lyotard, “Critical Reflections,” 92-3. In this, Lyotard argues even more emphatically for a distinction between the properly aesthetic nature of art and the work that ‘cultural’ artefacts do.

56 For capitalism’s “capitalisation” on the sublime, see Zylinska, *On Spiders*, 8.

are complementaries bound into a single, expanded discursive economy. It is this larger economy, a “blocking together” of the now and the new, that typifies capitalism rather than either of the two alone. The result is, of course, that the sublime has only a rather ambivalent power of subversion, and remains a much more accommodated aesthetic than those, such as Lyotard, who hope in it for a radical alternative to capitalist culture, would wish. The further implication of this is that the grounds of the opposition repeatedly set up in art critical discourses, as we saw with Ray and Brooks, between an authentic artistic sublime and the simulations of the media industries also collapses. My next task is to start to think further the nature of the capitalist sublime.

Chapter 3

Capitalism and the Sublime

In Chapter 2, I made an analysis of the way that Lyotard's structuring distinction between the new and the now – and thus also the distinction between the temporal logics of capitalism and the sublime – deconstructs under the weight of the detail of his explication. In this chapter, I explore what alternative vision emerges from a critical encounter with Lyotard's essay. In order to develop such an account, I explore the extent to which the sublime he proposes as an alternative to the cultural logic of capitalism actually finds itself in harmony with the ideological self-presentations of "postmodern" capitalism. To do this, I compare Lyotard's sublime to the vision of capitalism proposed by arch-neoliberal apologist George Gilder. Lyotard's description of the avant-garde's sublime leap beyond the known and knowable has disturbing affinities to Gilder's vision of the leap of the entrepreneur. Conversely, in Gilder's description, planned socialist economies look strangely like Lyotard's "monad in expansion." I make sense of these echoes between the two writers – who would otherwise be irreconcilable political enemies – in terms of the shifts in the make-up of late-twentieth-century capitalism, with the increasing dominance of consumption within the mechanics of capitalism – in the West at least – and in terms of the changing ideological self-images that capital requires as a result of this.¹ Such reconsideration also entails rethinking the longer history of the sublime and its relations with capital. I shall propose an alternative which, though derived from Lyotard, opposes both his and Gilder's accounts of it.

In the last chapter, I described Lyotard's figuration of capital as a "monad in expansion," a system which seeks totalisation, closing itself off to contingency and to that which is other or external. Its temporal mode collapses the future into the present, making it entirely knowable and calculable here and now, subject to present will. It seeks to eliminate that in the present which might make the future less determinable. I have also noted Lyotard's debt in this vision to Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of a dialectic of Enlightenment,

¹ This is the change which has brought us to consider that we live in a "consumer society," though we should be wary of believing that this is indeed a good name for the society in which we live. It has been discussed variously by the Situationists as the rise of the "Society of the Spectacle," and more recently by Antonio Negri as the "social factory" where consumption itself must be produced, and leisure has become subsumed within the capitalist mechanisms as key to the social reproduction of the system, and an increasing area which has to be produced and managed by capital itself. His theory of "real subsumption" suggests that it is this area of social reproduction which has increasingly become the focus of capitalist endeavour and the source of surplus value. See Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 269-76, 284-94.

which in turn leans on Weber's pessimistic vision of capitalism's rationality as an alienating mode of thought.

There is something over-abstract and general in Lyotard's chilling vision of capitalism; something even somewhat idealist. He writes: "Capital is not an economic or a social phenomenon. It is the shadow cast by the principle of reason on human relations."² Lyotard in this reduces social and political reality – history – to the expression of an inverted, dystopian Hegelianism, where the dialectic progress of *Geist* towards full consciousness and self-realisation starts to look like the monstrous, devouring force of *Thanatos* on a cosmic scale.³ I am far more wary about proposing a single essence of capitalism. Such an essence is belied by the varied forms that capital has taken across its long history from its pre-industrial forms to its contemporary mutations.⁴ I have, in any case, in the last chapter, discovered in Lyotard's essay a counter-vision in which capital is far more divided against itself (as we would expect if we treat seriously Marx's analysis of capital as founded on antagonism).

I'm not alone in such reservations about Lyotard's vision of capitalism.

² Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 69. In this chapter, as in the last, where the source is clear, references to the essays from this book will be given in brackets in the text. Lyotard perhaps draws this idealism from Weber and his influence on Adorno and Horkheimer.

³ To the extent that Lyotard makes capitalism a mere example of cosmic process, it loses its own particularity. We might ask what the point of this as an analysis of "capitalism" rather than just of "discourse" in general might be. There are fundamental philosophical questions here, regarding the relation between idealism and materialism. The angle I have taken in this dissertation, as implied already in the use of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (see esp. pp. 94–97, above), is that the relation between materialism and idealism is a complex one, each producing the "spectre" of the other. Attempts to sort out the ideal from the material (whichever one makes the primary reality) end up producing a troubling spectral supplement. Capitalism can neither be reduced to the reality of the material productive conditions of an economic base, nor can it be reduced to an ideal "spirit" or "essence."

⁴ Braudel, whose history of capitalism proceeds from the minutiae of the empirical rather than from abstraction paints a rather different picture. "Let me emphasise the quality that seems to me to be an essential feature of the general history of capitalism: its unlimited flexibility, its capacity for change and *adaptation*. [...] [T]he essential characteristic of capitalism was its capacity to slip at a moment's notice from one form or sector or another." Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 433; original emphasis. In the contemporary world, capitalism has most clearly shown its Protean nature in the new forms it has taken on in China. For example, there is the appearance of "shareholder feudalism", (dubbed by the authorities "socialism with Chinese characteristics," but hailed by Bill Gates as "a new form of capitalism") where whole villages such as Huaxi, "officially the country's wealthiest village," are floated on the stock market and achieve fantastical rises in share price (and in the case of Huaxi, a combined village turnover of over \$640 million in 2003), but where the occupants, still officially registered as "peasants," although they receive a yearly bonus of \$10,000 and dividends of \$25,000, have their lives regulated to the finest detail in order to ensure their productivity, have to reinvest eighty-percent of their dividends back into the village, and will also lose almost everything if they either sell up or move away from the village. Here, in a strange mix of pragmatism, ancient feudalism, Maoist socialism and market economics, the village owns them as much as they own the village. Such a situation is hard to account for in terms of Marx's classic articulation of the plight of the proletariat under capitalism, without quite some modification. See Jonathan Watts, "In China's Richest Village, Peasants Are All Shareholders Now - by Order of the Party," *Guardian* 10 May 2005, <<http://proquest.umi.com>> visited 20 May 2005.

Wilhelm Wurzer, for example, notes that “Lyotard manoeuvres laboriously with the notion of capital”⁵, and Paul Harris notes that “Lyotard’s ‘complexification’ is a monolithic category, but in practice the ‘complete monad’ of techno / scientific / economic (and even aesthetic) globalisation is not monolithic and never takes shape as a totality.”⁶ Indeed, in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” Lyotard himself admits, when he raises the spectre of the increasing totalisation of capitalism in an information economy, that his “observations are banal” (105) – and this in spite of the fact that the cultural politics of the essay (and the politics of its aesthetics) rest so heavily on them.

However, reading Lyotard’s account through and against itself, marked as it is throughout by slippages between the logics of the new and the now, the logic of capitalism starts to appear a more contradictory phenomenon than the account of capitalism-as-monad would bear, secretly based as it is on the “agitation” of the event. We start to see the effects of this “agitation” on capital (and on Lyotard’s account of it) when he writes that “there is something of the sublime in capitalist economy” (105). There is a gulf between capitalism’s Idea of absolute mastery, and the fact that there can be no example of such a power empirically demonstrable. This desired level of control is impossible, and the capitalist economy finds that, “in making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady” (105). For me, *this* is the hinge on which the interest of Lyotard’s essay hangs: the opening of the enigma of what it means that capitalism has “something of the sublime” (105).

How are we to understand the paradoxical situation Lyotard draws of a system which “attempts” an absolute mastery, but in fact produces the opposite? What kind of *agency* is involved? Where are we to locate this desire for mastery? Is the “monad in expansion” itself to be imagined as having a subjectivity? Does it have a desire? a will? intention? a consciousness, perhaps? And in this case even an unconscious? Is Lyotard guilty, in his personification of capital in such a monad, of a peculiar form of anthropomorphism?

Lyotard’s account itself opens these questions through its decentring of human agency in the Copernican turn which proposes an agential “inhuman” monad expressing itself through human action. (In Lyotard this agency is not just the *id*, as in Freud, but the demands of both an economic and a cosmic process.) Lyotard’s proposition of such an agency, embedded in but separate from human will, and in fact sometimes quite inimical to humanity, suggests that agency is something inherently plural – something (as with Freud and Lacan) which is always not where we think it is, and thinks where it is not.

⁵ Wurzer, “Lyotard,” 208.

⁶ Harris, “Thinking,” 144.

Can we, in this case, pose the question of the agency of the “monad” in the same way as we pose the question of human agency? If, as Lyotard suggests, the monad acts secretly through the human agent, what else acts through the monad, that it might produce not a closure of the future, but an increasingly uncertain one? If we see the “monad” in these terms, it looks, once again, much less monadic.⁷ If there is some form of “agency” in capitalism which aspires to be monadic, to close itself off, there is another agency through which another, quite different end is served – perhaps as a result of the “agitation” which nonetheless drives this process, and through the actions of which a rather differently inhuman principle is also at work. Seeing things this way the tensions between the new and the now no longer mark different forms of discourse, but rather a splitting of agency within the one and the same movement of thought.

The spectre who haunts such questions – an author who was highly influential in Lyotard’s early work – is Georges Bataille.⁸ It is, in particular, the ghost of Bataille’s understanding of the relation between a “restricted economy” and a “general economy” that seems to be at work in Lyotard’s account. Bataille will play a central role in this chapter, too, in understanding the relations between Lyotard and Gilder

In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille argues that the fundamental error of conventional forms of political economy – the error of a “restricted economics” – is to treat the economic sphere as cut off and separate from the “general economy” of energy in the biosphere. He argues that even if we can treat a simple task such as changing a car tyre as a self-contained act, this is not the case with running a complex system such as the economy, which aside from its complexity is implicated in a larger cosmic process.⁹ This, for Bataille, is

⁷ See Harris, “Thinking,” 144. Rather than a monolithic, global monad, and its others, which appear at the level of the local, Harris proposes that in contemporary, globalised culture, there are complex interferences between global and local processes, and that thus “resistance” is not simply expressed at the local but often, in interactions and resonances between various localities, on the level of the global itself. In making this critique of Lyotard, Harris makes a further pertinent observation on Lyotard’s account of resistant thought. For Lyotard, this resistance seems to happen at atomised points. Thought is something very like an individualistic affair, in that we have little sense from him of the “parallel processing” of thought as it takes place in a community (147).

⁸ For an account of Bataille’s enormous influence on Lyotard, and on the milieu in which Lyotard’s work developed, see Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 7, 16. Botting and Wilson note that “It was to Bataille that both Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard turned in their seminal critiques of capitalism and socialism’s complicity with capital” (16). They identify the book in which Lyotard had turned to Bataille so centrally and explicitly, to develop an understanding of capital as *Libidinal Economy* [1974], trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Athlone Press, 1993). It is via this book that Bataille continues to haunt Lyotard’s description of capitalism in *The Inhuman*.

⁹ Bataille writes: “economy is never [usually] considered *in general*. The human mind reduces operations, in science as in life, to an entity based on typical *particular* systems (organisms

an error which can rebound in disastrous ways on those who make it, since “Beyond our immediate fulfilment, man’s activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.”¹⁰ The logic of the fulfilment of this purpose expresses itself through and determines our actions whether we intend it to or not, and, put simply, if we do not take control of the implications of this fact, they will take control of our destiny. (This, of course, mirrors the way that in Lyotard, there are “cosmic” imperatives and a “cosmic” subject at work in human activity.) For Bataille, it is particularly disastrous to forget the consequences of the inhuman imperatives that work through us, since their central principle or end is the useless expenditure of energy and wealth: destruction and death. If we do not pay heed to this destructive principle, it will be ourselves who will be destroyed.¹¹

Lyotard does not seem to embrace Bataille’s argument as to the nature of the cosmic imperative embodied in the “general economy.” However, the question of such a relation of the restricted to the general economy, and the doubleness of function or agency that can be seen to be in operation in any action can still be taken up. Indeed, such a vision seems to be behind Lyotard’s own cosmological vision of capital as negentropic complexification (a system with an end beyond the ken of, and yet also the animating principle of, human activity). It is also, however, at work when he raises the problem that although capital might seem to tend to closure and totality, its effects are quite the contrary: here we are dealing precisely with a situation in which a sub-system would seem to tend to self-closure, but because of its relation to the larger system into which it feeds and which feeds back into it, interfering with its closure, this pressure of the sub-system to closure creates an increased effect of fracturing.

Lyotard and George Gilder

The problem with Lyotard’s reliance on Bataille for his conception of capitalism is highlighted by the surprising echoes we find between it and the

or enterprises). Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends. The mind generalises by composing the aggregate of these operations. Economic science merely generalises the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*.” Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:22-3; original emphasis.

¹⁰ Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:21.

¹¹ “An immense industrial network cannot be managed in the same way that one changes a tyre... It expresses a circuit of cosmic energy on which it depends, which it cannot limit, and whose laws it cannot ignore without consequences. Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of the mechanic who changes a tire.” Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:26. The ellipsis is Bataille’s.

visions of apologists of neo-liberal economics that Lyotard is surely writing in opposition to: the champions in the sphere of economics of what Lyotard elsewhere dubs the “slackening” prevalent in late-twentieth-century thought.¹² It is thus to George Gilder (Ronald Reagan’s favourite author) that I shall turn.¹³

For pointing me towards Gilder I am indebted to Jean-Joseph Goux’s essay “General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism”, which explores the fate of Bataille’s criticism of capitalism under “postmodern” economic conditions. Goux argues that Bataille’s conception of capitalism now looks dated. Bataille conceives it in Weberian-Adornian-Freudian terms, as a rationalising system which, with its Calvinist imposition of a work ethic at the service of the demand to accumulate, stifles the playful, libidinal and expending side of (in-)human nature. Goux notes that Bataille claims that any residual playfulness in the world under the reign of capitalism is only the “effect of a relative lack of power. Capitalism would avoid play if it could.” In Bataille’s terms, capitalism is primarily a “project” and thus fundamentally opposed to play.¹⁴ This conception of capitalism and Lyotard’s, as I have already described it, share obvious affinities.

Goux goes on, however, to note that capitalism may not require such a rationalist, repressive, Calvinist form of society as it seemed to in the 1930s when Bataille was developing his criticism of capitalism, a time characterised by an economic crisis of overaccumulation – a time, moreover, historically closer to an age of “Victorian” values, and one in which capitalism tended to be understood by its opponents and champions alike in terms of rationality, efficiency, and productivity.

Goux argues that we now live under a different form of capitalism, or at the least a capitalism that understands itself and its ethic in quite a different way, and that requires from its apologists quite a different ideological articulation. It would seem strange to characterise the consumption-orientated capitalism which has been growing since the 1930s as requiring Calvinist libidinal repression from its subjects. In this capitalism what is traded is the sign-value of brands, as much as material products with use-value. This capitalism mobilises human desire for its own ends, rather than repressing it:

[I]t is quite clear that today’s capitalism has come a long way from the Calvinistic ethic that presided at its beginning. The values of thrift, sobriety and asceticism no longer have the place they held when Balzac could caricature the dominant bourgeois mentality

¹² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 72.

¹³ The text I shall be drawing on is George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1982).

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. 7, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-88), 219, cited in Goux, “General Economics,” 204.

with the characters of Père Grandet or the usurer Gobseck [...] [H]asn't contemporary society undergone a transformation of the ethic of consumption, desire and pleasure that renders the classical (Weberian) analyses of the spirit of capitalism (to which Bataille subscribes [and, we might add, Lyotard]) inadequate? [...] No society has 'wasted' as much as contemporary capitalism.¹⁵

Such a wasteful, libidinal form of capitalism starts to look paradoxically like just the form of society that Bataille was championing. This is not to suggest that today's consumer capitalism is "a good thing." Capitalist society is still – obviously – inherently unjust: a system condemning an unacceptable proportion of the planet to political muteness, abject poverty, exploitation, economic and social instability, the threat of war, starvation, and countless other forms of violence.¹⁶ To note that capitalism no longer demands Calvinist repression from at least that proportion of its subjects who serve as its consumer base is not to laud it, but instead to ask whether this kind of analysis or understanding of "the spirit of capitalism" is any longer adequate as a basis of its critique.

To bring the point home, Goux turns to the arch-Reaganist George Gilder, noting that Gilder's attempt to produce an ethics for neo-liberal or postmodern capitalist economics, although seemingly unaware of Bataille, retreads almost exactly the same ground as him: Mauss and Levi-Strauss, the potlatch and the gift. For Gilder, contemporary, neoliberal capitalism owes its dynamism and its "goodness" not to Weberian rationality, but rather to the irrationality of the entrepreneur's investment in the future, which according to Gilder – quite in contradistinction to Lyotard – involves not the calculation and the reduction to certainty of the unknown, but a heroic leap into the incalculable.

For Gilder, it is precisely this irrationality which sets capitalism aside from socialism, which he does see as rationalist in its embrace of a planned economy. For Gilder, capitalism and socialism have quite different conceptions of human desire:

The capitalist, by giving before he takes, pursues a mode of thinking and acting suitable to uncertainty. The socialist makes a national plan in which existing patterns of need and demand are ascertained, and then businesses are contracted to fulfil them; demand comes first. One system is continually, endlessly performing experiments, testing hypotheses, discovering partial knowledge; the other is assembling data of inputs and outputs and administering the resulting plans.

¹⁵ Goux, "General Economics," 199.

¹⁶ Capitalism, I would contend, in opposition to its apologists, (who are unsurprisingly without exception from the minority that capitalism in fact serves best) is not a system that "works," which brings dynamism and prosperity, but one which for many is a continual, unabated catastrophe.

Socialism presumes that we know most of what we need to know to accomplish our national goals. Capitalism is based on the idea that we live in a world of unfathomable complexity, ignorance and peril, and that we cannot prevail over our difficulties without constant efforts of initiative, sympathy, discovery, and love. One system maintains that we can reliably predict and elicit the result we demand. The other asserts that we must give long before we can know what the universe will return¹⁷

Striking here is the extent to which for Gilder the capitalist transaction embodies an aporetic confrontation with the unknown which resembles the ethics which Lyotard associates with those things which stand in opposition to capitalism: avant-garde art and (true) philosophy. At the same time, what Lyotard identifies as the totalising logic of capitalism turns out in Gilder to be the logic of an anti-capitalist planned economy.

It is thus in the name of the same “irrationalist” critique of Enlightenment reason that both Lyotard and Gilder proceed, although the one is attempting to justify contemporary capitalism, and the other to critique it.¹⁸ Where Lyotard sees the aporetic as a disruptive force, for Gilder, it is precisely the source of the energies of capital. For him the poles of capitalism and the avant-garde which Lyotard’s essay tries so hard to pull apart entirely collapse into an identity:

Because nobody knows which venture will succeed, which number will win the lottery, a society ruled by risk and freedom rather than by rational calculus, a society open to the future rather than planning it, can call forth an endless stream of invention, enterprise and art.¹⁹

The model of avant-garde art, with its “creativity” (which for Gilder operates on the principle of “leap before you look”) is key to Gilder’s account.²⁰ When we consider the role that the avant-garde plays within this highly ideologised account of capitalism, we should be somewhat more suspicious of Lyotard’s claims about the oppositional nature of the avant-garde’s logic of the “now.” Entering uncharted territory in order to bring back goodness-knows-what, even if not run to an explicit programme of calculable gain, it looks – as it does explicitly in Gilder’s repeated metaphors of capitalism as adventuring exploration – disturbingly like a colonial trade mission, mapping out the

¹⁷ Gilder, *Wealth*, 35.

¹⁸ Gilder at a number of points develops his argument against state socialism explicitly in terms of a criticism of Enlightenment. Of Adam Smith’s version of rational self-interest, Gilder writes: “A rational calculation of personal gain would impel an individual above all to avoid risk and seek security.” This would in turn lead to a “sterile,” “ever-expanding” welfare state (Gilder, *Wealth*, 256) – one strangely reminiscent of the monad in expansion...

¹⁹ Gilder, *Wealth*, 243.

²⁰ Gilder, *Wealth*, 251.

unknown and unknowable for future exploitation. To put it just a little less metaphorically, the avant-garde appears as a “research and development” wing of capitalist culture. Its failures end up recuperated in the long run, on a larger scale, where “the system” will capitalise on any “mistakes” (whether the mad expenditure of the avant-garde, or the folding of an unsuccessful business idea) as these are transformed into new forms of knowledge.

Moreover, Gilder’s capitalism takes on the guise of an *almost Lyotardian* vision of the sublime, though without being explicitly named as sublime. It is a sublimity now associated with the mad risk of the entrepreneur. As the book winds towards its quasi-mystical concluding vision of a “providential” Universe of divine, productive chance on which capitalism draws, the risk of the entrepreneur is imagined ever-more emphatically in figures and words traditionally associated with sublimity.²¹ The incalculability of the entrepreneur’s risk involves an encounter with a “realm of dark transcendence where can be found all true light and creativity.” Gilder continues: “All men, however, shrink from this awesome contact with cosmic mystery and power,” since it is a “plunge into darkness.”²² It is not hard to see this in terms of a Lyotardian experience of privation, the feeling of terror evoked by the risk that “nothing might happen,” and the wonder that something, after all, continues to happen.²³

At this point, I start to wonder whether Lyotard is attacking the *wrong* capitalism, and whether his attempt to resist its logic ends up profoundly in harmony with, if not perhaps the actual functioning of capitalism itself, then at least the ideological pictures which allow it to function by ensuring a series of behaviours and actions by certain of its citizens.²⁴ Lyotard’s theorisation

21 For Gilder’s mystical vision of “providence,” see esp. *Wealth*, 256, by which time Gilder is drawing on St. Paul, and writing that “All human pioneers, from poets and composers in their many epiphanies to scientists on the mystical frontiers of matter where life begins, are essentially engaged in devotion.”

22 Gilder, *Wealth*, 253.

23 In fact these short quotations only start to scratch the surface of the extent to which Gilder’s vision of the entrepreneurial moment is centrally reliant on (or born within) a scenario of the aesthetic of the sublime, this very passage calling further on a vaguely Jungian concoction of the “collective unconscious” to image the entrepreneurial gesture as a becoming-one with the cosmic mind. See also, however, his whole contrast between socialism and capitalism (247-51), which develops through a comparison of their supposed abilities to deal with vast natural disaster. Here, Gilder conjures global catastrophes (in which nature is imagined and celebrated in its terrible guise) and dying civilisations into his discourse in a manner which places it securely in the tradition of the Gothic, “last man,” Ozymandias-esque fantasy and of Kant’s discussion, in his account of the dynamical sublime, of the human power of transcendence over such of nature’s powers, a tradition that my first Interlude notes Lyotard’s *Inhuman* also takes part in.

24 Goux makes it clear that what we have in Gilder is not something valuable as an accurate description of capitalism, but an example of the kinds of ideological, mystificatory picture that this “new” capitalism throws up around itself to ensure its functioning. These values – of the

of capitalism has ignored profound change, at the very least in its necessary ideological self-image.

Lyotard, Gilder and the Ideological Picture of Capitalism

Lyotard's adherence to a Weberian-Adornian-Freudian image of repressive capitalism, however, can be read in at least two ways. The first of these I have just raised: Lyotard is simply taking aim at an outdated target, a repressive capitalism that no longer exists. A more generous reading understands it as a refusal of the ideological pictures of capitalism of Gilder and his ilk: Lyotard is telling us that capitalism is not in any real sense, even if it claims in its self-ideologisations to be, any more open, creative or free than it ever was before; under the glittering surface of the Spectacle still lies a machinery of domination and destruction. A third answer lies somewhere between the two: Lyotard, in his haste to refuse the new ideological pictures of late capitalism, falls into the false solace of the familiarity of another false picture of capitalism, no less produced by mistaking one of its ideological self-images for its reality. Lyotard sees capital as the embodiment of Victorian morality in which the good of the commonwealth is served by disciplined, industrious production. In this, he ends up getting his critique of capital tangled with the new capitalism's new forms of ideologisation.

There is use, however, in holding open a moment longer the critical angle on contemporary ideologies of capitalism that can be found in Lyotard, by tracing some of the differences between him and Gilder, to emphatically show the mystifications involved in the work of the latter, and to lead us to a slightly different image of capitalism than those we find in either Lyotard or Gilder. The resulting counter-image that I shall paint of "capitalism," is of course, also somewhat speculative: I can claim neither economics nor social history my area of expertise, and I am, moreover, wary of the generalisations which I am myself proposing; it is meant, however, as an image, a counter-mythologisation, to trouble the equally metaphysical accounts which both Gilder and Lyotard give. It's an image, moreover, which is also given credence by the more empirical investigations contained in the second half of this dissertation.

The fundamental opposition between Lyotard's and Gilder's understanding of the nature of capital lies in their conceptions of capitalist exchange. For Lyotard this exchange demands absolute certainty, as the future is enveloped in the knowledge of the present. For Gilder, exchange is, on the contrary, an incalculable risk, and capitalism opens into absolute uncertainty.

Gilder attempts to back his version up, repeatedly, with the statistic

aporetic, of the necessity for blind risk – are essential to the justification of late capital and its imperative to consume.

that nearly two-thirds of new businesses fail within the first five years. He claims, again and again, that the entrepreneur – that lynchpin ideological figure of 1980s capitalist folklore – does not and can not calculate the risk he undertakes.²⁵

But this picture is highly counterfactual. It ignores all the apparatuses that do exist in capitalism for the prediction of the future, apparatuses which help, if not eliminate uncertainty altogether, then at least minimise it. Industry never ceases setting up models of consumer demand and desire. It sets into motion an elaborate machinery of focus groups, surveys, psychology, demographic classification, electronic feedback systems between manufacture and consumption, projecting profits and losses: a whole machinery of science and pseudoscience. Gilder omits to mention this whole machinery.

Lyotard, furthermore, supplies us with a vision of the homogenising powers of capitalism that Gilder denies. Gilder sketches the consumer age as providing a vast proliferation of choice as entrepreneurs seek to open new niches in the market. But contemporary social commentators such as George Ritzer remind us that successful large-scale business has largely run on the principles of “McDonaldisation”: predictability, controllability, calculability and repeatability. The start-to-finish management of the processes of production and consumption in McDonalds’ restaurants, claims Ritzer, has been taken up as a model throughout both industry and the public sector, resulting in a widespread “mallification,” and cultural homogenisation which fulfils Lyotard’s worst nightmares.²⁶

Gilder’s denial of actual capitalist practice and conditions is symptomatic of the repression which occurs in his privileging of the heroic figure of the entrepreneur: the small businessmen starting up their new businesses, who have such a high chance of failure. This reduction of the capitalist system to the scale of the individual small-business owner – the fundamental repeated gesture of 1980s capitalist ideologues²⁷ – ignores the question of what

25 “The idea that businesses buy knowledge like any other factor in production, until its cost exceeds its yield, that businesses can safely and systematically assemble facts until the ground ahead stretches firmly before them, misses the radical difference between knowledge and everything else. It is the leap and not the look that generates the crucial information; the leap through time and space, beyond the swarm of observable fact, that opens up the vista of discovery.” Gilder, *Wealth*, 251. I hardly need point out here the colonialism inherent in the metaphor, but note the imagery of sublime landscape that it evokes, a movement of the expanding imagination confronted by the broad vista, just as Addison describes it in, for example Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, “The Spectator, in Four Volumes,” *Project Gutenberg*, ed. 14 April 2004 [electronic version of Henry Morley’s 1891 edition], online e-text, Project Gutenberg, Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/2/0/3/12030/12030-h/12030-h.htm>>, May 2004. See issue 412 (23 June 1712).

26 See George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (London: Pine Forge, 1993).

27 Precisely, of course, the ideology which the entrepreneurial Goldsmiths artists, Hirst

proportion of the economy is comprised in such figures and what proportion of the economy is made up of enormous, trans-national corporations.²⁸

Such corporations, even if they do not have the power of absolute control over the future to which Lyotard suggests they aspire, do have at their disposal a series of mechanisms of risk-reduction. At this scale, however, questions about both Lyotard's and Gilder's accounts are raised. Gilder, in his attempt to explain the dynamism of capital, pictures it in terms of a sacrificial expenditure at the scale of the individual which is recouped at the larger scale of the system.

I have already noted how individual failure is capitalised at the level of the system as knowledge, forming that system's investment in "research and development" which wards off future uncertainty. Corporations, however, can play the law of averages within themselves, risking something in one enterprise that will likely enough be recuperated elsewhere in the company's balance sheet by another risk that *has* paid off. Stock-market speculators will not invest everything in one mad gamble (as Gilder's account of the heroism of the capitalist suggests) but organise shares into portfolios which balance out risks, taking advantage of the fact that what is unpredictable on the molecular level can often lead to a high level of predictability on the molar level.

In this regard, Lloyds of London is the archetypal capitalist venture, where risk is balanced through insurance. In the formation and rise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the key institutions of modern capitalism – joint stock companies, banks, tradable national debt, new forms of credit – this mechanism of scale and of the spreading of risk is crucial. Braudel, for example, sees such a "hedging" of bets as an important and consistent strategy within a longer history of capital.²⁹

Such an understanding of capital, its management of risk, and the

foremost among them, exploited to get their careers off the ground, coming in the meantime to serve as a kind of version of the "myth of the artist" for Thatcher's yuppie generation! Freeze as a re-enactment of the myth of the *Salon des refusées*, in modern dress, and set in London's Docklands regeneration zone...

28 In the difference between such small-scale entrepreneurs and large-scale corporations, we are dealing precisely with the difference between what Fernand Braudel calls the "market" and "capitalism" itself, proper. (See e.g. Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 229-30.) For Braudel what marks out the capitalism proper of big business is precisely its power to evade and overcome the forms of fair competition that doom Gilder's heroic little entrepreneurs to perpetual failure chasing the dream of capitalist ideology such as his.

29 He writes: "When in the nineteenth century, capitalism moved so spectacularly into the new world of industry, it did of course give the impression of specialising, and historians in general have tended to regard industry as the final flowering which gave capitalism its 'true' identity. But can we be so sure? It seems to me rather that after the initial boom of mechanisation, the most advanced kind of capitalism reverted to eclecticism, to an indivisibility of interests so to speak, as if the characteristic advantage of standing at the commanding heights of the economy [...] consisted precisely of not having to confine oneself to a single choice, of being able, as today's businessmen would put it, to keep one's options open." (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 381.)

gathering of the intelligence to calculate it, has the advantage of helping us understand some of the characteristics of today's "information" capitalism (and its differences from industrial capitalism) within a longer framework. Such characteristics, though brought to the fore and enhanced by technological and organisational means, are not new within the history of capitalism, however extreme the hyper-aggressive forms of speculation that have grown up in the last twenty-odd years may be. (The hedge fund is the prime example – its very name marks its reliance on forms of spreading, managing and balancing risk.)

The term, then, that both Gilder and Lyotard elide in their accounts, though in opposite directions, is that of *probability*, the central mathematical tool for capitalist speculation on the future.³⁰ In Lyotard, these calculations collapse into determinations of *certainty*. In Gilder, we are no longer dealing with probability, since the capitalist *calculates* nothing, and *risks* everything. We are faced with divine "providence," a cosmic principle that the capitalist embraces, possibly even to their own destruction, which resembles the notions of "destiny" or "fate" to be found in pre-modern Europe – a destiny which the entrepreneur must seize like a classical hero.³¹

But if modern capitalism has a character, it lies neither in the embrace of absolute chance, nor in a movement towards absolute certainty. Its constant harnessing of the unpredictable energies of the "general economy," which it deals with through "risk management" and probability theory characterise it as an economy (and society) of managed risk, a society which both needs but also must contain a certain level of instability and unpredictability.³² Capitalist speculation – the very possibility of profiting from capitalist exchange and investment – needs this (only) relative mastery of the world which probability theory affords. Just as the capitalist benefits from the exploitation of other differentials, in our information economy it is also from differentials

30 Hence in Shannon's founding text of the mathematics of the "information theory," which Lyotard seems to take as so central to capitalism, it is always *probability* and never absolute *certainty* which is at stake. Shannon, in his more philosophical remarks stresses just this point. As soon as prediction of information becomes certain, it is no longer information. See Claude E. Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Information* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1949).

31 Anthony Giddens, for example, emphasises that notions of "risk" develop in contrast to older conceptions of "fate" and "destiny"; they are a consequence and a means of emplotting ourselves in a changing history, a world which transforms itself through time, rather than pre-modern, eternally stable or circular cosmic orders, in which there is nothing really to be risked or gained, since everything is just as it is and always will be. Anthony Giddens, "Lecture 2: Risk," *Reith Lectures: Runaway World.*, 1999, B.B.C., <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith1999/lecture2.shtml>>, visited 4 April 2005. This suggests that an ideological function of Gilder's text is to reject the possibility of change, picturing capitalism as a stable and inescapable cosmic order, a Fukayama-esque "end of history."

32 In sociology, modern (capitalist) society is characterised by both Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck as fundamentally a "society of risk," one obsessed with the production and management of risk. As well as Giddens (cited in footnote above), see Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter, Theory, Culture and Society (London: Sage, 1992).

of information and control that the capitalist can “get one over” on his competitors, his employees and those with whom he does business. It is by having a better grasp of probabilities about, for example, a product’s success on the market, that he allows himself to take chances that others will not. It is in this sense that information becomes not just commodity but capital.³³

Such a description of capital as managed risk also makes sense of some of the tensions which appear in Lyotard’s own vision of capital in *The Inhuman*, emerging as it does between the image of capital as a drive to predictability, and the paradoxical effects of destabilisation caused by such a system, as it unleashes the destructive, transformative energies of scepticism on which he notes the avant-gardes rely (105). Such a description also accords with the tendency of capitalist societies not to be regular and orderly, controlled and disciplined, but ones in which, as Marx put it, and commentators ever since have ceaselessly observed, “all that is solid melts into air,” characterised by instability and the chaotic energies of restless change.³⁴

This highly ambivalent aspect of capitalist societies, which Lyotard touches on but does not fully integrate into his argument, chimes with another aspect of capital that Lyotard ignores in favour of the determinacy of economic exchange. Equally crucial to capitalism as the iron rationality of quantitative economic exchange is the irrationality and indeterminacy of the surplus-value that lies at the heart of the capitalist process of accumulation: surplus, after all, when reinvested *is* capital. But surplus is not readily determinable in advance; it always involves an uncertain speculation on the future. Surplus-value, though quantifiable, is unpredictable, unstable, fluid, and even likely to drain away altogether if overaccumulated. Like Derrida’s spectre, it shatters the presence of the present moment, and the hoped-for self-identity of value. Certainly, as Lyotard notes, this adds a certain urgency to the capitalist’s task of reducing the uncertainty of speculation, closing off the future’s indeterminacy to return to value its self-identity. Nonetheless, instability and lack of closure lie at the heart of capital’s determinations of exchange-value (in excess of production cost), its gambles on profit, and its drive to accumulation. Such indeterminacy can never be entirely eradicated. This is just one of the forms which the inherent contradictoriness of capital takes. Abiding in the heart of capital, surplus – a term which itself implies something excessive – runs according to the logic

³³ See, for example, Morris-Suzuki, “Capitalism,” 81-91.

³⁴ Marx, “Communist Manifesto,” Chapter 1. I have, of course, circled repeatedly around this passage throughout the last chapter. Theories of the tendency of capital to crisis were to be central in *Capital*, and to a tradition of Marxist critique which followed. (See for example, David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982], xvi.) For an analysis of capital’s fundamentally unstable dynamic and its proneness to crisis, developed from conventional (non-Marxist) economics, see also Michael Perelman, *The Natural Instability of Markets: Expectations, Increasing Returns, and the Collapse of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

of Derrida's "supplement."³⁵ This is not merely an addition to an otherwise self-complete object or concept, but an addition which is (paradoxically), nonetheless integral to it. It is an externality at the heart of the object – the otherness which the same intends to close itself off from, but which, turning out to be at the heart of the same, nonetheless grounds it. Exchange-value itself, then, as the abstraction of the object-commodity into a pure and rational determinate value carries with it an irreducible remainder of irrationality and indeterminacy.

In our increasingly dematerialised commodity-and-information capitalism, capital seems less and less simply analysable through the rational logic of an exchange whose exchange-values (prices) can ultimately be reduced to the realisation of a labour-value. Rather, in an information economy where "innovation" produces value,³⁶ where forms of "aesthetic monopoly" hold,³⁷ and where marketing – and a whole "technocracy of the sensible"³⁸ – creates branded goods and "sign values"³⁹ which exchange at prices which bear little relevance to the costs of production, the productions of exchange-value and surplus-value appear radically ungrounded from any such fundamental determinants as Marx's Labour Theory of Value would propose.⁴⁰ Today, when we view capitalism in the longer view (both before and after its industrial form), the problem of the source of surplus-value seems a much more open matter – more a matter of the capitalist's grip on the market, and of the illusory, phantasmagorical and spectral reality which capitalism produces. Capital itself appears increasingly animated by the removal of any fixed co-ordinates or ground for value: a de-ontologising and de-teleologising force, eschewing any transcendental point of origin or destination, in which everything is laid out in a horizontal relation of exchangeability – the expression or source (or at once both) of the forces of scepticism and destruction on which, we have seen in our discussion of Lyotard, above, the avant-garde draw, and which saw to the end of all the fixed systems of value and hierarchy of the *ancien regime* and its classical poetics.

Understanding capital as constituted by a tension between the drive to

35 Derrida, *Grammatology*, 142-157.

36 Morris-Suzuki, "Capitalism," 81-91.

37 Haug, "Commodity Aesthetics Revisited," 20-1.

38 Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, trans. Robert Bock (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 17.

39 Baudrillard, *Critique*.

40 For a Marxist critique of Marx's Law of Value, and the ways in which it no longer holds in late twentieth-century forms of capitalism, see Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*. Marx's law of value appears increasingly a matter of the particulars of the nineteenth-century form of capitalism which he was observing, with its intensive investment in industrial manufacture.

quantification, and the mutability of surplus, makes it clearer how Lyotard's sublime is not opposed to capital, but one of its (many) faces. Wilhelm Wurzer, in an essay on Lyotard, makes just this equation:

Making the exchange between things possible, capital, unlike any other being, is paradoxically both the least and the most representational (Thing). Never entirely present, it stands at an insurmountable distance from the subject that craves and enjoys it [...] The sublime is no longer present to itself. [...] In its 'postmodern' context as capital, the word 'sublime' (*erhaben – erheben – in die Höhe heben*) becomes a sign that cannot be read so easily. Drawn into an aesthetic explosion of appearances (as Adorno might say), and sliding off from mimesis, the sublime marks the very scene of the *différend* wherein the dissolve becomes capital, a promise without finality, a maddening presence.⁴¹

Wurzer, however, would seem to mean something rather precise by capital. In his book, *Filming and Judgment*, he notes that, as he would like to define it: "There is more to capital than its alignment with capitalism."⁴² Capital, as just such a disruptive, anti-metaphysical, de-ontologising force as we have described, is to be distinguished from its reinsertion into "capitalist" ideologies and social forms, which would also involve the reterritorialisation of the restless energies of capital by the (relatively) stable discourses of capitalism, with their metaphysics of the commodity relation.

Peter de Bolla: Sublimity and Capital in the Eighteenth Century

Such a reading of the sublime as tied up with the historical emergence of capitalism is given further credence by Peter de Bolla's argument in *The Discourse of the Sublime* about the links between shifts in economic discourse and developments during the mid eighteenth century in the discourse on the sublime.⁴³ Such a historical mode of argumentation – rather than the more speculative account I have just given – shows the development of a functional logic (economic, social, and representational) which historically bound the sublime to the growth of capitalist economic discourse.

Though there is no indication in de Bolla's book that he is aware of Lyotard's writings, there is a synchronicity between his vision of the sublime as a discursive excess beyond representation or control, and Lyotard's account of it.⁴⁴ For de Bolla, the sublime of mid-eighteenth-century authors such as Burke,

⁴¹ Wurzer, "Lyotard," 208.

⁴² Wilhelm S. Wurzer, *Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London and New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1990), 65.

⁴³ de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*.

⁴⁴ Though Lyotard's essays had already made their splash in the world of contemporary art, de Bolla's book came out two years before Lyotard's key essays on the sublime were collected in

Kames and Gerard is involved in the same management of unruly excess and surplus-value as is involved in modern capitalist economics of debt and credit, and the malleability of value caused by paper money.

In particular, de Bolla discusses the emergence of the discourse on sublimity as forming a “discursive knot” along with the discourse on the English national debt as it escalated during the Seven Year War with France. This war was waged over control of colonial territory for reasons of trade. But as “a struggle for the right to exploitation, manufacture, expansion of capital: profit,” money was not just its stake, but also its means of combat; it was an economic war as well as a war for economic gain. However, the economic weapons of the two sides were somewhat different: whereas the English had opened a “sinking fund” which allowed the national debt to spiral in order to keep interest payments to its creditors high, the French attempted to limit their debt by periodically reducing interest payments by decree. As a result, the French found it difficult to maintain the level of investment necessary to pursue the war, whilst investment in the English war effort remained an attractive proposition. The problem for the English, however, became extricating themselves from the war they were winning without financial collapse.⁴⁵ If the discourse on the sublime was “a powerful mechanism for ever more sublime sensations,” de Bolla claims, the discourse on debt created “the rationale for a never-ending inflation.”⁴⁶

According to de Bolla, there is a shift throughout the eighteenth century, especially in the period of the war, in the way that the “potentially infinite excess” of the national debt is figured, mirroring the shift of power from the landed to the moneyed class.⁴⁷ As value becomes understood as a mere product of exchange, uprooted from its mooring in land-value, the debt becomes imagined as productive, its instability manageable, even desirable.⁴⁸ No longer

The Inhuman, and de Bolla, writing from the perspective of the discipline of eighteenth-century British literary and cultural history does not mention the forays into the notion of the sublime that Lyotard was by that point already making. However, the “synchronicity” between the two is less surprising when we take into account de Bolla’s attempt to transpose into a more traditionally Anglophone form of academic discourse a certain corpus of poststructuralist (in particular, it seems, Derridean and Foucauldian) notions of “discourse,” springing from just the intellectual milieu from which Lyotard’s own work springs – notions which precisely stress “surplus” and “excess” as central. When de Bolla and Lyotard apply these notions to the “sublime,” it is hardly a shock that their versions of sublimity might resemble one another.

45 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 106-8. This is, of course, a situation conjuring the spectre of eternal war, one which has so many sinister echoes throughout the centuries since and also in the present day. In this respect, the current “war on terror” complies to an awful financial rationality.

46 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 6.

47 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 108.

48 This unmooring of value is also linked to the increase of the printing of paper money at this period (the ten pound note, for example, being introduced in 1759, which marks a key point in

a parasite on the body of the nation, debt becomes a body itself, a positive property that one can own, even in its negativity;⁴⁹ a body which can itself be healthy or vigorous, and can even come to represent the “body” of the nation.⁵⁰

This figure of over-plus is used to harmonise in a new, properly “modern” way, the “interest” of the individual subject and national “interest,” which come together in the “interest” accruing in the national debt. As the century progressed, public interest and the interest accumulated by private investors on their loans to the nation were seen increasingly to be in harmony, the free decision to lend to the nation allowing the blood of capital to circulate from the individual to the national body.

For de Bolla, the management and figurability of a potentially infinite debt and the interpellation of the subject in its terms, amounts to the birth of modern subjectivity and is “a founding gesture of the capitalist description of the subject.”⁵¹ It relies on an essentially similar discursive technology of subjectivity as the discourse of the sublime: sublime discourse, too, produces the individual subject as marked by a discursive excess, an excess of affect and meaning. This surplus which cannot be accounted for within the balance sheet of discourse thus constituted the irreducible difference of individuality in the same way as the economic subject is marked by the exponential surplus-value of interest on their investment. Both discourses, he argues, involve “a conceptualisation of the subject as the excess or overplus of discourse itself; as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control.”⁵²

Both discourses also involve a new reflexivity about their own surpluses of discursive power, which mark the subject’s place within them (as both producer and product). The new conception of infinitely malleable economic value was grounded in new economic practices, which in paper money and money of account treated money as an arbitrary sign. By 1778, Richard Price is writing of paper money, representing a representation (coin) of a representation (value), as if it was simply “a fact of life” that “signs can and do produce further signs.”⁵³ Signs are available, moreover, to be produced and manipulated through the representational systems of economic theory in a similar way to

paper currency’s competition with coin).

49 We can compare such a negative positivity to Burke’s “negative pleasure”, the “delight” of the sublime.

50 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 104, 108, 113.

51 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 6, 128.

52 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 6.

53 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 138. De Bolla is referring to a passage in Richard Price, *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* (London, 1778) 74-5.

that in which theories of the sublime were being understood themselves to be productive (and managerial) of sublimity and of literary or rhetorical excess.⁵⁴ Discourse, argues de Bolla, becomes at once excessive, and also itself regulates and produces the discursive excesses which, we have noted, mark the modern subject of the sublime and the economic.⁵⁵

De Bolla, however, focuses on an artificially narrow historical moment. Concentrating on the Seven Years War appears primarily a conceit to allow him to organise and figure what is in fact a more drawn-out process of the development of both the sublime and political economy.⁵⁶ But even if the Seven Years War is a remarkable moment at which the new economics has taken a decisive foothold, and at which, simultaneously, there is clearly a zenith in the outpouring of writings on the sublime, nonetheless the conceit has a distorting effect, and over-emphasis on this moment forestalls recognition of the developments and dominance of both theories of the sublime and the presence of the economics of debt throughout the early eighteenth century. Both of these, however, are well documented.⁵⁷ Many of the tropes and themes that de Bolla picks out can be traced back to the early century: the anxieties about national debt and new forms of credit permeate the work of early-eighteenth-century journalists such as Steele or Defoe.⁵⁸ And, as I shall argue in Part 2, the sublime, spectral, unsettling effects of the credit economy left their mark in the transforming literary landscape of Pope and his contemporaries. We also, even, see more emphatic and explicit forms of linkage between the tropology of the developing discourse on the sublime and the new economics. Laura Brown, for example, identifies themes of oceanic expansion and (over-)flow permeating early-eighteenth-century depictions of the developing empire of trade.⁵⁹ Images of torrents, oceans and floods served as figures of the flows of goods and money

54 See the repeated assertion, after Boileau, that Longinus's essay *is itself* an example of the sublime of which it treats...

55 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 6.

56 See for example Joanna Zylinska, who criticises de Bolla's account, with its focus on a very clearly defined moment, for being yet another attempt to circumscribe and contain the unruly and possibly transgressive discursive energies that de Bolla himself identifies. Zylinska, *On Spiders*, 28-32.

57 Monk, *The Sublime*; Dickson, *Financial Revolution*. Significantly, for Dickson, 1756 marks not the date of this change, but precisely the end of its progress, its final triumph. For more on the decisiveness of this "financial revolution" after the post-Revolution Settlement, see Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 525-8.

58 See, for example, Colin Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance: Capital Satires of the Early Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

59 See the Chapter "Imperial Fate: The Fable of Torrents and Oceans," in Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 53-92.

from the mouth of the Thames and out into the global sphere (and back again), in an image which both constituted an ecstatic presentation of the expanding imperial power and wealth born of these flows, but also, in a more discordant key, the threat of the chaotic energies unleashed by capital returning on the nation. Longinian rhetorical effects and the natural sublime are thus combined in order to represent the new economic energies.⁶⁰

De Bolla also holds back from drawing a causal link – from arguing either that the discourse of the sublime is caused by economic change, or that the economic changes of the eighteenth century were produced by their liberation from old modes of activity by the new ways of conceiving subjectivity and excess which were being opened up in the nascent aesthetics of the sublime.⁶¹ Aiming more to describe a configuration of discourse than a causal relation, his argument is that the two discourses, in their synchronicity, form a discursive “knot,” bound together by complex interrelations in a larger synchronous structure of the discursive network. Nonetheless, what we have in his work is a powerful image of the emergence of a discursive logic which is both that of the sublime and that of one of the key mechanisms characteristic of capitalism, which seems to strike a series of chords with those aspects of capitalism, in all its ambiguity, which find their way into the Lyotardian sublime: the importance of its (de-ontologising) forces of scepticism, which cause experiment,

60 Brown cites, for example, Young’s *Imperium Pelagi* (1729), where the benevolent and rational businessman is depicted as thinking of future wealth, hoping to be launched on a “flood of endless bliss” guaranteed by an Ocean of commerce as benevolent as Gilder’s providence. “Streams of Trade” become identical (again like in Gilder’s book) with fate itself, and Young writes:

Oh For eternity! a scene
To fair adventurers serene!
Oh! on that sea to deal in pure renown, –
Traffic with gods! What transports roll!
What boundless import to the soul!
The poor man’s empire, and the subject’s crown!

This clearly Longinian language brings together the same affective and economic over-flows (as well as flows of imperial power) which de Bolla associates with the sublime of the Seven Years War. Brown contrasts this, however, with Young’s *Ocean* (1728), where the image of the seas becomes ambivalent and loaded with the threats of modernity: the collapse of nation and of the very form of the cosmos, in the tempestuous chaos of the maelstrom which has the power to “Blend ... seas and skies” (Young, *Imperium Pelagi*, lines 345, 368 and 371-6, cited in Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 82-3.; Young, *Ocean*, 157, cited in Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 85.)

61 This refusal to penetrate further, which would involve a critique of capital itself, and its representational regime marks, I think, a certain liberalism implicit in de Bolla’s account, a liberalism which becomes increasingly apparent in his later works, such as *The Education of the Eye*, where the individual subject of liberal economics and democracies, and aesthetic art’s power to produce and “educate” this subject in modes of seeing, feeling and being, are increasingly held as exemplary. (Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003].) De Bolla’s work, then stops short of pushing his analysis beyond an understanding of the relation of the links between the discourse on national debt and the sublime to an understanding of the complicity of the sublime in the processes of capital *per se*.

destruction and rapid change, and the fact that in spite of its drive to order, capitalism creates an ever more complex and uncontrollable world. Such an account opens up to the reading of Lyotard's statement that "Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art" (106) which I have been pursuing over the last two chapters.

Concluding Remarks

This account makes it clear that sublimity and capital are not simply, as Lyotard seems at first to propose, opposing temporalities; rather, as has also been clear in my reading of the way Lyotard's essay deconstructs itself, sublimity and capital are intimately bound together. Since the modern rediscovery of Longinus it has been capital – "speculation" – which has been sublime, and which has been the source of sublimity. There is an ecstatic irrationality at the heart of capital, that resists its own tendencies to closure.

My reading of de Bolla has served to make the current form of informational capitalism that Lyotard describes look somewhat atavistic, even in the moment it appears to us as hyper-new.⁶² The historical moment I share with both Hirst and Lyotard is, after all, one of (neo)liberal and (neo)imperial resurgence in which a legacy of Whig ideology has come back to haunt us. The intimacy between the sublime and capital turns out to be older, more recurrent than fully acknowledged in Lyotard's essay. Already in 1769, a London stockbroker, discussing the British national debt as the nation's apparent source of wealth and power, mobilises an imperial monetary sublime, calling it the "standing miracle in politics, which at once astonishes and over-awes the states of Europe."⁶³ Lyotard's recognition that "Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation" and that "there is something sublime in political economy," dates back long into the history of capital. I have been hoping in the argument I have unfolded over the last three chapters to suggest that Lyotard's own recourse to a primarily eighteenth-century concept to think about contemporary art should already alert us to this fact.

Identifying such atavism in the contemporary sublime also helps us recognise the mode of supervention which rules the reappearance of the sublime in Hirst – both in the repetition of the tropes, themes and affects of the sublime in the sculptures themselves, but also in the insistent return of the concept of sublimity in the criticism which surrounds it, and the way that the

62 We should expect, in any case, a capital built on the shattered temporality of the spectral to work in returns and atavisms, rather than in any simple form of linear progression from one "stage" to the next.

63 Thomas Mortimer, *Every Man his Own Broker* (London, 1769), cited in Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 528.

concern with sublimity forms the basis on which judgments on the work are produced, whether explicitly articulated as such a concern, or whether this has retreated into the background noise of a culture already permeated with the culture of the sublime.

Part 2 of my dissertation will turn to further examine the prefigurations of the Hirstean sublime in the very moment of the aftermath of the post-Revolution Settlement, when the effects of the new institutions, instruments and practices of modern capitalism were making themselves felt: the Bank of England, Lloyds of London, the growth of long-term national debt, the permeation of credit and paper forms of money through society, and the Walpole ethos where everything becomes an object of exchange. It will also elucidate the way in which the sublime was at work as an imperative – just as it is in Hirst’s commodified art – in the commercialising cultural industries of the early eighteenth century. The role of the sublime in a commodified consumer culture rather undermines the way the sublime is imagined in criticism as a point of resistance to the system of capitalist culture. Rather, my analysis of Lyotard has suggested, within such a commercial culture, judgments of the sublime (and the expectation which they conjure) serve as part of an economy of excess which capitalism itself needs but must also limit and master; they mark the antagonistic core of the dynamic of capital itself.

The following section will start by focusing on Alexander Pope’s brush with the new, commercialising forms of literature of Grub Street, which were already, from the early days of the growth of the discourse of sublimity, starting to latch on to the language of Longinian rhetorical theory, suggesting that the “commercialisation” of the sublime is not, as Lyotard tends to envision it (along with other cultural critics such as Ray and Brooks), a corruption or betrayal of the purity of the project of the sublime, but rather, one of its primary poles of orientation from the very word go. Pope was on the one hand an opponent and satirist of this commodifying literature, who used the notion of the sublime to critique it; but Pope was also both a pioneer of innovation within this commercialising modern economy of literature, and an observer who leaves us a powerful image – like Lyotard, one feels, quite in spite of himself – of the sublimity of this literary system and its products. Lyotard and Pope, echoing each other across the centuries, though decidedly strange bedfellows, thus appear equally ambivalent towards the commercial sublime, each giving us equally contradictory – but for that all the more rich and evocative – accounts of its function.

Interlude 1

Picturing Capital

Towards a Spatial Logic of the Hirstean/Lyotardian Sublime

So far we have been considering Lyotard's work on the sublime in terms of its theoretical, historical and critical content. However, ever since Boileau noted that Longinus stood, himself, as the prime example of sublime writing,¹ there has been a recognised tendency for the sublime to slip from being properly the object of a theoretical text, to become instead its mode of exposition – for writing about the sublime to become, that is, sublime writing. There is something in the sublime which fosters such slippage. Sublimity is, after all, a matter of the ecstatic and oceanic overcoming of boundaries, and an aesthetic in which it is thus impossible to attribute clear positions to subject and object, form and content.² Theories of the sublime begin to perform, to act out and become engrossed in what would seem to be properly held at the safe distance of an object of analysis. Discussions of the sublime start to produce its effects.

Lyotard's text is itself no exception to this.³ Rather than merely a text "about" sublimity, it offers its reader a sublime vision, a vision precisely of the capitalism which I have been proposing Lyotard identifies as producing the logic of sublimity. Lyotard's text, that is to say, is not merely theoretical, it

1 See Boileau, *Oeuvres completes*, ed. A Gidel (Paris, 1873), 3.437, cited in Monk, *The Sublime*, 22. Pope echoes this when he writes that Longinus's "own example strengthens all his laws; / And is himself that great sublime he draws." Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (London: 1709), Project Gutenberg etext, February 2005 <<http://www.gutenberg.net/dirs/etext05/esycr10h.htm>> 3 October 2004, 679-80.

2 See for example, Suzanne Guerlac's excellent essay, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime," in which she discusses the way that subject positions dissolve in the discussions of the sublime, and in particular in Longinus's own technique of the quotation of sublime passages (a technique, of course, which became standard in eighteenth-century criticism, and in particular in the case of treatises on the sublime). In these, the position of the original author, the quoting author, and the reader become peculiarly aligned and indistinct; each takes the "power" of the passage as their own (Longinus himself writes of the way that "our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard" (Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, ed. Agathon [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899], Peitho's Web, <<http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/longinus/index.htm>>, visited 17 Oct 2005, §7.2). – exactly a matter of the subject's loss of distinction between itself and its others). The sublime text becomes a zone of subjective indistinction and merging. But even with the natural sublime, the experience of being overwhelmed is a matter of the moment in which self and object are no longer distinct. Suzanne Guerlac, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime," *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985): 275-89.

3 I am referring, of course, to the essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," which I have been discussing during the last chapter, and taking it, once more, within the larger context of the essays in *The Inhuman*.

is also a literary text, and indeed it is full of literary tropes. As such, it needs examining not just as theory and philosophy, but as a piece of fiction, a work of the imagination. More precisely, Lyotard's essay is specifically a *Gothic* text, and is permeated by the phantasies which inhere to this genre. The legacy and imaginary it activates – just as much as that of philosophers such as Kant – is that of Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe and Robert Walpole. The fundamental phantasies that underpin Lyotard's *Inhuman*, as a literary work, are drawn from the Gothic canon.

Lyotard's essays in *The Inhuman* are most explicitly concerned with the problem of time (the subtitle of the book is *Reflections on Time* and we have here already explored his account of the unfolding of the "new" and the "now"), but dealing with time also always involves dealing with space, just as the opposite is also true. In this short "interlude" (perhaps itself a Gothic fragment: I will, at least, follow a rather tortuous, winding itinerary, like the secret passageways of a Gothic castle) I shall explore a logic of phantastical space which emerges from the Gothic tradition which, I hold, animates Lyotard's restless dreams of the logic of inhuman capital. It is also a logic which, I shall here suggest, animates the spaces (and hence temporalities) of Hirst's vitrines. This spatial logic defines a shared imaginary which both Hirst and Lyotard inhabit, the imaginary of a contemporary capitalism haunted by Gothic returns.

Lyotard's Gothic Fragments

What could be more Gothic, after all, than Lyotard's vision of the "monad in expansion"? Its cyborg body – uncannily inhuman, but nonetheless man-made; unnatural and yet of organic composition; the monstrous offspring of the technological manipulation of life itself, fused into a form that is neither life nor death – appears to have emerged from nowhere if not Frankenstein's laboratory (the first of our Gothic spaces here).

Lyotard's musings on the undead life of the postmodern techno-scientific rationality of late capitalism, in "Can Thought Go on without a Body?" – the first chapter of *The Inhuman* – speculates on the common postmodern cyber-fantasy of the inevitable end of life on earth, the end that is of its organic base, with, in this case, the heat death of the Sun, when mankind's consciousness would have to be uploaded into a computer and sent across the galaxy to find a new home. But what, wonders Lyotard, would thought be without its organic substrate, transformed into the passionless switching of binary digits?

It is a common Sci-Fi scenario; but one whose roots lie in the Gothic imagination of the turn of the nineteenth century, not the twenty-first.⁴ Its

⁴ Science fiction is itself a modern variant on the Gothic. See Botting, *Gothic*, 162-7.

scenario repeats Byron's 1816 poem "Darkness," which also imagines the end of humanity precipitated by the death of the solar system.⁵ The resultant cybernetic monster of Lyotard's fantasy piece – human consciousness and memory without human body – serves as a warning, like *Frankenstein*, about the intrusion of reason and capital into the territory of life itself, as science, reason, technology and capital have not ceased to intrude since the Enlightenment. This super-brain, once more, is the totalising monad. Closed off on itself, a perfect digital system, it would not be subject to the "noble agitations" of thought or of the body. It is a story of the end of man as the birth of the perfect technological monad. In the figure, Lyotard brings together two of Mary Shelley's texts: the monster of *Frankenstein* becomes transposed onto the end of the world, as depicted in her novel *The Last Man*.⁶ *The Last Man* itself, in fact, as Vijay Mishra has argued, already conflates the two figures of the monster and the end of the human (the monster is, after all, in a sense always a kind of "end" of the human, in the sense that it is an image of what it is to be no longer or not quite human...). Mishra claims that the connections between the two novels is "much more direct and explicit than hitherto made out by critics."⁷ In *The Last Man*, Shelley reiterates a series of the repeated tropes associated with her monster,⁸ and in Mishra's analysis the plague and the monster share a logic of ecstatically terrifying "decreation" which is lodged at the heart of the Gothic sublime, an inhuman annihilation of the purposes and faculties of the human which reveals our insignificance and contingency within a vast and awfully indifferent nature, and an expression of an Oceanic death-wish present within humanity as its other. Lyotard's totalising monad is also a figure of this counter-purposive, inhuman decreation, tending to a state of entropic heat death and final closure. The "decreating" is also a figure we will come up against when we come to Pope's vision of the Dulness of capitalist culture and the monstrous, artificial births of its "uncreating word."

As Gothic fantasy of the ends of the human, Lyotard's essay belongs in a lineage also sketched out by Mishra around Mary Shelley's work: Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805), and John Martin's *The Last Man* paintings, stretching back through William Godwin's speculations in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and even to James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-44), a poem which we will also encounter later in this dissertation,

5 Available in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 95-6.

6 Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, [1826] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

7 Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 175.

8 There are, for example, similarities between Frankenstein's dream on creating the monster and Verney's dream in *The Last Man* of an "empty, plague-ridden city" (See Mishra, 175). Mary Shelley, however, also makes the link more explicit, calling the plague that will destroy mankind an "invincible monster." Shelley, *The Last Man* 160, cited in Mishra, *Gothic Sublime* 182.

but which here is significant for its proto-apocalyptic images of starving wolves and plague-ridden streets.

Mishra, tantalisingly, in his discussion of the postmodern as a reiteration of the Gothic, suggests that the “abyss of heterogeneity” which Lyotard discovers at the heart of the sublime is more a matter of the Gothic, with its “abject failure to totalise,” than of Kant, and that “the real metatexts for Lyotard are in fact the texts of the Gothic sublime.”⁹ Given just how Gothic Lyotard’s essays are, not just in their philosophical vision of sublimity,¹⁰ but also their literary style and their tropology, I am led to wonder what sort of denial or disavowal it is which would cause the Gothic moment in the history of the sublime – precisely the moment which is most constitutive of his own version of the sublime – to disappear from Lyotard’s account of the history of this concept. The slippage of the Gothic into the scotoma of the field of vision of Lyotard’s account is a symptom precisely of Lyotard’s avoidance of the base products of capital, and his desire to find in the sublime, as a mode of high-cultural aesthetic work, a means of “pure” resistance to commodifying culture, and his reluctance to find within the popular itself the possibilities of forms of unease, resistance and heterogeneity or antagonism.

Imaging the Monad

There are two images in art history, in particular, which provide clear equivalents of Lyotard’s monad, which help elucidate the spatial logic of its phantasy scene. Given what I have said about the relation between Lyotard and the Gothic, the most obvious of these is rather unsurprisingly one of the “precursor texts” (as Mishra calls it)¹¹ of the Gothic itself: Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s cycle of engravings, the *Carceri d’Invenzione* (c.1749-50). The other, which we will come to, is even older, and is Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Tower of Babel* (c.1563).

Piranesi’s *Carceri* were themselves a key site of critical discussion around which the British shift from a taste for the beautiful to one for the sublime was

⁹ Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 39.

¹⁰ Mishra’s argument is that the Gothic involves a “negative transcendence” rather than the “positive transcendence” of Kant or the Romantics. It consists of a refusal to allow (human) transcendence, and an insistence on the failure to transcend – a failure of the ideal – and on what causes this failure. It is this failure, rather than the transcendental leap which Kant stresses, which is the source of sublime affect in the Gothic. If Kant locates affects of ecstasy and exhilaration in his second moment of the sublime, the moment of overcoming, for the Gothic, these are to be found in the masochistic experience of blockage itself. (Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 39.) In my analysis of Hirst’s shark sculpture in the final two chapters of this dissertation, this Gothic experience will be seen to lie at the heart of a wider sublimity in the experience of consumption and in the commodity itself.

¹¹ Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 45.

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Fig. 34: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Imaginary Prisons of G. Battista Piranesi* (2nd. state), c.1749/50, Title page. Edition Piranesi, Rome, 1761. Image from Ficacci, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Selected Etchings* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 31.

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Fig. 35: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Imaginary Prisons of G. Battista Piranesi* (2nd. state), Plate 6, “The Smoking Fire,” c.1749/50. Edition Piranesi, Rome, 1761. Image from Ficacci, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, 36.

effected, and around which the properties of (a particularly Gothic version of) this new taste was to be articulated.¹² Piranesi's etchings were central in the development of the "Gothic sublime," serving as the most direct source for Horace Walpole's own deranged dreamscape of *The Castle of Otranto*.¹³

Piranesi's prisons, springing from his nightmares as he recovered from a fever, embody the Faustian work of capital, exactly as envisaged by Lyotard, as an inhuman monad in expansion. Expanding infinitely, they are always only half-built, often strewn with scaffolding and the tools of their construction, but are seemingly already falling into decay. The prisons are an inhuman landscape, filled with devices of torture, built counter to the needs and purposes of their inhabitants, expanding according to their own autonomous, geometric logic, which prescribes for them no proper boundary, no closed form, only a vertiginous, modular – though also somewhat chaotic – self-replication, a "complexification" (in Lyotard's idiom) which is logically unlimited. Their hard, rough, cold stone surfaces are hardly adapted to the needs of the human body, and, as with the Kantian mathematical sublime, their vast scale uproots and unsettles, or even annihilates the sense of self, offering no orientation to the subject.

The castle/prison that was to emerge as central in the Gothic imagination forms a landscape or architecture that, like Lyotard's sublime capital, itself takes on a form of uncanny, inhuman agency, which becomes more a character, more a protagonist than the human "characters" of the novel or play, who become fragmentary and inconsistent, losing their individuality on the one hand in a series of shifts or inconsistencies in behaviour and motivation from scene to scene as they jump from role to role, and on the other in a labyrinthine structure of doubling with the other characters in the narrative, a labyrinth which itself mirrors the architectural labyrinth in which the action takes place, and turns out to be the only real logic which animates it. Such a vision of the heteronomy of the self and its motivation parallels the experience of the subjection and reification of the individual at the hands of an external agency or "Will" in capitalist relations, a "Will" that seems less and less like that of another individual, and more and more like that of a "system," an inhuman monad.

Piranesi's engravings serve as the blueprint for an ensuing tradition of the industrial sublime, a profusion of vast, infernal, Miltonesque or Martinesque landscapes of "Satanic mills," which dwarf the human, and subject him or her

12 For the influence of Piranesi on the Gothic, and especially on its initiator, Horace Walpole, see Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 59. For more on the wider influence of Piranesi (not just on the Gothic, but on British taste in general, and the love of ruins in particular), see in particular Frank Salmon, *Building on Ruins: The Rediscovery of Rome and English Architecture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

13 Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 57.

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Fig. 36: Andreas Gursky, *Siemens, Karlsruhe*, 1991. Cibachrome, 175.5 x 205.5 cm. Image from *Andreas Gursky: Photographs from 1984 to the Present*, 33.

to the mechanics of labour and productivity. A tradition not just of the depiction of these landscapes, but which has wended its way into the very organisation and planning of the world itself.¹⁴ John Martin's fantasies of the vast ruined cities of the ancient world – which formed one legacy of Piranesi – ran alongside a string of “improving” engineering projects which he launched, and the “Martinesque” became itself a favoured style for contemporary engineers such as Brunel. Piranesi's fantastical nightmare prisons in their turn form a blueprint for Bentham's Panopticon, so famously itself, in Foucault's analysis, supplying a master principle for the society of surveillance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Panopticon serves to attempt to impose a rationality on the Gothic schema of torture and cruelty of Piranesi's architecture, but nonetheless is still posited in an anti-transcendental Gothic logic whereby the ideality of the social itself is always already presumed to be unstuck in the impossibility of its instantiation in the body of the madman, the criminal or the political subversive, and on a logic of quite Gothic tyranny over such bodies.¹⁵ And if the circular form of Bentham's prison appears a model of rational order in relation to Piranesi's sprawling and multiplying forms, at the point where Bentham fantasises about the generalisation of his principle of the jailer into society, producing a world of centreless mutual observation, it soon disintegrates once more into the labyrinth of paranoia which underlies the conspiracy theory genre so strikingly described in Jameson's work on postmodernism.¹⁶ Aside from this most paranoid form, however, the architectural and spatial principle of Piranesi's multiplying modules underlies that of the modern landscape – perhaps itself echoing a logic of the quantification of space and its parcelling out into chunks of property. In this sense, Piranesi's vision extends to the present day in Andreas Gursky's mammoth photographs of the sites of production, transportation, display, exchange and consumption within which the individual appears as a mere point emplotted within the spatial plan of the architecture or urban site.¹⁷ Gursky's images, like Lyotard's vision of the monad, and like the Gothic castle, annihilate the human within the complex of the inhuman otherness of the machine of capital.

On a rather smaller scale, Hirst's vitrines themselves echo the rectilinear spaces of Piranesi's architecture, the abstract and Newtonian space of a grid

14 See especially Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*.

15 Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 53.

16 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37-8; Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 9-66.

17 Gursky's vision of the spaces of globalisation have often been discussed in terms of the sublime, though not to my knowledge connected with the Gothic. See for example Caroline Levine, “Gursky's Sublime,” *Postmodern Culture* 12.3 (2002). <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v012/12.3levine.html> 10 August 2006; Alix Ohlin, “Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime,” *Art Journal* 61.4 (2002): 22-35.

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Fig 37: *The Acquired Inability To Escape*, 1992. Glass and steel vitrine, MDF, on silicone, table, chair, lighter, ashtray and cigarettes. 221 x 305 x 214 cm. Tate Collection. Image from *I Want to Spend...*, 62.

which is, in principle, infinitely expandable. Hirst's *oeuvre*, planned as it is around iterable product lines, follows the logic of accumulation through which Piranesi's space, too, is constructed. Forming an abstract, carceral space, these transparent cells repeat the forms of the disciplinary society Foucault so expertly anatomised as following Bentham's paradigm – the hospital, the prison, the workplace. They reiterate the uncanny sense of Gothic imprisonment and helplessness, and of the loss of will to an abstractly monadic "system" which, though unlocatable and unpresentable remains nonetheless every bit as tyrannical as the most frightening Gothic villain. They are architecture and technology come to life, with a will of their own (or rather, in fact, with the undead life which capital endows them), to terrorise and subjugate the human and the creaturely. To recognise oneself in the bodies within their spaces is to take on the role of the Gothic hero or heroine. It is in such a spatiality that we find the common imaginative logic which unites Hirst's and Lyotard's sublimes.

Piranesi's prints of his imaginary, infinitely expanding prison – and thus Hirst's cells, too – belong to the tradition of architectural caprice,¹⁸ and amongst their predecessors from this tradition has to be numbered what for me is the model *par excellence* of Lyotard's vision of capitalism as inhuman and ever-expanding, a painting which seems to figure rarely in the eighteenth-century canon of sublime paintings, but nevertheless which lies at its thematic core. This image is Pieter Bruegel the Elder's vision of the Tower of Babel, painted as it is at a moment of the expansion of early modern capital, and of industrial and urban expansion in the low countries.¹⁹ In the version in Rotterdam, by far the more dystopian of the two extant towers he painted, the tower spirals ever outwards in a centrifugal compositional movement to encompass and annihilate the landscape in which it is situated, its pastoral green relegated to the distant horizon, giving way in the foreground to an earth blackened and blasted by the mines and furnaces which surround the tower and supply it with the materials of its manufacture.²⁰ It also swallows up a vast army of labouring figures, in procession up its ramparts towards its unfinished and unfinishable turret, become so tiny in relation to the tower itself that they are almost invisible

18 The title of the first state (dating to the 1740s) of Piranesi's prisons denominates them as *capricci*. For Babel as a subject of architectural "caprice," see, for example, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: His Predecessors and His Heritage*, (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1968), which although not listing Bruegel as such as a predecessor for the prisons, does list a series of architectural caprices, including several by Claude le Lorrain, one of which is a drawing of the Tower of Babel.

19 The tower is translocated from its Biblical setting to the sixteenth-century Flemish landscape that Bruegel knew, and overflows with observed details of contemporary dress, architecture, and mining and building techniques.

20 The painting I discuss is Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), *The Tower of Babel*, c. 1563, oil on panel, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Bruegel in fact painted three versions; the third, a miniature, painted on ivory, is missing. The other tower still in existence is in Vienna.

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Fig. 38: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel*, c.1563. Oil on panel. 60 x 74.5 cm. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Image from Wikimedia Commons.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Pieter_Bruegel_d._Ä._076.jpg>

in reproduction, and cause a viewer of the painting to step so close as to be swallowed up in the space of the rather modestly-sized panel on which the picture is painted.

The Sublimity of the City as an Embodiment of Capital

A peculiarity or problem, however, about figuring the sublime in terms of the limitless excess or expansion conjured by the effects of capital's surplus value – a theme I shall go on to develop in the following chapter – is the fact that it is so emphatically *nature*, in explicit opposition to the artificial, that is expected to carry the feeling of sublimity in its standard articulations in Romantic art and thought.²¹

This problem can be seen particularly clearly with the depiction of the city in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century accounts, in particular of London, a city by this point by far the largest urban centre in the world, growing at an exponential rate according to the demands of a “free” market. Such a city can be understood – like the image of the tower Bruegel paints – as an embodiment of the market, or at least as an image of the very unrepresentability of that market's principles. But what is striking is just how rare it is for the city to be explicitly named as “sublime,” in spite of the fact that observers repeatedly describe it in terms of the characteristics reserved for the natural objects evocative of sublimity. Repeatedly it is described in terms of its vastness and formlessness, its obscurity and inhumanity; its production of sensory overload or privation, dizzying disorientation, feelings of threat, danger and loss of self; but also of exaltation and excitement. It is repeatedly envisioned as a force greater than and overwhelming to the human individual: in short it is described repeatedly as an object impenetrable and unfigurable, the contemplation of which can only evoke an ambivalent sense of “negative pleasure.” In spite of all this the word *sublime* itself is hardly ever applied to the city.²²

21 “[W]e must not point to the sublime in works of art, e.g., buildings, statues and the like, where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor yet in things of nature, that in their very concept import a definite end.” Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §26.

22 Only a few of the examples that Roy Porter cites, for example, in his *London: A Social History* will make this repeated trope clear. Christian Goede, a German visitor to London, writes in 1802, “nothing is presented to the view but a vast crowd [...], many of whom are so overpowered by the heat, noise and confusion, as to be in danger of fainting. Everyone complains of the pressure of the company, yet all rejoice at being so divinely squeezed.” Cited in Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 115. Robert Southey in 1807: “I began to study a plan of London, though dismayed at the sight of its prodigious extent, – a city a league and half from one extremity to another, and about half as broad, standing on level ground. It is impossible ever to become thoroughly acquainted with such an endless labyrinth of streets.” (*Letters from England*, cited in Porter, *London*, 93.) Walpole himself, in a letter of 1791, writes of a town so vast that “Hercules and Atlas could not carry anybody from one end of this enormous capital to the other”, a town nonetheless which “cannot hold all its inhabitants”, who seem subject to an even more unimaginable growth: “so prodigiously [is]

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Fig. 39: Carl Haag, Panoramic view of London from the Monument, 1848. Image from Roy Porter, *London: A Social History*, plate 20.

Wordsworth's *Prelude* provides an example of this phenomenon in its full-blown Romantic form. In Book 7, he describes his time spent in London, after his studies in Cambridge, and the city is described repeatedly in the terminology usually associated with the sublime, just as it is in so many other texts of the time: it fills one with "wonder and obscure delight," "awe," it "dizzies" one.²³ Wordsworth writes of feeling "in heart and soul the shock / Of the huge town's first presence" (7.66-7); the streets are "endless" (7.68). In one passage, Wordsworth even goes so far as to bring in the term "sublime," describing the city in a vision which emphasises its disorienting and inhuman vastness, which reduces us to mere ants, its vortex of dynamic forces, its sensory overload, its chaos and its formlessness:

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain
Of a too busy world! Before me flow,
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!
Thy every-day appearance, as it strikes--
With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe--
On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance
Of colours, lights, and forms; the deafening din;
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesman's honours overhead (7.149-159)

The city here, as throughout the book, disintegrates into a shapeless mass of fragments and partial images, which only rarely crystallise into an intelligible form. The rhythm mimes this out, broken into short, staccato clauses, which pile up as grammatical fragments – incomplete, almost verbless – marked by alliteration, repetitions, and by short, Anglo-Saxon words. Stylistically here – and again throughout the book – Wordsworth leans on the list, a device perhaps

the population [...] augmented", he writes, that he mistakes the everyday crowds for a mob, and finds himself imagining, in a natural metaphor precisely of natural/oceanic sublimity, that "the tides of coaches, chariots, curricles, phaetons &c. are endless." (Cited in Porter, *London*, 99.) We find Boswell in 1763 on the one hand in enthusiastic rapture at the vast vista of the city: "When we came upon Highgate Hill and had a / view of London, I was all life and joy" (cited in Porter, *London*, 160.) but on climbing the Monument he describes a quite different sense of being overwhelmed, but one that equally follows the tropes of sublimity as classically described by Burke and Kant: "It was horrid to find myself so monstrous a way up in the air, so far above London and all its spires. I durst not look around me. There is no real danger [...] [b]ut I shuddered, and as every heavy wagon passed down Gracechurch Street, dreaded the shaking of the earth would make the tremendous pile tumble to the foundation" (cited in Porter, *London*, 164). These are (more than) enough examples to demonstrate the insistence of this motif, but many more could be given.

23 William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," ed. July 1999 [1799-1805], Bartleby.com, Available: <<http://www.bartleby.com/145/>>, September 2003. 7.87. This text is that of the 1850 *Prelude*, which is also available, alongside the 1805 version in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1995). Here, Book 7 takes up pp.250-95. Following citations will be given in the body of the text, from the 1850 version, with only line numbers rather than page information.

borrowed from Pope's accounts of the maelstrom of urban life.²⁴ Laura Brown has analysed this device as being in Pope the formal equivalent of the reification involved in capital, its transformation of all objects into their exchangeable value (or place within a list) and their loss of their specificity under this law of exchangeability – the objects start to appear random in their piling up – at the same time as it mimics the profusion of objects becoming available in their sheer enumeration.²⁵ Of course, the list is more than this, too. It registers the ecstatic state of the subject of such a commodity culture, captured within capitalist exchange's logic of *différance*. However, these are issues to which the current dissertation shall have to return to work through fully.²⁶ For now I shall satisfy myself with noting that the logic of accumulated, exchangeable things is also central in Hirst's sculptures, too, with the vitrine providing a structure within which new objects can be substituted for old, and thus through which a product line can expand.²⁷

Wordsworth's account is hugely ambivalent. It drags us through the exciting, energetic chaos of the city, the magnificence and profusion of its spectacles, from the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall to Ranelagh, its museums and exhibitions with their displays of the exotic, the panoramas, dioramas and miniature models, sideshows, its architectural and engineering wonders, the spectacle of the cosmopolitan crowd itself, the dazzle of the shopfronts and even the more lofty pleasures of spectatorship of legal and political oratory.²⁸

²⁴ That this might be a source for Wordsworth's style is strengthened by his evocation of the help of a "Muse" to ascend to the heights of the showman's platform (which is ironically, of course, also a figurative depth) at Bartholomew Fair (7.682). This muse would have to be, quite literally, the "Smithfield Muse" of Pope's *Dunciad*, whose name ("Dulness") itself appears several lines on in Wordsworth's poem (7.716). The description of the fair, in particular, with its power to lay "The whole creative powers of man asleep" (7.681), to level and dedifferentiate things shows Pope's vision of Dulness as an unmistakable influence in Wordsworth's account of the city. We will come to discuss Pope's Dulness in Chapter 4, and here it will become clear the extent to which what is at stake in both Wordsworth's and Pope's poems is an apprehension of capitalism and capitalist culture in the spectacularised urban milieu as "sublime."

²⁵ Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 130.

²⁶ See in particular the discussion of Pope, to come in Chapter 4, pp.201-202 and 215, where I discuss the device of the list in more detail, and discuss it in relation to forms of the commodity production of culture. See also the discussion on subjectivity in Colley Cibber's work throughout Chapter 5, and also Chapter 7, where I discuss in more detail and in relationship to Hirst's shark, the subjectivity of consumption involved in the Hirstean sublime.

²⁷ Hirst himself has discussed the process of the conception of his work as functioning through a logic of substitution. When one examines his drawings, one finds a series of titles jotted by the side of a sketch. These titles jump from the marginalia of one sculpture to another, as if Hirst is testing them out; but it is clear that there is a certain exchangeability between the titles, that frequently would serve as well for one sculpture as another. Hirst, indeed has suggested that the titles and the works stand in a relation of equivalence to each other, and even that the works themselves are "about something similar," and thus are exchangeable equivalents for a single idea. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 19.

²⁸ At this point, (7.494-571), he picks out Edmund Burke as the great example of such oratory, and his presence as theorist of the sublime is joined with the sublimity of his rhetorical practice.

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Fig. 40: Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1733-4. Etching/engraving, 36.3 x 47 cm. From John Trusler, *The Works of William Hogarth* (London, 1833), 109. Project Gutenberg online edition <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22500/22500-h/22500-h.htm#Page_109>

However, as well as threatening the senses with overload, and with the formlessness and imagelessness which the city threatens the poem repeatedly, the city is also a site of repeated “disappointment” (7.96). Its pleasures, aimed at the mass of the crowd, hardly supply more than stimulation, do not aspire to, or offer little more than a dim echo of, the absolute which is Wordsworth’s goal, and which he seems to suggest is perhaps what they appear to be hawking nonetheless. Moreover, this bathos of the urban spectacle is tinged repeatedly by the threat of moral and social, as well as intellectual, corruption or “Dulness.” Such dulness and disappointment, as I shall be emphasising throughout this work, are the very markers of the commercial sublime, its constant cargo.

As the apotheosis of this fallen culture, it is Bartholomew Fair – long in literature the name of all that is anarchic, popular and dangerous – that becomes the final image which provides the epitome of the urban spectacle of the late eighteenth-century metropolis:

From these sights
 Take one, – that ancient festival, the Fair,
 Holden where martyrs suffered in past time,
 And named of St. Bartholomew; there, see
 A work completed to our hands, that lays,
 If any spectacle on earth can do,
 The whole creative powers of man asleep!
 For once, the Muse’s help will we implore,
 And she shall lodge us, wafted on her wings,
 Above the press and danger of the crowd,
 Upon some showman’s platform. What a shock
 For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din,
 Barbarian and infernal, – a phantasma,
 Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!
 Below, the open space, through every nook
 Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive
 With heads; the midway region, and above,
 Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
 Dumb proclamations of the Prodigies. (7.675-693)

Again, the motifs of sublimity are evoked, but in a negative mode: formless, overwhelming, dynamic, unfigurable, the city is merely “monstrous,” senseless, abject. It threatens us with all Pope’s powers of Dulness, and to completely obliterate our imaginative, creative powers under its sheer formless and unmanageable profusion:

All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts
 Of man, his dulness, madness, and their feats

Through a series of metonymic displacements (from the book to the man and his speeches, and from the man to the city within which he speaks), Burke’s theory of the sublime – a theory which stands out amongst other versions of the sublime precisely for its embrace of urban spectacle – finds itself at the heart of London’s visual culture.

All jumbled up together, to compose
 A Parliament of Monsters. Tents and Booths
 Meanwhile, as if the whole were one vast mill,
 Are vomiting, receiving on all sides,
 Men, Women, three-years' Children, Babes in arms.

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
 Of what the mighty City is herself,
 To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
 Living amid the same perpetual whirl
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
 To one identity, by differences
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end (7.715-728)

In these lines, the description of London's baseness, chaos and monstrosity, epitomised in the fair, builds to an image of the effects of the forces of modern capital reducing the particularity of the world to a grid of exchangeable, abstract differences without regularity, teleology or ontology beyond their very exchangeability, as they are "melted" to "one identity" – that of the "whirl" of "trivial objects," commodities. Within this whirl of objects, it is the self itself which is threatened with – and indeed promised – an absolute annihilation, as all forms of identity are dissolved, and herein lies the sublimity – both terrible and exhilarating – of the capitalist city and its spectacular culture. Such an annihilation of the subject is precisely what Mishra locates at the core of the Gothic sublime, though Mishra does not clearly understand this as originating in the experience of the commodity form itself – as, that is, a sublime of the commodity in that most commodified of sublime cultural forms.²⁹

But Wordsworth's account doesn't end with this negative image, and sets out on a manoeuvre which seems to me profoundly revealing of the nature of the Romantic desire for the solitude of the natural sublime. Wordsworth's poetic imagination, unlike that which he attributes to "thousands upon thousands of her sons", is able to transform this overwhelming experience of the city and of its commercialised urban culture into a sublime vision of nature itself, just as the (Smithfield) Muse allows him a panoptical view of the chaotic scene below,

29 "[A]t the heart of Gothic discourse is the crucial problem of the presentation of that which had previously been thought unrepresentable as the mind now struggles to find an adequate image of its own dissolution." (Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 16.) To rethink the Gothic as itself articulating a logic of these forms of capitalist experience, and as restaging its terrors and ecstasies, helps also understand the parallel that Mishra wishes to make between the Gothic and postmodern culture, which he thinks is carried out "under the sign" of the Gothic (20). It is under the weight of the vast networks of capital, and their common logic of exchange and consumption – whether these be those of the eighteenth-century city and its commercial shows, or the tele-technologies of the late twentieth century – that the subject is threatened with the "toxic breathlessness" (19) of a schizophrenic dissolution into the "negative bliss" (26) that echoes the affective register of the Gothic novel.

which elevates him above it, allows him a form of transcendence.

But though the picture weary out the eye,
 By nature an unmanageable sight,
 It is not wholly so to him who looks
 In steadiness, who hath among least things
 An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
 As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.
 [...] Attention springs,
 And comprehensiveness and memory flow,
 From early converse with the works of God
 Among all regions; chiefly where appear
 Most obviously simplicity and power.
 Think, how the everlasting streams and woods,
 Stretched and still stretching far and wide, exalt
 The roving Indian, on his desert sands [...] [whose] powers and aspects
 Shape for mankind, by principles as fixed,
 The views and aspirations of the soul
 To majesty. (7.731-756)

Wordsworth's transcendent movement is basically Kantian. An object (one counter-purposive to the self) checks the imagination's power to take it in and provide a figure for it, on the basis merely of what is presented to it. It is only by turning inward, and away from the scene, by appealing to a supersensory knowledge of the absolute that the profusion of formlessness in the urban spectacle can be made "manageable" by the mind.³⁰

This reveals in the Romantic quest for the solitudinous sublime of nature an explicit – explicit, that is, here, though elsewhere frequently implicit – retreat from the hurly-burly of the commercialism of the late-eighteenth-century metropolis, which serves as the repressed object of sublimity, providing an experience of sensory overload which must be repeatedly distanced, and whose anxieties must be displaced into the safer images of the natural sublime.³¹ In this sense the natural sublime is precisely Burke's terror "at one remove,"

³⁰ These similarities with the Kantian sublime may be somewhat superficial, however, since for Wordsworth here it is not just an abstract attunement to the "absolute" as an Idea of Reason that allows such a transcendence. It also depends on the powers of memory, and on the mediation of the urban scene by a natural one; as with Kant it is properly the natural rather than the artificial which allows us access to a "proper" aesthetic vision of the absolute, although in Wordsworth, nature is figured as something much more directly imbued with the empirically evident presence of the work of God, and although in Wordsworth the man-made starts to take the place of nature as the object which might evoke (or face us with the need for) such a movement transcendent of sensory perception. Wordsworth continues: "The Spirit of Nature was upon me there; / The soul of Beauty and enduring Life / Vouchsafed her inspiration, and diffused, / Through meagre lines and colours, and the press / Of self-destroying, transitory things..." (7.767-771).

³¹ Think also of the echo of this in Wordsworth's most known lines, where the image of the city's unbearable throng is sublimated into the rather more domestic (in fact, rather pretty) "crowd / of golden daffodils" which does not threaten the poet's solitude or his tranquillity of mind.

which undergoes a “modification” to allow it to offer pleasure instead of mere revulsion.

Thus Frances Ferguson is correct, I think, to see the Romantic sublimity of nature as a reaction against the anxieties, already expressed in Gothic fiction, about the press of others on the consciousness of the self, and about the uncomfortable press onto the individual’s sense of their identity and autonomy of the grids of social and economic relationships, which determine identity from the outside.³² These are the grids, too, of course, of Hirst’s vitrines, which also depict the violent forces of modern social control on the individual subject – reason, technology, work, consumption, the medico-scientific complex, a society of surveillance – forces staged in Hirst in terms of the conflict between the organic body and its artificial others.

It is thus a fundamentally Gothic rather than Romantic version of the sublime that we have in Hirst’s sculptures, even if the bucolic nature to which an “English” Romanticism retreated in the face of the forms of space, power and knowledge of a fallen urban and capitalist modernity rears its head in the guise of the invitrated cows and sheep which seem to have wandered in from a landscape by Constable or Sandby. In their twenty-first-century twist on the matter, the “nature” of Hirst’s sculptures no longer seems the unproblematic escape from the technological, the rational or the capitalistic which once it may have seemed. It begins to look like a “third nature”: technologised nature, as much a product of human action and manipulation as an “other” which stands in opposition to this (the nature discussed by Jameson, where condos have been built over the Heideggerian “house of being”³³), just as contemporary concerns over ecological crisis refelect not a sense of nature as a power superior to the human, but of the instability of this nature which has been overcoded by the flows of capital.

If the Gothic landscape, like that of Hirst’s vitrines, is already one which has become uncannily animated by the forces of capitalist exchange (by the nascent – though actually rather un-monadic – “monad in expansion”) which provide a mysterious doubleness to our agency, and whose logic has already started to animate us, as if we were characters in a dream, might this not – via the reading of Lyotard through and against himself which I have made here

32 Ferguson writes: “The aesthetic discussion that emerged in the eighteenth century located an anxiety about the relationship between the individual and the type,” Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 31. My argument here is, of course, that her suggestion that this stems from the philosophical problem of how to account for “how there can be one of anything” in relation to the possibility of plurality (Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, viii) would only be a secondary consideration to the fact of the experience of capitalist relations..

33 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 35.

– provide a more fundamental or satisfactory explanation of the experience?³⁴ This, at least, is the possibility I am pursuing in this work, where, just as in Ferguson’s account of the natural sublime of the Romantics, idealism and empiricism can be understood to be in tension in the differing accounts of the sublime. As we shall meet it here, however, the problem of the ideal or empirical will appear much more closely bound with the function of the forms of money and the commodity, than it does in Ferguson. Money, the commodity and capital, keystones amongst the institutions of modern thought and practice, are at once forces of abstraction, but also forces destructive of abstractions: a tension which also permeates the history of modern thought.³⁵

34 Such production of the modern subject through capitalist relations produces it as at once more autonomous from, and at the same time more threatened by, social processes than so-called “pre-modern” forms of subjectivity. Medieval culture is often imagined to interpellate a subject more stably than modern economic reality: less mobility meant both that identity was more welded to one’s position in a stable hierarchy, and also that this place permeated further one’s social and cultural experience: to be a peasant or a guildsman was to live, love, worship and feast as one. Under capitalist conditions, the individual achieves a kind of autonomy in that labour, having become a quantifiable, exchangeable possession ceases to determine identity in quite the same way: identity also becomes exchangeable. However, as with the objects of exchange, it is liable to lose its particularity, and its moorings in any stable terms of reference. Hence, perhaps, a need in Romanticism to flee the social sphere to seek a place in nature where the individual can appear to be master of its own experience, as if this individuality to which it aspires were not already a product of the social conditions in which it is formed.

35 For a sustained examination of the tension between idealism and empiricism or materialism in the history of aesthetic theory from Baumgarten to the twentieth century see for example Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. This book thus places the sublime within this very tension in modern thought. The position which will develop throughout the following chapters of my own work here will be that the constitutive tension between the two camps (idealism/ empiricism) – which is the tension at the heart of the commodity and of money itself – can’t, I think, be done away as simply as Ferguson would like.

Part 2:
Damien Hirst in the Eighteenth Century?

Chapter 4

Sublimity, Bathos and Dulness

Introduction

In the previous section I have argued that there is an anachronism in Lyotard's argument: though he traces the discourse on the sublime back to the "rediscovery" and promotion of Longinus by Boileau and his successors at the end of the seventeenth century, he only envisions an art of the sublime in the twentieth-century avant-garde, and only thinks the commercialisation of art (against which he wishes to counterpose the sublime) in terms of the arrival of the "transavantgarde" of the 1980s.

But if, as I have been arguing, Lyotard's essay implies – in spite of its own ostensible argument – that the temporalities of the sublime and capitalist culture share an irreducible intimacy, we should expect to see something of the same constellation in the early history of the sublime, too. After all, the sublime grew up in London's world of letters in the wake of the "Glorious Revolution" of William of Orange, during the rise of the Whig administration which dominated the first half of the eighteenth century, and is thus co-temporal – and hardly accidentally so – with an explosion in capitalism itself, which P.G.M. Dickson has gone so far as to term a "financial revolution."¹ This financial revolution heralded the arrival of new institutions such as the Bank of England and Lloyds, and new forms of monetary instrument, in particular the forms of credit which permeated and transformed all levels of trade and economic life. Though it did not immediately produce the forms of industrial production many associate with the term *capitalism* proper, nonetheless it involved enormous social and cultural upheaval, an intensification of entrepreneurial activity (or, as the eighteenth century called it, "projecting"), and the growth of an increasingly divided and commodified form of production which F. F. Mendels terms "proto-industrialisation."² A body of scholarship since the 1980s has been particularly fascinated with the cultural transformations of this

¹ Dickson, *Financial Revolution*.

² F.F. Mendels, "Proto-Industrialisation: The First Phase of the Industrialisation Process," *Journal of Economic History* 32 (1972): 241-61. See also Peter Kreidte, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Maxine Berg, Pat Hudson and Michael Soneuscher, *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). I further discuss this notion of the proto-industrial later in the chapter.

still-mercantile form of capitalist society, and with its rocketing production of commodities, seeing in it a new “World of Goods” within which early-eighteenth-century subjects had to learn to swim. It is even dubbed, in the hope of finding there a mirror of our contemporary condition, “The Birth of a Consumer Society.” In the eighteenth century, like today, just as commodities increasingly became cultural objects, culture became increasingly a commodity object.³

Since my interest – starting as it does from Hirst – is in the relation between commercial, commoditised culture and the sublime, it is thus to this moment, rather than the more canonical moments in the history of the (Romantic) sublime that I turn here. What is offered is a supplement to these more usual histories of the sublime, with their emphasis on high culture, and sets out to problematise some of the assumptions about the value of the sublime as a term which distinguishes art from “consumed” culture.

In this chapter, I focus on two works by Alexander Pope, a defining cultural figure of this historical moment in England. Pope is remembered as the great proponent of a witty, elegant Neoclassicism and as a satirist who defended *ancien régime* values against bourgeois incursion.⁴ He is also, I propose, a writer who, like Lyotard, set about a comprehensive assault on the commodification of culture. In this assault, as with Lyotard, the problem of the sublime is key.

The sublime makes its explicit appearance in Pope’s satirical essay *Peri Bathous*. This essay has been generally overlooked in histories of the sublime, partly because of its humorous (rather than “serious,” philosophical) form, but also because its subject is that entwinement of sublimity with the commercial

³ See my discussion of problematic notion of “the birth of a consumer society,” and the authors who propose it, in my introduction, above, pp.46-51.

⁴ Pope first appeared in print in 1709 with a series of pastoral poems, which were included in miscellanies published by Jacob Tonson. (See David Foxon, *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book Trade: The Lyell Lectures*, ed. James McLaverty [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], 18.) His first separately published work was the *Essay on Criticism* of 1711, which ran into a second edition after only six months. (Foxon, *Pope*, 23.) The topographical celebration of English imperial power, *Windsor Forest* (1713) and the mock-heroic *Rape of the Lock* (1712; revised ed. 1714) further cemented his reputation. See Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New York and London: Norton and Yale University Press, 1985), 121-312 for more details of this stage of Pope’s career. From this position, he embarked on the major project of a translation of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and followed this up by editing the works of Shakespeare. These accumulated him a Hirstean-scale fortune; and ironically, given his hostility to capitalism and entrepreneurialism (which we shall see in some detail in this chapter), and the vitriol he pours upon such practices when others pursue them, through the creation of a business model as innovative as Hirst’s own, and a production process which (in his subcontracting of sections to William Broom and Elijah Fenton), this involved something startlingly close to the “putting out” system that we shall see he envisions as destroying modern letters in *Peri Bathous*. After this, Pope turned primarily to satire on contemporary literature, and the production of his *magnum opus*, the mock-epic poem *The Dunciad*, which went through a series of editions and revisions between 1728 and 1743.

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Fig. 41: Eighteenth-Century Luxury. William Hogarth, *Taste in High Life*, 1742. Engraving by Samuel Phillips 1790s. 37 x 44 cm. Printed by Boydell, 1808. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Taste_high_life.jpg>

which has seemed to writers of the history of aesthetics to be marginal. However, Pope's essay is, in spite of its comedic format, also a serious tract – even an overlooked master-work – on sublimity. I will use *Peri Bathous*, and the opposition it sets up between sublimity and bathos, as a key to Pope's more well-known late poem, *The Dunciad*, which develops further the satirical mapping and critique of commercialised culture and its effects on the social, moral and political order. With *Peri Bathous* in mind, it becomes clear that the inverted terms of the Longinian sublime serve to structure the critique he launches in the *Dunciad*.

Pope, prefiguring Lyotard, opens up a longer history of the use of the notion of the sublime as a counter to the productions of a commodified culture. But as with Lyotard, Pope's use of the sublime to oppose commodified culture is unstable. Paradoxically, the description of the commercial world Pope sets in opposition to sublimity turns out to have just the characteristics of the Burkean sublime (though well in advance of Burke's essay itself). And Pope's poetry is not simply, as it seems at first, hostile towards commercial culture. Rather, it fosters an ambivalence, where the very logic of commerce he attacks at the level of content is embraced in poetic form, providing it with all its ribald, ecstatic, and fantastical energies. Pope's poetry itself produces its sublime effects on the terms of the commodified culture he satirises, and turns out to be as subject to its logic as any of the "dunces" he bemoans.

I argue that the poem is evidence of a reaction to the take-up of Longinus within the commercial as well as high-cultural sphere from the very outset of the rise of English culture's interest in the sublime during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, providing a powerful productive logic for commercial culture. It is this "misappropriation" of Longinus that motivates Pope's use of *Peri Hupsous* as his chosen means of satire, pointing to a consistent entwinement of the sublime within commercial forms. Such an entwinement of the sublime and the commercial makes sense of the insistent echoes of this discourse in Hirst. As we shall see, in Pope's wildest fantasies about the absolute subjection of culture to the logic of commodity production, there is an uncanny prefiguration of Damien Hirst himself.

The context of Pope's Peri Bathous: Scriblerian Satire, the Ancients and Moderns, and the Commercialisation of Culture and Society

Pope's *Peri Bathous: Or, Of the Art of Sinking* was published in 1728,⁵ though its roots lie over a decade earlier in Pope's involvement with the Scriblerians, a Tory-aligned literary club formed around the collective production of a satire on

⁵ It appears in the fourth volume of the 1727-8 *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* which was largely edited by Pope, but also included contributions by Swift and Gay. See Foxon, *Pope*, 124.

“modern” learning, and especially on prominent Whig intellectuals. The club included the literary greats Pope, Swift and Gay. It took its name from Martinus Scriblerus, the fictional muddle-headed pedant they created as their instrument of satire.⁶ With the death of Queen Anne in 1714, and the ensuing reversal of political circumstances, marking the end of a Tory administration and the rise of Whig power, the Scriblerians dispersed and the club was disbanded. However, the members stayed in close correspondence in the following decades, and the club provided a template for the satirical projects of Pope, Gay and Swift.⁷

As a satire on the “modern,” the Scriblerian corpus had its roots in the long-running “Battle of the Ancients and Moderns.” In the last decades of the seventeenth century this had exploded as a burning and definitive cultural controversy – in French, a *querelle*⁸ – around which the battle-lines for a host of other issues were drawn up and through which the larger structure of intellectual and ideological discourse itself was articulated and organised.⁹

6 The Scriblerian circle formed, breaking away from the more Whiggish Kit Kat Club in 1712, when Swift had been recruited by Robert Harley to write pamphlets for the Tories. The core of the circle consisted of Pope, Swift and Gay, along with the Queen’s “physician extraordinary” Doctor Arbuthnot and Tory politicians Viscount Bolingbroke (Henry St. John) and Harley himself. During 1713 and 1714 they met regularly to discuss the production of the *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, a satire on modern learning. Martinus Scriblerus, the fictional protagonist of this book, is the very apotheosis of what the Scriblerians took as the idiocy of modern forms of knowledge. Scriblerus is a dabbler and a pedant, described by Pope as “a man of capacity enough, that had dipped into every art and science, but injudiciously in each.” (Pope in conversation with Joseph Spence, reported in Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men: Collected from Conversation*. Ed James M. Osborn. 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1966], 1:56. Cited by Ackroyd in Alexander Pope and Peter Ackroyd (foreword), *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, [1741] [London: Hesperus, 2002], vii.) The book, parodying a series of the more arcane and fantastical scientific, religious and legal debates of the day, follows the disastrous results of his various (but invariably muddle-headed) excursions into the realms of law, biology, antiquarianism, and medicine, amongst other fields. The Scriblerus memoir itself was not finished, however, by the time the club was scattered by the death of Queen Anne in 1714. With the accession of the Hanoverians, Anne’s Tory ministry was replaced with the Whig administration that slowly but steadily became dominated by Robert Walpole. With the change of government, Harley was impeached and imprisoned, Bolingbroke fled to France, Swift returned to Ireland, and Arbuthnot lost his court positions, as well as the properties at which the club had been meeting. As a result of the scattering of the club in this way, the Scriblerus memoirs themselves were not published until Pope edited them into a final shape for the second volume of his *Works in Prose* in 1741. For full details of the complex process through which this essay, alongside *Peri Bathous* itself, found this particular (and belated) place within Pope’s canon-building *Works* project, see Foxon, *Pope*, 124-6, 131-8.

7 Amongst the by-products of its satire on modern intellectual endeavour can be counted, for example, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera*, Pope’s *Peri Bathous* and the *Dunciad* (both of which contain material ostensibly authored by Martinus Scriblerus), and the Pope/Gay/Swift/Arbuthnot collaboration on the play *Three Hours After Marriage*.

8 The word does not quite have an English equivalent, but, like that other French euphemism for the epoch-making controversies, the “*affaire*” (such as the “Dreyfus affair”), Joan DeJean proposes that the notion of the *querelle*, as used here, would stand somewhere between a controversy and a scandal. Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin De Siècle* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6-9.

9 For an incisive account of the French arm of this debate, and the ways that it prefigures

Crudely put, the figures on either side of the controversy lined up around the issue of whether modern culture and learning was rivalling, or could rival, the ancient world. However, in this question much else was at stake: not least the very “shape” and nature of history itself, and the proper relation which “moderns” should establish with classical examples and traditions. It was a debate in which the implications of and appropriate responses to the nascent consciousness of a “modernity” were being registered and contested.¹⁰

In *Ancients against Moderns*, Joan DeJean contextualises this *querelle* with regard to changes in literary production and consumption. In 1678 Jean Donneau de Visé, the editor of *Le Mercure Galant*, one of the most widely circulated French periodicals, developed the innovation of inviting non-specialist readers to write in with their thoughts about Lafayette’s new novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*. In doing this, Donneau de Visé established not just literature but amateur, public debate on literature as “hot news,” capable of selling papers.¹¹ In such a context, argues DeJean, the stakes of the *querelle* were who had a right to pass judgment on literature, and how this was to be done. It was this that made the question of Ancient and Modern suddenly such a pressing issue. Ancients such as Boileau represented the interests of an elite group of Academicians with a monopoly on the specialised knowledge of ancient literature and criticism which they proposed provided the “rules” according to which modern works should be produced and judged. This monopoly on critical judgment was being threatened by the new literary and critical forms and forums of the novel and the periodical, and the new – and newly non-specialist – bases of judgment which were being developed in and around these. Notions of “sensibility” as the basis of cultural judgments were being developed, in the birth of what DeJean terms an “affective revolution”

more contemporary cultural controversies see DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*. For a more general history of both the English and French debates, and their interrelation, see Joseph M Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991). The question of whether (we) “Moderns” might have started to rival the Ancients, in one way or another, had in fact been a feature in European intellectual life since the late middle ages; however, it is only in France in the late seventeenth century, with the publication of Bernard de Fontenelle’s *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (Paris, 1686) and Charles Perrault’s reading of his *Age of Louis XIV* (Paris, 1687) at the French Academy that the debate was ignited as a full-blown *querelle*. This was spread to English culture by William Temple’s “Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning” (London, 1690) and William Wotton’s attack on it in his *Reflexions on Ancient and Modern Learning* (London, 1694), which both drew on the French debate. Before the Scriblerian club had formed, Swift had pitched into this debate on the side of the Ancients with his *Tale of a Tub* (London, 1704) and its pendant poem, “The Battle of the Books.” For an account of Swift’s contribution, see Levine, *Battle*, 110-20.

¹⁰ One has, however, to be careful here. As Levine notes, the Moderns were not nearly as “modernist” as we may like to imagine, and at the very least in terms of culture, the authority of Greek texts, examples and artistic models, is not at issue. There remains a consensus between the two sides about far more than is sometimes imagined. Levine, *Battle*, 4.

¹¹ DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 57.

providing the basis for the interiority of the modern subject.¹²

The importance of such questions of affect, pathos and sensibility in the British philosophical debates on art or literature during the first half of the eighteenth century has been well documented, so hardly needs more than mentioning here; nor does the entanglement of the notion of the sublime in the establishment of the production of such heightened states of affectivity as the basis of art.¹³ In terms of my own argument about a “Hirstean sublime” and its eighteenth-century forebears, what remains largely implicit in DeJean’s argument, but needs stressing, is the extent to which the commodification of the cultural object is involved in this process of the redefining of forms of production and consumption, and even of the subjectivities and affectivities involved in these: the literary forms which DeJean singles out – the novel and the periodical – are, of course, exemplary cases of the development of commodified cultural objects in this period.¹⁴

The stakes which DeJean discovers at the heart of the *querelle* become increasingly clear in Pope’s return to and reworking of the Scriblerian satirical project from the 1720s onwards. As we shall see, the commodification of literature, and the new forms of production and consumption involved in this (in contradistinction to the issues of scholarship and epistemology with which the *querelle* is usually associated) become increasingly central to his attack on the Modern.¹⁵ This had become all the more pressing for Pope, due to the

12 DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 78.

13 For an account of this history of British aesthetics see Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, esp. 31-69. For the role of the sublime in this, see, Monk, *The Sublime*; Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*. It is Shaftesbury whose name, above all, is associated with such accounts of sensibility as providing the basis not just of aesthetic experience but of an emergent, expanded social contract. Shaftesbury’s towering influence over his contemporaries and successors cannot be underestimated. For more of Shaftesbury and his influence see Paddy Bullard, “The Meaning of the ‘Sublime and Beautiful’: Shaftesburian Contexts and Rhetorical Issues in Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*.” *Review of English Studies* 56.224 (2005): 169-91; Shawn Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

14 For the novel and periodical as forms within the commodification of literature, see for example John Feather, *History of British Publishing* (New York: Methuen, 1998). There is also an excellent chapter entitled “Authors, Publishers and the Making of Literary Culture” in John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 125-97.

15 Pope had, in fact, earlier in his career embroiled himself actively in the intellectual debates over scholarship, through his translations of Homer and his edition of Shakespeare. (Pope’s *Iliad* was published 1715-20 and the *Odyssey* between 1725-6; his edition of Shakespeare’s works was published in 1725. For more on the production of these, see Foxon, *Pope*, 51-101.) Pope’s translations and editions had been produced in a “gentlemanly” fashion, smoothing out the rough edges that he found in the texts where they clashed with the taste of the day, and this placed him in controversy with the more professionalised, and scholarly philological approaches of “Modern” scholars such as Richard Bentley and Lewis Theobald, with their concern for historical accuracy. (For Pope’s embroilment in this controversy, see for example Levine, *Battle*, 199-228.) Most immediately, it is this quarrel ensuing from his editorial and

mercantile and commercial bent of the society fostered by Walpole's Whig administration. It marks Pope's increasing estrangement from – and bitter hostility towards – the literary, political, and cultural values of this moment in which scholarship and writing are being professionalised, and in which the Whigs nurtured an increasingly entrepreneurial and materialistic attitude in all walks of life, including literature. Since the Restoration, entrepreneurial book-sellers were playing an ever-more dominant role in the determination of what was published, in relation to the patronage of an educated aristocratic few (a pattern which echoes the stakes of the Ancients and Moderns debate in France, as identified by DeJean). The theatre, too, had also become increasingly a commodified spectacle rather than the prerogative of the King and his circle: a pleasure of the town rather than the court, which needed ticket sales to support itself.

Whilst Pope's friends Bolingbroke and Swift had become more or less literally exiles with the rise of the Whigs, by the late 1720s Pope had set himself up in a figurative exile in his house and garden in Twickenham, which he fashioned in the image of an Arcadian retreat from the fallen commercial and political modernity of London.¹⁶ Since the halcyon days of the 1710s and the Scriblerus Club, Pope's satire had changed from the mild humour of the *serio-ludere*¹⁷ to an embittered and concerted attack on a world which Pope envisions plunging into irreversible artistic, moral, social and metaphysical collapse.¹⁸ This became the mainstay of Pope's output in his last decades. An initially mild

translation work which propelled Pope back onto the polemical territory of the controversies of the Ancients and Moderns, and it is in the context of these disputes that Pope was turning to a renewed and intensified round of Scriblerian satire. In the poem's first editions, Theobald is thus the Duncce of the *Dunciad*'s title, the paradigm of all that is wrong with the world of literature. However, this particular quarrel over translation (and even the partisan function of Pope's decision to undertake the Homer translations and throw the cultural capital of his name behind the project) can be understood more generally to mark Pope's increasing estrangement from – and bitter hostility towards – the literary, political, and cultural values of the moment, which, in the contrast between the figures of the professional and the gentleman, marks a distance also to the commercialisation and commodity basis of literature and society itself. It is increasingly to this more general territory that Pope's satire turns. The development of the *Dunciad* across its different editions registers an increased focus on literary production *per se* rather than forms of academic learning. In the final edition, it is no longer Theobald the scholar, but Cibber the playwright, poet and theatrical entrepreneur who becomes the central target of the satire. It is to Cibber that we will turn in Chapter 5.

16 See Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope 1713-1743* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

17 It is in this more mild genre, which is as much about the display of knowledge through play as it is a form of attack, that the earlier Scriblerus *Memoirs* were written. This is raised by John Mullan in , Dir. *In Our Time: The Scriblerus Club*, Melvyn Bragg, John Mullan, Judith Hawley, Marcus Walsh, 2005, Radio broadcast, 9 June, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/ram/inourtime_20050609.ram> visited 15/12/07.

18 See especially the final book of the four-book *Dunciad*, where Pope describes the end result of this plunge into chaos.

Tory commitment to the values of the Ancients against the Moderns had, in the face of the growth of commercialised literature, and the political conditions of the Whig pact, grown into a running battle with all things modern.

Commerce and Poetry in Pope's Peri Bathous.

Pope's *Peri Bathous* (his *Art of Sinking*) is part of this deepening project of satire. It takes the form of a rhetorical treatise, ostensibly by Scriblerus himself, giving advice to modern poets. The contrivance is, of course, that just as with all his other forays into the intellectual world, Scriblerus gets the wrong end of the stick, allowing Pope to mount an ironic attack on modern literature. Scriblerus, instead of writing a treatise on how to produce sublime poetry, has concluded that since it is in its mediocrity (and, beyond this, its sheer incompetence) that modern poetry outdoes the ancients, this is what should be encouraged amongst his contemporaries: for Scriblerus, bad poetry is a value in and of itself. What is produced is an inverted pastiche of Longinus, an art not of the sublime but of the "profound"¹⁹: not of soaring in poetry, but of sinking, falling, becoming enmired – and, in the Longinian Greek terminology Scriblerus (or, actually, Pope) picks up, not of *hupsos*, but *bathos*. The form of the text follows Longinus's basic formula: it starts with general remarks on the spirit of bathetic poetry, and follows on with more detailed examinations of particular tropes or devices. Like Longinus, it relies heavily on the citation of examples, allowing Pope to hold out for ridicule some particularly dire passages by his contemporaries. But more than merely a satire on his contemporaries' faults, *Peri Bathous* is a platform from which to launch a critique of the contemporary conditions of literary production, and also, though in disguised, inverted, comic form, a tract about Longinian sublimity and its proper uses and forms within the modern world. I shall show that the choice of Longinus to provide the form for his attack on commercialised culture is far from an arbitrary one: I discover here lines of force which already in the eighteenth century implicate sublimity with the modalities of capitalist culture. But before I turn to the early-eighteenth-century commercial realm's reception of Longinus, and before I can start to make sense of Pope's choice of Longinus as the model for his satire, I must sketch Pope's vision of the effects of commercialisation and modernisation on literature, and the notion of "bathos" which gives form to this vision.

From the outset of the piece, Pope diagnoses the degeneration of contemporary literature as rooted in the effects of the growth of England as a mercantile society, and the consequent ill effects of the organisation of literature as one commercial activity amongst the others of an "every-way-

¹⁹ This is a word which Pope uses throughout in a negative sense, rather than with the positive connotations it has today.

industrious" modern society.²⁰ In the first chapter, parodying hymns to the modern age such as Perrault's (and also in particular Defoe's celebrations of English economic development²¹), Pope sets the question of literature in the context of the new wealth of Britain and its transforming economy, writing of "the flourishing State of our Trade, and the Plenty of our Manufacture."²² The humdrum concerns of such a mercantile society are figured – in terms of their effects on the poetic realm – with a description of "the Extent, Fertility, and Populousness of our *Lowlands of Parnassus*,"²³ an only-ironically pastoral image which sets the materialism of the present against the lofty heights of the past. In this image, Pope sets to work a metaphoric of height and depth which remain central throughout the essay, taking on multiple connotations and purposes: it is, of course, the fundamental metaphor of verticality inherent in the notion of the sublime itself. It sets sublimity against *bathos* and its English synonyms ("sinking," "the profound," etc.). Pope anchors the pastoral image as merely ironic through the echo of a similar image of a slope which Scriblerus has just used to describe his own purpose, which is to "lead [the Moderns] as it were by the hand, and step by step, the gentle down-hill way to the Bathos; the Bottom, the End, the Central Point, the *non plus ultra* of true Modern Poesie!"²⁴ These *double entendres* define the "lowlands of Parnassus" as an ignobly corporeal region, and by implication suggest that the "sinking" effect of modern poetry is a product of basely corporeal forces.²⁵ As we shall see, this figurative axis between *hypsos* and *bathos*, with the latter figured as a lapse into the base matter of the body, motivated by the forces of commerce, is central to Pope's vision of

20 Alexander Pope, "Peri Bathous or, of the Art of Sinking in Poetry," *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 389.

21 Defoe had been celebrating the expansion and modernisation of English trade through enterprise in his economic journalism since his first published work, the *Essay upon Projects* (London, 1697). Such "projecting," and the ways in which it may effect literature, is, of course, the central object of Pope's anxiety. Defoe continued his paean to the transforming powers of modern forms of trade and manufacture in particular in his *Review of the State of the English Nation* (1706-13), and this aspect of his work would have been once more topical as Pope was working on *Peri Bathous*, with Defoe's *The Compleat English Tradesman* appearing in 1724 and his *Tour of the Whole Island of Great Britain, Divided into Circuits or Journeys* between 1724 and 1727. Defoe, moreover, had written, in 1725 (in just the terms of Pope's satire, but without a trace of Scriblerian irony) praising bookselling as "a very considerable Branch of the English Commerce. The booksellers are the Master Manufacturers or Employers. The several Writers, Authors, Copyers, Sub-Writers and all other operators with Pen and Ink are the workmen employed by the Master-Manufacturers." (Quoted in Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 9.)

22 Pope, "Peri Bathous," 389.

23 Pope, "Peri Bathous," 389. The italicisation is Pope's, as will be the case in further quotations, unless otherwise stated.

24 Pope, "Peri Bathous," 389.

25 I will leave to you, gentle reader, to ponder the double meanings which the properties of "Extent, Fertility and Populousness" might take on in such a context where the landscape image of the "Lowlands" of a mountain are clearly conflated with an imagery of the lower body...

bathos, and also to the related notion of “Dulness” in *The Dunciad*.

This link between fallen modern literature and the commodity economy is amplified in the second chapter of *Peri Bathous*, where Scriblerus misquotes and misunderstands Horace’s injunction that poetry should both please and instruct:²⁶

It must be confess’d, our wiser Authors have a present End,

Et prodesse volunt, & delectare Poetae

Their true Design is *Profit or Gain*; in order to acquire which, ’tis necessary to procure Applause, by administering *Pleasure* to the reader: From whence it follows that their Productions must be suited to the *present Taste*; and I cannot but congratulate our Age on this peculiar Felicity, that tho’ we have made great Progress in all other Branches of Luxury, we are not yet debauched with any *high relish* in Poetry.²⁷

Scriblerus misapprehends the moral benefit of Poetry in terms of financial gain. Furthermore, in order for the poet to profit, he must pander to the desires embedded in the mechanisms of the market. Poetic creation is transformed into “administration,”²⁸ and placed within a commodity-exchange relationship where such a service is given over to “procure” applause. Worse (for Pope), such a transaction must be undertaken in relation to the “present taste” even if the reading public lacks “high relish.” Echoing the standpoint of the Ancients in the French *querelle*, Pope is suggesting that the submission of poetry to these mechanisms involves a deviation from the values preserved through the transmission of “good taste” passed on from one generation of the elite to the next.²⁹ For Pope, the abandonment of such an ideal audience and its chain of tradition is also the abandonment of the canon of agreed rules and orders, and thus of any stable basis for value. Artistic value *per se* has, in Scriblerus’s account of it, been done away with altogether, becoming entirely subsumed into economic value. Pope has Scriblerus take this to the point of *reductio ad absurdum*. Scriblerus argues that since successful poetry is the best kind (an

²⁶ See Horace, *The Satires, Epistles and Art of Poetry of Horace*, trans. John Conington, Project Gutenberg, 2004, <<http://www.gutenberg.net/dirs/etext04/hrcst10.txt>>, 372-3.

²⁷ Pope, “Peri Bathous,” Ch.2, p.391.

²⁸ “Administration” in this sense also carries with it the charge of a servile activity – “administering to the needs” of somebody involves being their servant. Poetry at the behest of the taste and pleasure of its buying readership is thus criticised for not taking a more active role of leadership, for not defining taste and pleasure as they should be, rather than merely pandering to them as they are.

²⁹ For Scriblerus, to write for such a tiny (or posthumous) audience under market conditions (where the “true Design” of writing is “Profit or Gain”) is merely Quixotic: “we shall find those who have a taste for the Sublime to be very few,” he complains, and from this comes to the conclusion that in any case, “ ’Tis a fruitless Undertaking to write for men of a nice and foppish Gusto, whom, after all, it is almost impossible to please; and ’tis still more Chimerical to write for Posterity, [...] whose Applause we can never enjoy.” Pope, “Peri Bathous,” 391.

echo of this resounds in Warhol's "good business is the best art") and there are as many good poets who starve as bad ones, then good poets are ultimately no better than bad.

In the place of the stable hierarchies and forms which provided the basis of poetic value is the mere "pleasure" of the reader. This term echoes the attempts at grounding the moral order of art in the innate affectivity of the embodied, human subject evidenced in such notions as "sensibility" that DeJean associates with the legacy of the Moderns. But Pope's "pleasure," is altogether more Protean, dangerous and ambivalent than "sensibility." It is used to imagine the body in terms of the base. Pope's choice of the word *pleasure* marks the difference between his conservative position and that of those in the eighteenth century who sought to ground a decorous, sociable morality in the physiologies of the sentimental and sympathetic imaginations. The political implications at stake in these two models of the grounds of art are not lost on Pope. Only a page or two before, he has framed the contrast between them as one between the differing tastes of the "refined" and the "unquestionable Majority,"³⁰ a phrase which at the time must have still rung with Cromwellian connotations and memories of the civil war, loading the democratising force of the Moderns' position and the private conscience of its subject with associations of the Civil War and Puritan "enthusiasm."³¹

In the final chapters of *Peri Bathous*, Pope returns to discuss the degeneration of poetry in a series of mock-proposals for the "advancement" of bathos.³² These take the form of parodies of the changing institutions of

30 Pope, "Peri Bathous," 389-90. It's worth noting that "refined" is also, in this Neoclassical scheme, an image of a chemical (or alchemical) process of sublimation, and a term tied in closely to the whole system of tropes and figures through which "sublimity" (or *hupsos*) is imagined, in terms of the lofty, the ethereal and the immaterial, in opposition to the low, crude, heavy, material and base.

31 "Enthusiasm," of course, is used here in the seventeenth-century sense of the term, denoting possession or inspiration by the divine. Such enthusiasm was a core of Puritan religious practices, with their appeal to direct revelatory experience of God, rather than that mediated by the rituals and institutions of a church. A set of relationships between the growth of the interiorised conscience of Protestantism and the subject of capitalist exchange and accumulation has been famously mapped by Weber in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, [1930], trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin, 1985). More recently Colin Campbell has reworked Weber's thesis to put forward an argument relating these forms of interiority to the rise of the modern subjects both of aesthetic and of consumer pleasure, linking as Pope does the legacy of Protestant religion with new forms and subjectivities of production, sensibility and consumption. (See Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*.) For more on the role of enthusiasm as an end of poetry (and especially in the work of the central target of Pope's ridicule in *Peri Bathous*, Sir Richard Blackmore) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see Irlam, *Elations*. As Irlam argues, and as we shall see here, states of religious enthusiasm are hardly irrelevant to the ecstatic "transports" of the sublime.

32 The piece satirises such works which set out to "improve" literature as John Dennis's *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), and Blackmore's own "Essay upon Epick Poetry" of 1716, or his various prefaces, tracts decidedly on the side of the Moderns, which argued against the authority of the ancients and for the "Liberty" of poetry (for example,

literature, which he imagines as being in the process of being remodelled on the division of labour which was transforming the manufacturing industries:

The vast Improvement of modern Manufactures ariseth from their being divided into several Branches, and parcel'd out to several Trades: For instance, in *Clock-making*, one Artist makes the Balance, another the Spring, another the Crown-Wheels, a fourth the case, and the principle Workman puts it all together; To this Oeconomy we owe the Perfection of our modern Watches; and doubtless we also might that of our modern Poetry and Rhetoric, were the several Parts branched out in a like manner.

[...]

Now each man applying his whole Time and Genius upon his particular Figure, would doubtless attain to Perfection; and when each became incorporated and sworn into the Society, (as hath been propos'd) a Poet or Orator would have no more to do, but to send out to the various Traders in each Kind; to the *Metaphorist* for his *Allegories*, to the *Simile-maker* for his *Comparisons*, to the *Ironist* for his *Sarcasmes*, to the *Apothegmatist* for his *Sentences* &c. whereby a *Dedication* or a *Speech* would be compos'd in a Moment, the superior Artist having nothing to do but to put together all the Materials.³³

Blackmore, Preface to *Job*, (London, 1700), cited in Harry S. Solomon, *Sir Richard Blackmore* [Boston: Twayne, 1980], 85.) In these tracts, Dennis and Blackmore both argued for a modern, Christian poetry based around the affects of the sublime. Blackmore's biographer, Harry Solomon, describes Blackmore's project, citing his Preface to *Prince Arthur* (London, 1695): "Nothing, Blackmore observes, is more essential than that probability be observed; but since admiration is the passion pre-eminently aroused by the epic poet, he must delight in 'astonishing and amazing the reader.' To stimulate admiration within the bounds of probability, he must present 'sublime Thoughts, clear and noble Expression, Purity of Language, a just and due Proportion, Relation and Dependence between the Parts, and a beautiful and regular Structure and Connection discernible in the Whole.'" (Solomon, *Blackmore*, 34.) Blackmore is the central object of satire in *Peri Bathous*, however Dennis and Gildon are mentioned by name as the "two Greatest Criticks and Reformers" (436). Pope is also, of course, more generally attacking the various schemes, proposals and projects for the "improvement" of all aspects of modern life which were a feature of the literature of the time. Defoe, with his *Essay upon Projects* (London, 1697) and his other descriptions of the advances in modern trade and manufacture may well once again be the supplementary target of the satire here. For a further Scriblerian satire on the figure of the "Projector", see the third chapter of *Gulliver's Travels*, where the academy of Lagado provides a highly topical account of the universe of commercial and technical innovations and projects of the turn of the century. I discuss Pope's attacks on Dennis and Blackmore at further length later in this chapter, pp.218-221.

33 Pope, "Peri Bathous," Ch. 12, 428-9. Fielding, in *An Author's Farce*, published just a couple of years after *Peri Bathous* under the pseudonym of Scriblerus Secundus and obviously influenced by Pope's essay, reiterates the description, in his account of the workshops of the publisher Bookweight. (Henry Fielding, *The Author's Farce*, ed. Charles B. Woods [London: Edward Arnold, 1967], esp. 28-34.) According to Thomas Keymer, "Bookweight's hack-filled establishment was widely recognised as a satire on Curll's notorious 'Literatory,' a sweatshop for the mass production of worthless textual commodities. Ignorant scribblers and penniless dunces translate Virgil out of prior translations, thrash tedious verses out of dictionaries of rhyme, and manufacture and prolong pointless controversies to sell more print." (Thomas Keymer, "Roger in Merryland," *London Review of Books* 13 December 2007: 32.) Perhaps in the case of producers such as Curll, Pope's satire is not that far from the truth; and if, as I shall go on to suggest, Pope's image prophesies the literal practice of Hirst, then an alternative Hirstean

This is a striking image of commercialised literature, reduced to the divided labour process of commodity production which Adam Smith would go on to describe so famously in the 1770s,³⁴ and lacking everything which might distinguish art from other commercial products. In bringing together the “modernisation” of literature and that of manufacturing in this figure, Pope is attacking their shared economic logic. He brings to the surface the underlying principles of a terminology of “improvement,” “reformation,” “proposals” and “projects” which were being shared across a range of discourses, spanning “public” proposals for political reorganisation and reform, literary manifestos and, above all, entrepreneurial business plans.

The passage is also striking in its anticipation of the self-conscious organisation of Hirst’s artistic enterprise, which makes such an economic organisation of practice both a reflexive (and ironised) artistic gesture and a business strategy. The organisation of Hirst’s production takes Warhol’s construction of a “factory” more literally than Warhol ever did.³⁵

The phantasy of production which underpins the possibility of Hirst’s shark, for example, is just that which Pope imagines here, where “a Poet or Orator would have no more to do, but to send out to the various Traders in each Kind.” The strategy is now radically expanded by the possibilities of the telephone as a means of doing business, and now the poetic traders are no longer ironists, simile-makers and the like, but shark-fishermen, logisticians, shipping companies, exhibition-display technicians and formaldehyde manufacturers. This expansion of the trades on which art calls only further explodes the distinction between artistic and commercial work that Pope bemoans. Following the logic of this indistinction of art and non-art practices, Pope provides a further anticipatory glimpse of Hirst, suggesting that the person most adept at achieving bathos will be the intellectual who, like Hirst, is “an active Catcher of Butterflies, a careful and fanciful Pattern-drawer, an industrious Collector of Shells.”³⁶ In its embrace of the division of labour, the

forebear might have been the brash, tricksterish, Curll – every bit the Charlatan that our current media fears in Hirst – rather than Colley Cibber, whom I will explore further in the next chapter.

34 See “Of the Division of Labour” in Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: 1776), Project Gutenberg etext, 4 September 2004 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext02/wlnt11.txt>> 31 December 2007, Book 1, Chapter 1.

35 Warhol’s Factory, although in name it represented itself as an industrial concern, appears, at least when contrasted with Hirst, more akin (in turns) to a nightclub, an experimental laboratory, or even a form of “hippy” co-operative production (even if its products were so marketable, and successfully branded).

36 Pope, “Peri Bathous,” 399. The same figure of the collector-scientist appears in Book 4 of the *Dunciad* (4.394-436): the summit of dulness “Fair e’en in death! The peerless *Butterfly*.” (4.436) One of Hirst’s early installations, *In and Out of Love* (1991) involved the installation in a gallery of live butterflies, and one of his ongoing series of paintings involves dead butterflies attached to monochrome paintings. For Hirst as a “Collector of Shells,” see the cabinet *Forms without Life*

economic phantasy-scene of Hirst's production transposes onto the field of artistic production the phantasy which lies at the heart of Smith's long list at the end of the first chapter of the *Wealth of Nations* of the trades which serve to support the life and consumption of the "most common artificer or daylabourer in a civilized and thriving country," stretching that labourer's economic power across the globe and over a myriad of other producers.³⁷ A not-insignificant portion of the power and pleasure of Hirst's sculpture stems from its ability to occasion the transport of such a Smithian phantasy of the sublime reach of the act of consumption, folded as it is onto an image of the reach of mercantile capital and the scope of empire.

From the outset, moreover, Hirst's work was planned in product lines – the Spot and then the Spin Paintings, the "Natural History" series,³⁸ the medicine cabinets – each of which can be (re)produced by technicians according to a set formula. As Hirst's resources grew, the production of his work was rapidly broken into workshops, each specialising in given lines within the larger *oeuvre*. Within the workshops, tasks are once more divided amongst the labour force.³⁹ This form of production does not so much resemble the full-blown factory system of the nineteenth century; it more closely apes the eighteenth-century "proto-industrialisation" which Pope is here observing.⁴⁰ Far from a

(1991), currently owned by the Tate. Hirst as a technical pattern-drawer is represented in his spot, spin and the more recent "Superstition" series of butterfly-wing pictures.

37 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. As Hirst himself says in interview with Gordon Burn, "With the phone you become totally international. You can go beyond continents." Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 45.

38 i.e. the animals in formaldehyde.

39 The 2004 book of Hirst's selected drawings, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, not only evidences, but also celebrates and mythologises Hirst as such a producer. With their highly abbreviated and diagrammatic visual language, Hirst's drawings, which are almost entirely preliminary notes or visualisations for possible sculptures, largely take the form of plans for manufacture, covered in annotations and instructions for the workshops. They often, in fact, serve as roughs from which a technical drawing or computer model is produced by an assistant, which in turn is given to a manufacturer or another assistant for execution. (See Annushka Shani, "On Wishing, Thinking, and Joking on Paper: Damien Hirst's Drawings," *Od Zibelke Do Groba: Izbrane Risbe: Damiena Hirsta / from the Cradle to the Grave: Selected Drawings: Damien Hirst* [Ljubljana, Slovenia: International Centre of Graphic Arts and Other Criteria in association with the British Council, 2003], n.p.) It is instructive, in the context of marking a relation between this and the proto-industrial commercial practices of the early eighteenth century, to compare Hirst's methods to John Styles's discussion of the complex of forms of drawing and written instruction used to communicate design features between the entrepreneurs of eighteenth-century large-scale production and their agents and workers, under the pressure of the need to produce consistently branded and fashionable goods. Styles, "Design for Large-Scale Production," 14-6.

40 For the origin of the term, "proto-industrialisation," see footnote 2 above, p.173. The capital of the entrepreneurs ("projectors") who ran this system is invested in the materials which the workers work, rather than the heavy plant and property of the factory-owner (it remains "circulating" rather than "fixed" capital). Nonetheless, we start to see increased specialisation and division of labour, and the increased repetitiveness of tasks, as well as increased dependence of workers on their employers.

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Fig. 42: *Beautiful, cheap, shitty, too easy, anyone can do one, big, motor-driven, roto-heaven, corrupt, trashy, bad art, shite, motivating, captivating, over the sofa, celebrating painting*, 1997. Gloss household paint on canvas. Diameter 365 cm. Image from *Damien Hirst: Pictures from the Saatchi Gallery*, 45.

Hirst's "spin" paintings are the apotheosis of his strategy of the creation of a mechanical system for the production of the sublime. A motor turns the painting whilst paint is poured onto it (preferably by an assistant). The centrifugal forces create "expressionistic" marks harking back to a tradition of post-Romantic abstract "painterliness," though without the intervention of an expressive subject.

mere “throwback,” however, Hirst’s “return” to this form of artistic production takes place within the context of the atavistic return of increasing flexibilisation of production in the post-Fordist era of globalisation, where products are increasingly outsourced, produced in short batches to meet demand, and where the organiser of production, in the role that Hirst sets up for himself, is there to stamp the consistency of a brand upon the finished product.

It is striking that Hirst’s mask peeks out at us from between the lines of Pope’s tirade, in a piece which is not just a satire on the commercialisation of early eighteenth-century literature, but one which revolves centrally around the question of the sublime, which we have also seen so strongly in play in the critical literature on Hirst himself. This is all the more striking in that the “sublime” which Hirst’s work seems at first most clearly to echo is the Burkean sublime of terror and horror (a sublime defined in terms of its opposition to the beautiful, and not in opposition to the base or bathetic), and which belongs to a later moment in the unfolding of the concept than that in which Pope is writing.⁴¹ This Burkean sublime seems almost diametrically at odds with Pope’s Augustan formulation of the concept. Burke’s sublime is closer to Pope’s

41 One of the reasons Pope’s image startles us is that it seems surprisingly “early” - an image in which we recognise our own modernity rather sooner than we expect to find it. But it is too easy to see in Pope’s image a vision of a “culture industry” that really only grows up in the form we know it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Art and literature are not at this point produced and disseminated on a properly industrial basis, and the technologies of mass reproduction and broadcast on which a culture industry proper is reliant are not yet extant. Furthermore, though Pope has brought up the phantom of the “unquestionable Majority” - an image of a lumpen and consuming mass if ever there was one, and though throughout the *Dunciad* there are images of masses, throngs, swarms, mobs, and generally of formless, semi-animate social accumulations - there is certainly not a “mass” audience as we would tend to imagine one today, which would involve a “mass” subject formed through the address of an industrial cultural product. As Don Slater notes, however, “critics did not wait for the emergence of Fordist mass production to engage in full-scale attacks and large-scale theorisations of consumer culture.” (Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, 13.) But if this is part of the reason for the shock of finding Hirst in Pope’s image, the significance of this is certainly not simply a matter of shunting the familiar “modernity” of “consumer society” back a century or two. Rather, the resulting surprise should serve to allow us to break apart the category of modernity somewhat, to complicate it, make it plural, and perhaps even to problematise it as a useful concept. Our own historical moment is understandable in terms of its repetition of and its difference from both the eighteenth-century boom of cultural commodification in conjunction with the capitalist financial revolution, and also the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century revolutions in industrial production and social formation. What Pope offers is an image of cultural production run on the principles of the mercantile (rather than industrial) capital which was becoming dominant at this moment, and on the basis of the forms of organisation which were being taken up by the projectors of the era. If the audience of such products can already be imagined by Pope as a shapeless and formless mass, this is because the address of such culture, based as it is on the production of commodities, must necessarily see the audience as anonymous and without particular identity; the need for a large audience to ensure the profitability of production on an increasing scale also seems to “declass” the products further, projecting further down the social ranks in its address as far as the technological and organisational means of production allow. It is the commodity form which is the fundamental and traumatic shift which writers of this century had to grapple with - a fact that artists and writers continue to contend with today, and which, as I have stressed in my introduction to this dissertation, since the late twentieth century presses with renewed urgency.

bathos, and I will turn to make sense of the relation between the two later in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, I return to further explore the parallels between Hirst and the cultural modes of production which Pope is attacking, by looking at further echoes between Hirst and Colley Cibber, who, though he plays a fairly small role in *Peri Bathous*, will go on to be the anti-hero of Pope's *Dunciad*.⁴² This will allow me to further explore the kinds of subjectivity and productivity involved in such commercial production, and to investigate the involvement of the sublime in this. Now, however, I shall turn to a further exploration of the way that Pope uses the notion of bathos itself – and Pope's other key term, which I take as a synonym for it, "dulness" – to envision the effects of commodification on culture. An understanding will emerge of Pope's essay as a critique of the manner in which Longinian theories of sublimity have already been made active forces within the culture which Pope criticises.

Bathos and Dulness

What has hopefully already become clear from my discussion of *Peri Bathous*, is that Pope's notion of "bathos" is tightly tied in with his diagnosis of the effects of commercial organisation on culture. Bathos is not merely something that happens "within" poetry, a lapse into the ridiculous precipitated by rhetorical failure. Rather, inasmuch as Pope's essay makes a larger critique of the conditions of cultural production and consumption, bathos involves itself more widely in the social, moral, economic and cultural – and even the epistemological and ontological – spheres, within which poetic production takes place. Rhetorical bathos, rather than just bad poetry, marks the point of collapse – under the pressure of the profit motive and its "administration" of (and to) "pleasure" – of the very *formfulness* of Classicist literature itself, and of its consequent ability to support, reflect or inculcate the cultural, social, moral, and even ontological and epistemological, values, hierarchies and orders which, in Pope's Neo-Augustan terms, constitute a sphere of the "sublime."⁴³ Bathos is more a condition of fallen modernity than a mere matter of the quality of verse. The description of its threat to sublimity entails an apocalyptic cosmological vision, rather than just a discourse on style – exactly as is the case in Lyotard's

42 There are, nonetheless several references to Cibber in *Peri Bathous*. Most importantly in this context Pope notes that the proposal he sets out for the advancement of bathos in literature is not necessary on the stage, since Cibber, along with his fellow managers of Drury Lane, Barton Booth and Robert Wilks, have already done such a thorough job of the matter (436). In this sense, Cibber already provides the model which literature seems to Pope to be following.

43 In *Peri Bathous*, Pope explicitly uses the notion of sublimity to name such a process through which form and value are created and maintained, in a phrase which was later to be borrowed by Matthew Arnold as a banner for his civilising project: the power (and the task) of literature and culture is as an example to teach or even compel the reader, "to relish the *Sublime*" (391).

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Fig. 43: Hogarth, *The Bathos, or the Manner of Sinking in Sublime Paintings, inscribed to the Dealers in Dark Pictures*, 1764. Etching and engraving, 31.8 x 33.7 cm. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:William_Hogarth_-_The_Bathos.png>

essay.

Pope most fully pursues this cosmic vision of bathetic collapse in his *Dunciad*. This mock epic narrates the triumph of the goddess Dulness and the restoration of her empire of stupidity, sleep and formless chaos over modern English culture, and the coronation, as its King, of her son and champion, the “Dunce” of the title. In Pope’s corpus, *Peri Bathous* and the *Dunciad* belong together as two parts of the same developing satirical project. There are strong circumstantial reasons for stating this.⁴⁴ But beyond these, it is clear that the *Dunciad* starts where *Peri Bathous* leaves off in its attack on the commerce of modern letters, and, in order to do this, elaborates the rhetorical resources of the latter. With each rewrite of the poem, Pope developed an increasingly bleak and powerful vision of that collapse of all forms of value which he had started describing in *Peri Bathous*. This reaches its zenith in the final four-book *Dunciad*, of 1743, the version I discuss here.⁴⁵

The *Dunciad*, a mock epic rather than a mock rhetorical treatise, has available a host of narrative and descriptive resources to which *Peri Bathous* is

44 First off, the works both explicitly situate themselves within the afterlife of the Scriblerus Club. Scriblerus himself is the ostensible author of *Peri Bathous*, and although not the protagonist of the *Dunciad* (Pope chooses some real literary figures as targets of satire to replace the merely fictional Dunce), he nonetheless appears as a prominent voice within its heavy apparatus of spoof commentary. In terms of chronology, the first version of the *Dunciad* was published in 1728, the same year as the *Peri Bathous*. Pope himself, it seems from the evidence, wanted the two works published together as sister-pieces in the second volume of his collected *Works* of 1735, and it was only problems with copyright ownership which stopped this, delaying the inclusion of *Peri Bathous* in the *Works*, and relegating it to a second volume of collected prose which appeared in 1741. (See Foxon, *Pope*, 124-6, 131-8.) The copyright for *Peri Bathous*, having been published as part of the Pope/Swift *Miscellanies*, belonged to the bookseller Benjamin Motte, with whom Pope was no longer on good terms. In spite of several attempts to negotiate terms for its republication, *Peri Bathous* did not find its place in the *Works* until the death of Motte. The 1741 date this is also significant in the development of the *Dunciad*; it is the same year that the fourth book of the poem is published, and that Pope starts to rework the whole poem for his final, altogether darker vision, with Cibber now installed as chief Dunce.

45 This version is available online in Alexander Pope, *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope; with Memoir, Critical Dissertation, and Explanatory Notes by the Rev. George Gilfillan*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: 1856), 9 October 2003 <<http://www.gutenberg.net/dirs/etext06/8pop210.txt>> 3 October 2004. This is drawn directly from the 1856 edition published in Edinburgh by James Nichol. The verse is – as far as I can tell – identical to the version collected in Alexander Pope, *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 295-378. It is also identical to the (3rd) Twickenham edition of 1963, except for some minor modernisations of Pope’s spelling and the lack of italics necessitated by the text-only format. (Pope largely omits italicisation, in any case). Williams omits some of the framing apparatus which is included in the Gutenberg version, and adds his own notes, whilst omitting some of Pope’s and Warburton’s own, and there are differences between the notes provided in the online edition and the Twickenham edition, though they are largely similar. I will be referring here to the online version unless it is explicitly stated otherwise. (I do not miss the irony of finding myself relishing being caught in this manner in such a proliferation of pedantry as that which explodes around Pope’s poem, which had already itself set up its own overblown spoof apparatus of commentary as a satire on the professional scholarship which he observed growing up – no less in the figure of Theobald, the central Dunce of the first versions of the poem than anyone else.)

less suited. These allow it to expand and develop the ribald and scatological dimension of the satire, and develop an iconography and rhetorical armoury for mapping the intellectual and literary realm and its relations with the economic, cultural and social fields. If *Peri Bathous* pictures the absurdity of a system of poetic production which reduces artistic value to the economic, and lampoons some of the products of this system, the *Dunciad* sets about envisioning the effects of such a system, and of the realisation of its absolute form, in the social world. Pope brings onto the stage of the poem a host of “dunces” to laugh at – a teeming army of the goddess’s followers and agents (at the core of which are many of the figures ridiculed in the *Art of Sinking*), providing a panoramic satirical vision of the literary and intellectual world of the day, in particular with reference to its commercialisation. Alongside authors are the translators, scholars, schoolteachers, critics, journalists, party pamphleteers, scientists, antiquarians and, of course, booksellers and publishers who make up, in Pope’s own phrase, “all the Grub Street race”⁴⁶: professional rather than “gentlemanly” players in the literary field, a mercenary army of those “who hunger and who thirst for scribbling sake,”⁴⁷ and whose poverty thus makes servile to the purposes of whoever is paying.⁴⁸

In the *Dunciad*, the notion of “dulness” serves instead of “bathos” to designate the resulting collapse of all forms of value in this literary world, and the key term around which Pope develops this increasingly vivid vision of commercial culture. Many of the figures which were previously associated with bathos now gravitate around dulness.⁴⁹ Like bathos, dulness is associated with the base and bodily. A competition in the “art of sinking,” where journalists and party-writers dive into the open sewers of Fleet Ditch to see how deep they can sink into its depths, renews the metaphors of height and depth which set bathos as the vertical opposite of *hupsos* – linked in both cases to an iconography of the revolting body.⁵⁰ Also like bathos, dulness is a matter of harnessing

46 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.44.

47 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.50.

48 The “Letter to the Publisher” at the start of the *Dunciad* argues that “poverty itself becomes a just subject of satire, when it is the consequence of vice, prodigality, or neglect of one’s lawful calling; for then it increases the public burden, fills the streets and highways with robbers, and the garrets with clippers, coiners, and weekly journalists.”

49 I propose this centring of the poem around the notion of dulness rather than bathos as an act of the replacement of the one term by the other, since this allows us to understand the disappearance of the word *bathos* itself in the poem, in spite of the continued use of the constellation of related terms, tropes and images which Pope had built up around it in *Peri Bathous*. Thus the description of Cibber writing – “Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound! / Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there” (1.118-9) – which could have been a definition of bathos is now used to typify dulness.

50 Pope, *Dunciad*, 2.269-346. Even more particularly, this competition in the *Dunciad* expands on a figure introduced in *Peri Bathous*, where the technologies of diving are used to imagine

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Fig. 44: William Hogarth, *The Distrest Poet*, 1741 (from the painting of 1736). Etching and Engraving 63 x 47.5 cm. Image from John Trusler, *The Works of Hogarth* < http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22500/22500-h/22500-h.htm#Page_27>. Early states of the plate included a quotation from the *Dunciad* :

Studious he sate, with all his books around,
Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound:
Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there;
Then wrote and flounder'd on, in mere despair

literature – and its increasingly professionalised processes of production – to the purposes of economic gain. Images of coinage and the names of the metals out of which money is produced abound and echo throughout the poem, weaving themselves into its very texture – gold, of course, is prominent, but it is outnumbered by the less precious metals, especially those used for substitute coin, with silver, copper, bronze, brass and lead all making repeated appearance.⁵¹ A whole series of adjectives, which transfer the (largely visual) properties of precious metals to other objects and people in the poem reinforce this theme, for example *tinsell'd*, *twinkling*, *glittering*, *bright*, *rich*, or *shining*.⁵²

These images of money (or at least its *appearance*) take their part within the larger device in the poem, whereby Pope piles on a surfeit of images of material luxury.⁵³ Pope contrasts these with images of poverty, filth and abjection, pressing the valuable and valueless closely together to produce a combined image of a base materialism in which the love of luxury constitutes wallowing in the mire of the material world. Gold appears not as the standard of value but as the very basis of an inverted alchemical process of the destruction of value, an *unsubliming* in which pure and transcendent value is transformed into base metal and sordid materiality.⁵⁴ The word *dulness* itself carries with it

a literary plumbing of the depths. (Pope, "Peri Bathous," 394.) In the same passage, bathos is discussed in terms of an architecture of ditches (i.e. open sewers) rather than cathedrals, and this is, of course a competition to dive into a ditch.

51 The word *gold* occurs no less than nine times (1.53, 1.138, 2.4, 3.10, 3.254, 4.16, 4.117, 4.365, 4.382.) variations of *gilded* five times (2.2, 2.24, 4.408, 4.631, 3.95 – and this is not including its homophones *guild* and *guilt* which also both occur). Silver (2.274, 4.303, 4.421), copper (1.24), brass (2.254, 2.313, 4.365), bronze (2.10, 3.299), brazen (1.32), lead (1.123, 1.181, 1.305, 2.44, 2.281, 2.322, 4.17). Lead is not as such a metal used as a coin, but we shall examine its role in relation to the theme of gold and coinage in what comes. Though there is something rather reifying in the procedure of analysing a poem by tracking through or counting the words used in it, I feel justified in this case by the logic of Pope's poem, which itself involves effects of accumulation, naming, listing, and a chaotic piling up of materials and objects (whose properties are often then exchanged). It seems to me hard not to remember and respond to Pope's poem in terms of the impression of a dynamic mass of materials, their textures and their sheen. Gold and its substitutes are amongst the "stuff" which remains most prominent in my memory of the poem.

52 *Tinsell'd* 1.81; *twinkling* 2.11; *glittering* 1.75; *rich* 1.85; *shone* 1.147, 2.1; *shine* 2.9; *shin'd* 4.424; *brightness* 1.219; *bright* 2.173, 3.74, 3.78, 4.408. Pope also gives us other objects associated with money: a purse (2.197), groats (2.252), coins (4.349, and, in particular, in a number of notes) and "medals" [i.e. ancient coins] (4.390, and again in the notes), pearls (2.160) and so on. Colin Nicholson argues that Cibber himself is consistently depicted in the poem with the attributes of a coin - he is metallic, hard and shiny. (Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 193.)

53 It has been commented that a structuring device of the poem – and of much of Pope's other poetry – is an enumeration of the commodity objects and riches of eighteenth-century capitalist material culture. See Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 130; Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 154-61.

54 A nice example within the text itself of this logic: the "Poetic Justice" of Dulness's reign weighs "truth with gold" to attribute value – an ironic image where the weight of gold as measure has the effect of turning an abstract quality (truth) into a material one (weight, a quality moreover which can be associated with the power to sink, and which aligns its object with the vector of bathos), rather than vice versa; in the next line, moreover, it is the less glittering "solid pudding" which replaces gold on the scales of poetic truth against "empty

the resonance of the qualities of a less-than-precious metal of tarnishing and decay, which belie the eternality of its ostensible value. Lead – the material invested most often with dreams of alchemical transmutation into gold – a heavy, dull metal, whose pliability makes it quite unsuitable for coinage, thus takes a preponderance as the contrary of gold in the poem: the stated primary “action” of the *Dunciad* is the renewal of a “new Saturnian age of lead” (in contradistinction to a “golden era.”)⁵⁵ Pope’s unsubliming dulness is thus not only akin to bathos as a descriptor of commodified literature: also just like bathos, it constitutes a polar opposite to the elevating and structuring processes of the Augustan sublime.

The loss of structure and form entailed in this unsubliming process – ambiguously the cause and the result of the loss of elevation – is figured in the other quality of lead which Pope exploits as an image of dulness: malleability.⁵⁶ Dulness is “ductile.”⁵⁷ Such ductility connects with the thematic of formlessness and mutability which runs throughout Pope’s characterisations of capitalist culture, and finds its place in a much longer tradition, stretching back into the late middle ages, of literary attempts to grasp and articulate the anxieties produced by the Protean powers of an emerging monetary economy, and its erosion of older social, political and cultural ways of life.⁵⁸ The diatribe in

praise,” completing the victory of matter over spirit in a mercantile world where poets must earn a crust. An even more spectacular example of the transmutation of gold – now, rather than simply pudding, all the way into shit – is found in Book 4, in the section where antiquarians, numismatists and tourists are ridiculed. One “Mummius” (a name, suggests Williams’s note, which suggests an obsessive collector of old artefacts and mummies) tells the story of his swallowing a series of old coins when being pursued by bandits, in order not to be robbed of them, which, of course led only to the problem of ensuring the ease and timing of their “second birth” (4.386). As a result, the learned are keen to dine Mummius and attend his defecation for their edification. (4.375-394)

55 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.28; this is echoed in 4.16 where the images of lead and gold collapse in the final triumph of the Goddess’s empire of chaos, bringing “Saturnian days of lead and gold.” Figured thus, as the result of a reverse alchemical transmutation, a “golden” age can now be a purely mercenary one. Lead is also, of course, the heaviest of metals, the one most extremely subject to the laws of gravity, the most, that is, apposite to action of “sinking.” Aligned with the vector of the bathos, and used by the divers Pope includes in both poems as a weight to aid their “plumbing” of the depths, its “density” as also that of a dunce.

56 Lead is, of course, fairly soft at room temperature, but this malleability reaches its utmost point in the poem when Cibber’s attempt at poetic creation is depicted through an image of “Nonsense precipitate, like running lead, / That slipp’d through cracks and zig-zags of the head” - poetry as a molten, oozing mass of leaden cranial excretion (1.123-4).

57 “ductile Dulness” (1.64)

58 Braudel describes the experience of the monetary economy which emerges in the period 1400-1800 thus: “Although it is an ancient fact of life, an ancient technique, money never ceases to surprise humanity. It seems to them mysterious and disturbing [...] even in a country like France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even in the eighteenth. [...] What did it actually bring? Sharp variations in prices of essential foodstuffs; incomprehensible relationships in which man no longer recognised either himself, his customs or his ancient values. His work became a commodity, himself a ‘thing.’ [...] Actually every society that is based on an ancient structure and opens its doors to money sooner or later loses its acquired equilibria and liberates

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Fig. 45: Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *Sublime Oratory – A Display of It*. 1788, published by T. Harmar. Private collection. Image reproduced in *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*, 98. Here Burke's pretensions to the sublime in political oratory are mocked, as the author depicts Burke, supported by other Whig politicians picking up filth from the street to sling at Warren Hastings. The joke of the image draws on the iconography of Pope's *Dunciad* and *Peri Bathous*.

Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* on the power of gold to erase and invert all differences constitutes one example of this tradition of representation.⁵⁹ Jean-Christophe Agnew's book *Worlds Apart*, documents it further, arguing that a key task in late-medieval and early-modern literature was finding an "intelligible" shape in which to represent "the very formlessness that money values were introducing into exchange."⁶⁰ He argues that it was the Protean nature of money, and its power to reproduce its formlessness in everything it touches, which quickly became established as its figure.⁶¹

Dulness's unsubliming processes in the *Dunciad* lead to just such a formless and shifting world. The Goddess's reign is imagined primarily as a return to de-differentiated, primal, formless chaos.⁶² The effects of Dulness's – or, rather, capital's – power of de-differentiation are found throughout the poem, both envisioned as a force within literary production, and also in the moral and social order of the world at large. The very first lines of the poem already give us a highly condensed image of this collapse of order, hierarchy and value, in direct relation to the forces of commerce and commodification. Pope opens:

The mighty mother, and her son, who brings
The Smithfield Muses to the ear of kings,

forces thenceforth inadequately controlled. The new form of interchange jumbles things up, favours a few rare individuals and rejects the others. Every society has to turn over a new leaf at the impact." (Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, 325-6.)

59 There are, two relevant passages in Act 4, Scene 3. In lines 26-45, Shakespeare bemoans the power of gold to transform things into their ostensible opposites, making the negative into a positive, and unseating moral as well as logical distinctions. In lines 377-88, he goes on to articulate a vision of the disruptive power of money, transforming human society into one in which "Beasts / May have the world in Empire" (Act 4, Sc. 3 ll.387-8). William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, New Contemporary Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The passage is quoted, notably, by Marx in his "Power of Money" chapter of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx brings these passages together to evidence a recognition of the alienating power of money in early modern Europe, and as a powerful image of money's power to carry out "the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things." Karl Marx, "The Power of Money," *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx and Engels Internet Archive (Marxists.org), 2000, Available: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm>>, 4 January 2008.

60 Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, xii. His italics.

61 Agnew writes: "The formless, qualityless, characterless nature of money became a recurring motif in the rumination about self and society to which so much Renaissance and Reformation literature contributed. [...] Whether this literature struck a note of lament or promise, it nonetheless kept to the theme of a newly discovered, Protean social world, one in which the conventional signposts of social and individual identity had become mobile and manipulable reference points." Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 9.

62 This is announced at the outset of Book 1: "In eldest time, ere mortals writ or read, [...] / Dulness o'er all possess'd her ancient right, / Daughter of Chaos and Eternal Night: [...] / She ruled, in native anarchy, the mind." (1.9-16); It is established at the end of Book 4: "Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored; / Light dies before thy uncreating word: / Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall; / And universal darkness buries all" (4.653-656).

I sing.⁶³

A note makes explicit what is at stake in this opening image:

Smithfield was the place where Bartholomew Fair was kept, whose shows, machines, and dramatical entertainments, formerly agreeable only to the taste of the rabble, were, by the hero of this poem and others of equal genius, brought to the theatres of Covent Garden, Lincolns-Inn-Fields, and the Haymarket, to be the reigning pleasures of the court and town.

Cibber's westward transportation of his low Muses across London from the carnivalesque realm of Smithfield (an ancient site of market exchange, as well as entertainment) and onto the "courtly" stages further west marks an image first of an unstable urban geography, but also of the collapse of the social, moral and aesthetic hierarchies which should be embodied in the spatial distinction between Smithfield and the West End: the King is brought down to the level of the mob in the universal establishment of the cultural logic of Bartholomew Fair.

In the sixth verse Pope amplifies this spatio-temporal collapse onto a global scale, though this is now depicted as taking place within poetry itself, and its field of representation, in poets' confluences of distant climates or seasons:

[...] Time himself stands still at her command,
Realms shift their place, and ocean turns to land.
Here gay Description Egypt glads with showers,
Or gives to Zembla fruits, to Barca flowers;
Glittering with ice here hoary hills are seen,
There painted valleys of eternal green;
In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,
And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow⁶⁴

Pope, in the passage that leads up to this description makes it clear that such chaotic effects are produced by the neglect of the "rules" of poetry – a general liquidation of the *bienseances* and *vraisemblances* of Neoclassical decorum in "Figures ill pair'd, and similes unlike."⁶⁵ But if railing against such failures of decorum continues of the project of *Peri Bathous* – which picks out many examples of ill-chosen tropes and figures⁶⁶ – in this verse of the *Dunciad* Pope

63 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.1-3.

64 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.69-78.

65 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.66 Pope goes on, amplifying the metaphor of miscegenation, to discuss works where "Tragedy and Comedy embrace" or where "Farce and Epic get a jumbled race" (1.69-70).

66 See in particular the section on "Mixture of Figures" where Pope similarly bemoans the conflation of the seasons in an unnamed writer's figure of a "snow of blossoms." (Pope, "Peri Bathous," 413.) More generally, see the 5th chapter, where Pope suggests that the bathetic poet should consider his works "spoil'd by an Imitation of Nature, or Uniformity of Design. He is to

contextualises such a complaint within the broader vision of the formless and abjecting powers of capitalist cultural production.⁶⁷ The start of the verse abounds with a vocabulary evoking such formlessness. Here, Pope describes the genesis of a “poem or a play.” The prevarication over which literary form he is discussing is significant in itself, indicating that the distinction seems to have disintegrated, leaving us only “nameless somethings” stirring in the midst of “chaos dark and deep.”⁶⁸ Such a product is a “mass” consisting of “maggots” of “half-form’d” verse⁶⁹; it is constituted from a “mob” of metaphors and “motley” images, whose “mazy dance” sets time and space spinning.⁷⁰

Pope imagines this formlessness not just as a lack of structure, but as an actively destructuring principle of genesis. He imagines an *ex nihilo* but abortive (un)creation, called into being by an economic impetus, in terms of “spawn” and of an abortively forming “embryo.”⁷¹ Autochthonous “maggots” begin to crawl and teem in an image which is as much one of decay as it is of creation.

Such an abject insect imagery, in fact, abounds throughout the poem.⁷² This insect imagery ties together (in its swarms and throngs) the images of formless, multiplying mobs with figures of dirt and corruption and with the diligent, prolific productivity of the commercial realm, figured, for example in the guise of Cibber the “industrious bug.”⁷³ With it, Pope envisions dulness as a

mingle Bits of the most various, or discordant kinds” (395); should destroy credibility by giving unsuited actions to characters (“a Footman speaking like a Philosopher” [395]), and attends to the transformation scenes which were very much the rage of the time: “When an audience behold a Coach turn’d into a Wheel-barrow, a Conjuror into an Old Woman, or a Man’s Head where his heels should be; how are they struck with Transport and Delight?” (395-6) These fantastical transformations which Pope picks out, of course, share with the imagery in the *Dunciad* passage here under discussion the collision – or miscegenation – of forms of the “high” and the “low,” whether in terms of economic value, social status, gender, or the body.

67 Aside from heightening (as he does throughout the poem) the indistinction between what occurs within poetry and what happens in the actual world, he is figuring the one in terms of the other.

68 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.55-6.

69 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.58, 1.61.

70 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.66, 1.65, 1.67.

71 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.57-9. The economic impetuses mentioned are those of the “warm third day” of an author’s benefit performance, or a contract with a bookseller such as “genial Jacob” Tonson.

72 Aside from our maggots, we have a “bug,” two swarms of bees, a plague of locusts (“blackening all the ground”), “insect lust,” butterflies, flies, a glow-worm, a silk-worm and a spider. For the “bug” see 2.130; the swarms of bees, 3.33; 4.80; the plague of locusts 4.397; “insect lust” 4.415; the butterflies 4.436, 4.589; flies 4.454; the glow-worm 4.569, the silk-worm 4.253, the spider 4.590. There is an extended section in Book 4 in which he mocks naturalists’ rising interest in insects and other “low” creatures, ridiculing collectors of butterflies, This section, once more closely anticipates Hirst’s thematic concern with butterflies, “Fair e’en in death” (4.436) and experiments on flies (4.421-458).

73 Such industrious insect life also echoes, of course, Mandeville’s infamous hive, which produces public wealth from private vice. See also Kramnick, who argues that *Peri Bathous*

productive principle of restless, but ultimately destructive energy.

Such loss of form and order is raised to a cosmic vision, rather than a merely poetical problem. The slippage of the poem's terms between poetical and ontological form, of which the metaphorical transformation of the "real" Smithfield rabble into a "mob of metaphors" is symptomatic, is insistent. It has begun already in the "mazy dance" of time and space I have just examined. It is expanded throughout the poem.⁷⁴ Pope creates a geographical, cosmological and poetic order lapsed into a hyper-liquidity which is finally to have its literal and total realisation in the last lines of the poem where all religious, intellectual, and ethical order is annihilated and night and chaos are restored.⁷⁵

In Pope's poem, commodification is at the heart of this. Laura Brown has traced how Pope registers its effect on the cultural and material world of the poem.⁷⁶ She discusses the device which lies at the heart of the poem's style and rhythmical impact: the list. The poem, in fact often gives the effect of a dazzling enumeration or procession of the consumer objects and materials of the exploding "World of Goods" of early eighteenth-century London. Her example is the one of the first of the poem's lists: the "Miscellanies [...] Journals, Medleys, Merc'ries, Magazines"⁷⁷ pouring off the presses of the new print industry. This list of literary commodities gives the "impression of random enumeration." Its alliterative effect, here as elsewhere, "contributes to the effect

centres its critique of contemporary literature on its tendency (at the behest of the profit motive) to overproduction, which has drowned good literature, obscuring it in a flood of the bad. Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-4.

74 The basic conceit of this passage is repeated in even more hyperbolic form later in the poem, when Pope looks at the rise of the fantastical in theatre:

Thence a new world to Nature's laws unknown
Breaks out refulgent, with a heaven its own: [...]
The forests dance, the rivers upward rise,
Whales sport in woods, and dolphins in the skies;
And last, to give the whole creation grace,
Lo! one vast egg produces human race. (3.241-8)

These dancing forests, airborne dolphins, and continents-on-the-move comprise an image of a motile modern spatial order in which, as Marx would put it, "*Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft.*"

75 Pope writes:

Religion, blushing, veils her sacred fires,
And unawares *Morality* expires.
Nor *public* flame, nor *private*, dares to shine;
Nor *human* spark is left, nor glimpse *divine*!
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal darkness buries all. (4.649-656.)

76 Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 129-48.

77 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.39-42.

of indiscriminate accumulation by projecting the possibility of an infinity of like-sounding words, as if any noun beginning with an 'm' and ending in 's' could be substituted with identical euphony."⁷⁸ This disordered accumulation mimics in poetic form both the de-differentiation Pope regards as the heart of dulness, and the exchangeability of the commodity, which, in exchange-value, is robbed of particularity and made homogenous with all other things, just as these objects become grammatically and rhythmically interchangeable in Pope's list. Exchange-value, in Marx, is what makes inert objects leap into uncanny life to trade places across geopolitical space (though in Marx's essay it is merely a table which does this, rather than the whole gamut of forests, rivers, whales, and the very land and sea themselves of Pope's poem).⁷⁹ It is this uncanny life, its restless and morbidly unnatural energy, feared as "uncreating"⁸⁰ like money itself, which Pope evokes in his imagery of the effects of dulness.⁸¹

Just as in Marx's account, and, later, just as in the case of the Walter Benjamin's arcades, the uncanny life into which commodities leap is a matter of the "phantasmagorical."⁸² Pope's poem (and, by implication, the world of commodities which the poem imagines) takes almost precisely the structure which would be taken by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's *fantasmagorie* shows, from which the term is drawn.⁸³ Terry Castle's description of Robertson's shows could equally apply to Pope's poem: "Ghostly vignettes followed upon one another in a crazy, rapid succession. The only links were thematic: each image bore some supernatural, exotic, or morbid association."⁸⁴ Pope's poem

78 Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 130.

79 Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, chapter 1.

80 Pope, *Dunciad*, 4.654.

81 For Brown, these effects are primarily a matter of reification. This is an argument that she goes on to elaborate in her chapter on the *Dunciad* in her later book, *Fables of Modernity*. See, however, my comments below on p.215 for an alternative analysis.

82 Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, chapter 1, section 4; Walter Benjamin, "Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé of 1939," in Benjamin, *Arcades*, 14-26. The "phantasmagoria" is a term which, as Margaret Cohen notes, "recurs with troubling insistence throughout Benjamin's arcades project." (Margaret Cohen, "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria," *New German Critique* 48 [1989]: 87.) Benjamin extends Marx's notion of the commodity as phantasmagoia, finding in the term an apposite image for the unreal, spectacular, dreamlike procession of juxtaposed images, haunted by the repressed contents of capital's history and relations, which make the display and advertisement of goods – the whole world as capital constitutes it – an uncanny, surreal experience. For more on Benjamin's conception of the phantasmagoria, see also Buck-Morss, "Redeeming Mass Culture," 211-40; Gyorgy Markus, "Walter Benjamin Or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria," *New German Critique* 83 (2001): 3-42.

83 Robertson was the showman who coined the name "phantasmagoria" for his modified magic lantern show, which, in its showmanship, took the form of a séance, in which Robertson invoked and made appear a series of figures from the past. (Castle, "Phantasmagoria," 26-61.) Of course, Pope's poem predates Robertson's entertainment by over fifty years, and testifies to a longer tradition of the visionary to which Robertson's show belongs.

84 Castle, "Phantasmagoria," 36.

is formed, like the phantasmagoria shows, of a chaotic procession of spooks, spectres, and ghosts.⁸⁵ Like the phantasmagoria, it is characterised by its frenetic pace, its accumulation of scenes in absurd and random juxtaposition, its monstrous effects and shifting scale.⁸⁶ The unreal spectrality of the events, characters, scenes and spaces of the poem is emphasised throughout. Pope presents these punctuated with a vocabulary of illusion and fakery, where the visible always obscures as much as it reveals.⁸⁷ The poem's scenes are often presented as already-mediated through other forms of representation, appearing in the guise of plays, stage scenery, paintings, and even book illustrations or tapestry.⁸⁸ Even where such things are not explicitly presented

85 It would be hard to know where to start or stop with the enumeration of spectres in the poem, and my argument here is that the poem, as a whole, constitutes one long, visionary procession of such spirits. Its many evocations of dead writers, Gods, or allegorical figures could all, at a stretch, be thought in these terms. They are frequently described as "appearing," just as spirits in a séance do (e.g. 1.152; 2.25; 3.35; 3.313; 3.322; 4.116). There are, however, a series of even more clear examples of such spectres. The poem starts with an "invocation", repeated in the last book, of Dulness herself. These invocations are echoed in Cibber's own invocation of Dulness within the text (in the first book), burning his failed works in an act of sacrificial conjuration which resembles the pyrotechnic effects with which Robertson started his shows. The poem also includes a series of figures who are explicitly named as spectres, including, for example, the illusory "phantom" (2.50) which Dulness creates for the booksellers to chase, a "tall Nothing" (2.110), a "shapeless shade" (2.111) which melts away when they catch up with it; Dulness replaces this shade with "three imps", decked out as Congreve, Addison and Prior. (The booksellers are then, of course, instructed to repeat the illusion itself – their pirate and fake editions serving themselves as exactly such spectres of poets and simulacra of poetry.) In the third book, Cibber is transported into the realm of the dead, where he is addressed by a series of the souls of the departed dull who present him, in Dickensian fashion, with visions of dulness (rather than Christmas) past, present and future. Similarly, in Book 4, a gruesome "spectre" (4.139) – the ghost of schoolmaster Richard Busby – rises as the first speaker to address the assembled Dunces.

86 I am not entirely original in seeing this "phantasmagorical" logic in Pope's poem. In Williams's 1955 book-length study of the poem, he briefly notes that "The concluding events of the poem are a procession of images in a phantasmagorical movement." Williams does not develop the metaphor, and does not seem to accord it the significance that it deserves, as a structuring device for the poem as a whole; nor does he seriously explore the significance of this phantasmagorical quality. See Aubrey Williams, *Pope's Dunciad: A Study of Its Meaning* (London: Methuen, 1955), 154.

87 The vocabulary of appearance, as well as such verbs as *to appear* (1.152, 1.191, 2.25, 2.85, 3.35, 3.39, 3.313, 3.322, 4.116, 4.124), *to seem* (2.68, 2.110, 2.426, 4.395) and obvious nouns such as *illusion* (2.132), involves the set of adjectives I have noted above in my discussion of the theme of coinage or metal, which revolve around its sparkling, glistening effects, which produce a blinding, dazzling quality. This, furthermore, is a matter of surface and illusion as much as of metal's substance, as is betokened by Pope's favouring of the image of gilding. Gilding is echoed in a series of other actions such as painting, clothing, and the like which are similar cosmetic effects, involved in cloaking in the same action that they create a visibility. (A fine example of a passage in which this is emphasised is lines 1.73-84, in which we have the verbs "glads" [i.e. clothes], "painted," "tinsell'd," and "gilds" ["with her own fools-colours"]). At the start of Book 4, Pope brings up the startling figure for this paradoxical sort of visibility which is in fact an invisibility, of a ray of "darkness visible" – a sort of illumination which itself only creates sightlessness. (4.3)

88 For the stage, see the examples discussed above. For painting, see e.g. 2.145; tapestry 2.143 or 2.155, and for book illustration 2.160.

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Fig. 46: James Gillray, *A Phantasmagoria: Scene – Conjuring-up an Armed Skeleton*, 1803. Etching and aquatint with engraving, hand coloured. 27.9 x 24.5 cm. Image from *Gothic Nightmares*, 100. Note that here it is money which is being shovelled into the cauldron to produce the apparition.

as *mis-en-abyme* plays or paintings, we often have the uncanny feeling we are staring up at a Rococo ceiling, or viewing events through a proscenium arch. The final image of the poem is the falling of a curtain.⁸⁹

This illusory and artificial world is repeatedly presented in the poem as a production of madness, sleep or the intoxication of alcohol, opium, or enthusiastic religion⁹⁰; its “monsters” (another repeated term) are the product of the unstable powers of the imagination when tied to capital and unrestrained by Reason.

The diagnosis of this phantasmagorical logic is at the heart of Pope’s critique of capitalist culture. It is the basis of the de-structuring, de-subliming, “uncreating” powers which pitch against Pope’s Augustan sublime. For Pope – as Ann Bailey has noted – capitalist culture is fundamentally suspect because it unfastens representation from its anchorage in a transcendental realm of Ideas.⁹¹ Rather than serving to express such Ideas, language is instead yoked into a system of economic exchange.⁹² The capitalism with which Pope was faced functioned through an economic and representational logic which grounded meaning and value in the shifting and fundamentally spectral ground of *surplus-value*. The new monetary institutions and forms of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had produced an increasingly flexible notion of value, accelerating the use of what Braudel calls “substitute money.”⁹³

89 4.655

90 For drunkenness see e.g. 1.303, 2.344-6, 2.426; opium 1.271, 1.288, 3.21; religious enthusiasm 2.255-8; sleep and dream are such recurrent motifs that I can not start enumerating them. The triumph of the latter is, of course the final end of the poem. Madness is also a ubiquitous motif - the poem, of course, starts with the “Grub Street race” breaking out of Bedlam.

91 Anne Hall Bailey, “Just How Much for the Muse?: Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* and the Literary Market,” *Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation* 36.1 (1995): 26-8. See also Aubrey Williams’s account: he argues that for Pope, the modern forms of intellectual inquiry drive a wedge between *res* and *verba*, between words and the things they should mean, which disrupts the truth-seeking of the proper rhetorical tradition which seeks to connect the two. Thus philology is overly concerned with words alone, and the science of the Royal Society is overly concerned with matter alone, each constituting a different half of the same failure of the proper relation between representation and truth. Williams thus comes close to recognising the simulacral logic I describe here. (Williams, *Pope’s Dunciad: A Study*, 105-6.)

92 The slavery of language is a repeated motif, extending the metallic texture which runs through Pope’s poem so that the jingle of money frequently becomes the rattle of chains.

93 Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, 352. Braudel notes some of the different forms of “substitute money.” As well as actual metal itself, with its value, there are coins which involve the stamp of an arbitrary value; there is the “money of account” in which the price of different metals can be calculated, there is the increase of “fiduciary” or paper money, and the “scriptural” money, which exists not in material form, but in accounts and book-keeping. All these transform money into a symbolic rather than physical quantity; they nonetheless can be understood as separate from “credit,” perhaps the most significant form of substitute money of the eighteenth century, and the one which raises the stakes of the merely symbolic nature of money. With the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a massive rise in forms of credit and of the tradability of bills of exchange. Braudel, for example, credits the economic revolutions in Britain at this time - in particular the formation of the Bank of England - with

Discussing the rise of credit in her book *Fables of Modernity*, Laura Brown argues that, with the foundation of the Bank of England, and with the restructuring of the national debt so as to allow the growth of a speculative market in government securities, “the eighteenth century was the first age to live in the immediate intensity of credit, loans, discounts, shares, futures, national debt, deficit spending, and the fascinating fluctuations of the stock exchange.”⁹⁴ Noting the increasing burden of “belief” in economic life, she argues that the growth of forms of credit and speculative value involved a “vital incursion into the realm of the imagination” by economic thought in its appraisal of value, which entailed a leap into the representational and even the aesthetic – a leap to which the different meanings of the word “speculation” ought to alert us.⁹⁵ Just like Pope’s “dulness,” the speculative “surplus” at the heart of capitalist investment is a strangely phantasmatic product, consisting in appearance as much as essence.⁹⁶ Such unreal apparitions of value in economic life had their testimony in the “bubbles” which horrified the era. For Brown, the legacy of eighteenth-century capitalism is not one of hard-headed calculation, but an irrational, flighty and unreal speculativeness. This is Pope’s diagnosis, too, of

solving the problems banks had as instruments of finance, where capital held was needed in reserve to guarantee value. In such banks, money primarily gets “hoarded” and cannot play a useful role, constricting the amount of money available for new enterprise. It is primarily with the Bank of England, as issuer of notes as well as a deposit and clearing bank that forms of financial instrument are developed which increase the bulk of such money that is free to circulate, and does so without the collapse in “credit” itself. (Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, 350-1, 360.) With this, suggests Braudel, the dividing line between money and credit becomes increasingly blurred, and it becomes hard, philosophically speaking, to draw an absolute distinction between the two...

94 Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 97. She picks out as significant the growth of an international money market and the establishment of a futures market in the first decade of the Restoration, and the restructuring of national banking, which started up “government deficit financing,” the institution of a national market in government securities and the growth of speculation around these (98). See also P.G.M. Dickson’s description of the “financial revolution” of the period in question, in Dickson, *Financial Revolution*, esp. 3-14. See also Larry Neal, *The Rise of Finance Capitalism: International Capital Markets in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

95 Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 102. For more on the aestheticisation of money, and the incursion of belief into the economic sphere, see also Shell, *Money, Language and Thought*.

96 c.f. Derrida, *Specters*. Of Pope’s contemporaries it is Defoe – who we have already noted is a key object of the satire of *Peri Bathous* – who most clearly articulates the simulacral logic, embracing it in a way quite inimical to Pope. Defoe anticipates Derrida’s characterisation of the Spectre, writing that Credit “acts all substance yet is itself immaterial; it gives motion and yet itself cannot be said to exist, it is neither quantity nor quality ... it is the essential shadow of something that is not.” (Defoe, *Essay Upon the Public Credit*, p.6, cited by Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 187.) But if for Pope such a spectral form is absolutely sterile, for Defoe, there is still the possibility of distinguishing between an absolutely spurious insubstantiality, and these ghosts of value which nonetheless have real and useful outcomes: he writes of the “multitude of projectors ... who besides the Innumerable conceptions which die in the bringing forth, and (like Abortions of the Brain) only come into the Air, and dissolve, do really every day produce new Contrivances, Engines and Projects to get money, never before thought of.” (*Essay Upon Projects*, 4 cited by Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 192. Nicholson’s ellipsis.)

the spectral world of dullness.⁹⁷

Thus, for Pope, culture and economics are deeply tied together in a single economico-representational logic (of both the representation involved in economics and the economics involved in representation). Radically unfixed from the Ideal, signifiers, commodities and values become universally and arbitrarily substitutable in a fluid and formless system of the commerce of signs aimed at voluminous production and accumulation, producing a swirl of phantoms and appearances rather than structure, order and truth. Unfettered from the Idea, its logic is simulacral.⁹⁸ It is this which makes capitalist production prone to the monsters and mad forms of the sleep of Reason.

For Pope, in contradistinction to this horizontal simulacral regime it is

97 See especially the third book, where Cibber, the argument tells us, is taken by Dulness to her temple "and there lays him to slumber with his head on her lap; a position of marvellous virtue, which causes all the visions of wild enthusiasts, projectors, politicians, inamoratos, castle-builders, chemists, and poets. He is immediately carried on the wings of Fancy..." Here Pope clearly sees a continuum between the procedures of the financial speculations of projectors and the deranged fantasies of his raving poets. In fact, Brown argues that Dulness herself, as an allegorical figure, has a lot in common with the various literary incarnations of Lady Credit, a recurrent allegorical figure of the early eighteenth century, who served to imagine the new economic system in terms of monstrous and unruly feminine generative powers. Both Lady Credit and Dulness, she suggests, are variations of an "everyday Britannia." (Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 134.) Brown's argument is that such figures constitute a coherent strategy in which the ambivalence of capitalist modernity is imagined through images of "woman," who, like money and dulness is associated with fluidity, instability, the irrational, and the corporeal. The ambivalence of the figure of woman in Western culture as both desirable and terrible, abject and sublime, creating and consuming thus serves to figure the ambivalent world of capital in a way that transcends or unifies different particular ideological positions. Building on Brown's argument, it is the infant's relation to the maternal (and the status of woman in Western culture that emerges from this relation) which would most clearly mark a series of phenomena restaged in the subject's relation to capital. Pre-Oedipal conflicts are restaged in relations to capital where separation of subject from object, and control and independence from the desired object once more become problematic. Thomas Weiskel and Barbara Freeman have both argued for the importance of such a pre-Oedipal maternal relation as blueprints for the experience of the sublime. (Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*; Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* [Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1995].) This would further go to support Brown's own identification of the relationship between the aesthetic of the sublime and the figures of torrents and oceans which animate the fantasies of colonial power of the period, with all their reversibility as images of expanding imperial economic and naval might, but also of the threatening force of the sea and of the unleashed forces of modernity. (Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 84-7.)

98 *Simulacra* and *Phantasmagoria* are tightly bound up terms. The notion of the simulacrum – the copy or image without an original – is currently centrally associated with the work of Jean Baudrillard (See in particular, Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, *Foreign Agents* [New York: Semiotext(e), 1983].) However, the term is a latinised translation of Plato's *phantasma*. In *The Sophist*, Plato distinguishes these from *eikones*, which involve an internal resemblance to a depicted Idea. The Phantasma or simulacrum, on the other hand, is built on an actual dissimilarity – such as in the case of a statue which, rather than being a proper copy of the original, is made to resemble only its appearance, when its head is made larger-than-life-size in order to look correct when viewed from below. Here, it is appearance, rather than truth which is copied. This distinction is used to distinguish the arguments of a sophist from those of philosophy proper, since the latter aims at truth whereas the former does not. Plato, *The Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Project Gutenberg etext, 1999, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/soph10.txt>> visited 10 May 2008.

the vertical relation of the signifier to its proper signification in the realm of Ideas which is the guarantee of truth and order, and which constitutes his notion of the sublime. This sublime involves the evocation of lofty thoughts in an appropriate style of writing.⁹⁹ It establishes the link between our world of shifting appearance and the sublime world of Forms above. Since Augustan sublimity lies in this vertical relation and the eternal orders, hierarchies, values and truths which arise from it – the very possibility of Form itself – it is the abdication of this relation that sets the cultural products of capitalism against the sublime, making them instead a matter of “bathos” – not just in the sense of the ridiculous, but with all the ethical, social, political, epistemological and ontological charge Pope intends.¹⁰⁰

The Paradox of Sublime Dulness

My exposition of Pope’s *Dunciad*, in returning to the Augustan sublime’s opposition to bathos and dulness, has come full circle. But in coming back, we are posed anew with a paradox. The properties of Pope’s vision of dulness – its formlessness and dissolution of boundaries, its restive, destructive, apocalyptic energy, its overwhelming might, its tendency to totalisation, even its darkness and obscurity and its association with the visionary, the irrational, and the spectres of the supernatural – are consistently those which, over the next half century, become increasingly associated with the sublime itself.

In Edmund Burke’s essay on the sublime the reversal of all these tropes of Pope’s dulness into the characteristics of the sublime object or experience is complete. Burke’s essay mixes up the usual *loci* of the sublime (the Bible, Homer and Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton, and the experience of the natural world) with examples of heightened emotion and aesthetic effect from a whole landscape of urban culture and entertainment which echoes precisely the imagery of the fallen world of Pope’s poem. His urban iconography matches what Pope ridicules under dulness so closely that if Burke’s essay had been written first, the conclusion that it was the explicit target of the attack would be irresistible.¹⁰¹ Had Pope lived another fifteen years, I can well imagine him

⁹⁹ Pope’s project is summed up in a couplet by Bezaell Morris praising his *Essay on Man*: “Thy Muse, sublime, significant, and clear, / Alike informs the soul, and charms the ear.” Pope himself cites these amongst his collection of the various criticisms of his work included with the four-book *Dunciad*.

¹⁰⁰ In his envisioning of commodity culture as having “sunk” onto such a horizontal axis, Pope (though he values the terms in a reverse manner), anticipates Bataille’s proposition of just such a set of vertical and horizontal axes, counterposing the Ideal as the perpendicular to the material, the latter being that of a “base materialism” which he figures in just the terms of Pope’s bathos and dulness: “a spider or spit” – the formless, dirt, insect life, and bodily excrescence.

¹⁰¹ Fireworks displays, enthusiastic street preachers and low Grub Street productions of print culture such as ballad sheets or “little popular poems”, the theatre and public executions,

rewriting the *Dunciad*, with Cibber replaced by Burke as its final Duncer (a jumped-up Whig career-politician with aspirations in cultural criticism and aesthetic theory).¹⁰² Burke's essay is an extreme form of the rooting of art in affect rather than form which DeJean, we have seen, associates with the new commercial literature, and which for Pope subjects culture to the terminal and simualcral logic of dulness. Indeed, Burke largely abandons the verticality of the relation to the Idea in the Neoclassical sublime, concentrating instead on the immanent intensity of the "strongest emotion that the mind can feel."¹⁰³ He focuses on mechanistic "effects" and the apparatuses which produce them, an approach all too conducive to commercialised culture's formulaic and calculated production of affect and emotion. The Lockean empiricism of the *Enquiry* – its argument, as Burke puts it, "grounded on the basis of sure experience"¹⁰⁴ – roots aesthetic experience in physiology and psychology, arguing from direct observation and self-reflection rather than on the basis of ancient authority. This situates him squarely in what would have been the camp of the Moderns (although the truce-lines of the *querelle* had long been drawn up by the 1750s). Burke's close engagement with the medical theories of the time¹⁰⁵ develops the application of professionalised scientific knowledge to culture in a manner deeply inimical to Pope, who was already taking aim at Sir Richard Blackmore as a Doctor-poet¹⁰⁶ and at contemporary attempts to elucidate

tourism and even shouting mobs figure in Burke's exposition of nature and causes of the sublime. For Fireworks displays see Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 2, Section 13 ("Magnificence"), 119-20. Enthusiastic street preachers Grub Street productions are raised in Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 2, Sect. 4 ("The Same Subject Continued"), 104-7. Here Burke notes the extent to which the "passions" of the sublime are roused by "a fanatic preacher, or by the ballads of Chevy-chase, or the Children in the Wood, and by other little popular poems and tales that are current." The theatre and public executions and tourism are discussed in Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 15, ("On the Effects of Tragedy"), 93-4. The mobs are mentioned in Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 2, Sect. 17 ("Sound and Loudness"), 123.

102 In fact, Burke would indeed frequently be an object of satire for his interest in the aesthetic. In a long political career, he would, to the very end, be identified in caricatures with a speech bubble including the words "sublime and beautiful" (along often with a "begorrah" or some other phrase to denote his Irish origins). See Nicholas K Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

103 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 7 ("Of the Sublime"), 86.

104 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 19 ("The Conclusion"), 98-100.

105 Sarafianos, "Medical Gymnastics," 58-83.

106 Blackmore is the poet, above all others, whom Pope's *Peri Bathous* attacks (see below, pp.218-221). Blackmore's central income was as a physician; it was reputed he wrote much of his poetry in cabs between appointments. But even in the time of Blackmore, the relation between culture and scientific or medical knowledge was not uncontested, and as well as his forays into epic poetry, Blackmore engaged himself in just these debates. There was at the very turn of the eighteenth century a minor intellectual skirmish between the "physicians" and the "apothecaries" centred on Garth's *The Dispensary* (London, 1699), which revolved around class and set up lines between aristocratic and bourgeois medicine. Blackmore pitched in to the debate in his *Satyr on Wit* (London, 1700), which bemoaned the amateurish interventions of "Wits" in what should be a professionalising discipline, characterising wit as a sort of madness

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Fig. 47: The urban sublime? Hand-coloured engraving (dimensions and authorship unknown) commemorating a fireworks display put on by the Duke of Richmond in Whitehall, 1749 for the benefit of George II to celebrate the end of the War of Austrian Succession. This was the occasion for which Handel composed the *Music for Royal Fireworks*. Source: Wikimedia Commons <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:RoyalFireworks.jpg>>

literature through medical and psychological theories.¹⁰⁷ But Pope's satire is prophetic only because Burke's essay emerges from precisely the cultural nexus that Pope ridicules. Tom Furniss has argued that Burke's essay provides a "'revolutionary' aesthetic designed to establish the authenticity and authority of a middle-class ethos"¹⁰⁸ – an "aesthetic ideology" for just the professional class whose rise on the literary and intellectual scene Pope blames for the destruction of cultural and moral value. Furniss argues that the muscularity, antagonism, ambition and active striving involved in the Burkean sublime constitute an ethical valorisation of labour as healthily masculine, in contrast to a feminised "aristocratic" repose associated with the beautiful.¹⁰⁹

In this confluence of the Burkean sublime and Pope's fallen world, what ought to be opposites – sublimity and dulness or bathos – fold back onto each other. James Noggle has argued that Pope's "raptur'd vision" of Dulness constitutes a "depiction of the sublime," even if Pope does not himself term it such.¹¹⁰ For Noggle, this "sublime" which Pope depicts under the guise of Dulness is constituted by the new epistemological and aesthetic conditions of intellectual modernity. Drawing on Cavell's account of scepticism as constituent of properly "modern" thought since Descartes, he argues that the "pervasive climate of intellectual doubt"¹¹¹ developing in the eighteenth century produced a "simultaneously aesthetic and cognitive" rupture, "marking the limits of

circulating in culture which, whilst harmless in its own terms, became dangerous when it staked claims to authority in "serious" matters such as science or religion, which should be left to professionals. See Solomon, *Blackmore*, 65-70.

107 The third chapter of *Peri Bathous* is entitled "The Necessity of the Bathos, Physically Considered," and serves as a parody of the many short pieces produced by Blackmore on a range of medical topics. It proposes bad writing as a therapeutic activity, treating poetry as a "natural or morbid Secretion from the Brain" which needs purgation. Pope, "Peri Bathous," 392-3.

108 Furniss, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 1.

109 The general lineaments of Furniss's argument are also lent much credence by Aris Sarafianos's essay, "Pain, Labour and Medical Gymnastics," which examines in detail the relation of Burke's treatise to the discourses of medicine and health of the day, and emphasises the role of "labour" and "exercise" – much against the mores of politeness and fashion – as necessary for both a healthy body and polity. For Sarafianos, though, the logic of Burke's theory thus goes even beyond the opposition of the rising mercantile class with their aristocratic superiors, and starts to valorise the common labour of the poor and the working classes. In either case, we cannot imagine Pope embracing the idea of literature as labour. See Sarafianos, "Medical Gymnastics," 58-83.

110 Noggle, "Skepticism and the Sublime," 23. He goes on to argue that Pope draws consistently for his effects on the aesthetic of the sublime as it was emerging as a canonically constituted category associated with a set of poets such as Homer, Milton and Shakespeare. For Noggle, "The sublime aesthetically dominates the poem as a whole" (31). But Noggle leaves us uncertain: is Pope bemoaning this new aesthetic, parodying it and attacking it; or is Pope in fact interested in producing a form of sublime transport himself? Emrys Jones is also a little perplexed, noting the "disconcertingly absolute sublimity" of the final passages of the *Dunciad*. Emrys Jones, "Pope and Dulness," *Pope: Recent Essays by Several Hands*, eds. Maynard Mack and James A. Winn (Brighton: Harvester, 1908), 646-7.

111 Noggle, "Skepticism and the Sublime," 22.

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Fig. 48: William Dent, *The Raree Show*, Pub. 25 Feb 1788, W. Moore and W. Dickie. Collection of Andrew Edmunds, London. Image from Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*, 100. Burke himself is depicted on the platform, sounding a trumpet labelled “sublime.” Together with fellow Whig politicians, he stands under a banner entitled “The Oratorical Tragedy: The Power of the Pathetic over the Beautiful.” On the banner, Burke is shown again, moving an overly-refined audience to tears with his rhetoric – presumably his denunciations of Warren Hastings’s crimes in India. Supposedly sublime political rhetoric is reduced here to the status of a commercial side-show.

our capacity to experience and to know” which is soon to become (and is starting already in Pope’s day to become) registered in ideas and experiences of sublimity.¹¹² The procedures of Cartesian sceptical reason, though intended as tools to establish a radically certain ground of knowledge, ultimately introduce further doubts, which threaten to undermine the establishment of any system at all.¹¹³ Scepticism ultimately precipitates humanity into a contingent, senseless and obscure Universe, robbing us of all “function and purpose”¹¹⁴ (traditional or otherwise), and leads to the cognitive breakdown of the sublime. This, at least, is Noggle’s argument why Pope’s dulness equates with what we come to recognise as sublimity.¹¹⁵

I would like to think the matter slightly differently. Noggle’s account is itself rather Idealist, grounding the experience the poem registers in forms of thought, rather than material conditions.¹¹⁶ My own explication of the poem thus far would, instead, bring capital and the commodity back into the foreground. We have already seen Lyotard attribute scepticism a role in the avant-garde sublime.¹¹⁷ But Lyotard further associates the disruptive energies of scepticism with those of capital. The anti-teleological orientation of the thought Noggle describes, and its erosion of the transcendent grounds of all fixed or absolute truths, institutions, or orders is profoundly in harmony with the simulacral workings of capital and the commodity form, as I have described them here.

Looking at Pope’s essay and poem – which, between them, yoke together the *Dunciad’s* vision of what will, by the mid eighteenth century, be recognised squarely in the figure of the sublime with *Peri Bathous’s* satire of its productive

112 Noggle, “Skepticism and the Sublime,” 31.

113 Noggle, discussing Stanley Cavell’s ideas in *Must We Mean what We Say?* (Oxford, 1968) and *The Claim of Reason*, (Oxford, 1979) in “Skepticism and the Sublime,” 23. The corrosive force of Cartesian doubt is echoed in particular, Noggle argues, in Pope’s Clerk in Book 4 of the *Dunciad*, whose “pious hope” of a rational theistic explanation of religion only precipitates him into the darkness of atheism. (Pope, *Dunciad* 4.59-92.) Worse, claims Noggle, once started the process is as “irresistible” as it is “intolerable,” since the critical attack on scepticism proceeds only through scepticism itself; it becomes an intellectual condition rather than just a dialectic procedure. See also Noggle’s discussion of Richard Pokin’s argument that Montaigne’s resurrection of Pyrrhonic reason is what precipitates a modern intellectual condition which must either refute or learn to live with absolute doubt (29).

114 Noggle (29) defines scepticism in these terms, the phrase being borrowed from Williams’s *Pope’s Dunciad: A Study*, 130.

115 For Noggle, this also explains the ambivalence of Pope’s poem: to attack scepticism is only to duplicate its logic of negation, and so Pope’s poem is inevitably caught up in a Universe of sceptical reason which it cannot escape.

116 Furthermore, though it may give a plausible answer for why it is that Pope’s poem finds Dulness’s triumph inevitable – and why, in effect, the poem itself is marked by the cognitive difficulty whose aesthetic expression we recognise in the sublime – I’m not so sure it explains the high relish in dulness which the poem, in spite of itself, presents.

117 See pp. 110-111, above for my discussion of this.

logic in terms precisely of Longinus himself – adds weight to my arguments in previous chapters about the relationship between capital and sublimity, and the hypothesis that it is above all capital itself which is the unrepresentable object at the heart of the sublime. The sublime works in harmony with the new representational logics on which capitalist economics is based, addresses itself to the phantasmagorically constituted modern subject of capital and commodity consumption, and pictures that subject's world, in all its cognitive breakdown and metaphysical unrootedness.

Pope's Ambivalence

The confluence of Pope's vision of bathos and the sublime is further complicated by what is not merely a hostility but a profound ambivalence towards capitalism and dulness. Many writers have noted that in spite of the overt stance Pope takes against the culture of dulness – taken, that is, at the level of the *énoncé*, the level at which I have been largely describing the poem here – his excessive fascination with dulness unsettles his ostensible opposition to it.¹¹⁸ For such critics what is most compelling in Pope's poetry is not his wise stance against cultural degradation, but the vibrancy that he borrows from the very culture he attacks. Pope lets such an energy animate the poem. At the level of the *énonciation*, the *Dunciad* carries out a formal mimesis of the world which it critiques, serving not to oppose but to duplicate its logic: it is hard to imagine anything more mad, formless, phantasmagorical, accumulatory, scatological, or packed with wild juxtapositions or shifting illusions than this poem.¹¹⁹ Pope revels in and loves his Dunces.¹²⁰ Dulness itself takes on the force of the Longinian sublime, carrying Pope off entirely and in spite of himself into ravished ecstasies of transport. This transport finds its surrogate within

118 Laura Brown, for example, sees the poem as drawing its "vitality, inventiveness and descriptive exuberance" from just this source. (Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 146.) See also Tony Tanner, "Reason and the Grotesque: Pope's *Dunciad*," *Critical Quarterly* 7 (1965): 145-60; Howard Erskine-Hill, "The 'New World' of Pope's *Dunciad*," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 6 (1962): 49-67. See also the footnotes immediately below.

119 Colin Nicholson argues that Pope's *Dunciad* itself "falls prey to the forces of Dulness," taking the form of a "Mob of Metaphors" in which "Tragedy and Comedy embrace" in the "madness of the mazy dance." (Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 198.)

120 Jones, "Pope and Dulness," 612-51. Rather than thinking it simply a satire on the times, Jones finds the essay "infused with a powerful sense of gratification and indulgence" (616) and argues that "What Pope as a deliberate satirist rejects as dully lifeless his imagination communicates as obscurely energetic" (622). He makes the argument that the games in Book 2 mark a kind of regression to infancy which Pope looks on not just with the disgust of the Augustan adult, but also with a sense of "primitive liberation" (639). This recognition of Pope's paradoxical revel in the world of Dulness goes back as far as Johnson's remark that Pope seems to take "unnatural delight" in the *Dunciad* in "ideas physically impure." (Samuel Johnson, "Lives of the English Poets: Prior, Congreve, Blackmore, Pope," ed. February 2004, etext, Project Gutenberg, Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lvpc10h.htm>>, 8 January 2008.)

the poem in its narrator, who finally submits to the all-powerful Goddess Dulness, only meekly asking leave for a brief reprieve from sleep to sing the final triumph of her dominion.¹²¹ It is this “transporting” energy of eighteenth-century commercial culture which also carries us off, as modern readers.

Thus Pope’s poem registers not just unease about the effects of capital on culture, but also its exhilaration. Pope’s “satire” is powerful not because of its “critique,” but as a poetic expression of lived contradiction. Pope is a subject of this system just like his dunces, as is clear from his biography: Pope’s pose as arch-protector of the values of Neoclassicism is undercut by his status as a “projector” in the field of literary publishing, a canny speculator who made his fortune not through the old system of patronage, but through the production of commodities for the literary marketplace.¹²²

Given this ambivalence, Pope’s device of the list,¹²³ looks less the critique of the deadening reification of commodification which Laura Brown finds in it than a device which reiterates the ecstatic form of the pleasure of the commodity. This is the pleasure, too, of the “modern” subject of the sublime’s investment in phantasmagorical surplus. The list, like capital, accumulates, and is not rooted in a transcendent or stabilising referent, but in the displacement of terms along its immanent axis.

The Dunces’ Sublime

As an aesthetic object, Pope’s poem asks to be read in terms of its expression of this ambivalence and the dissonance between its ostensible *énoncé* and its mode of *énonciation*. However, Pope’s poem can also be read as a piece of evidence that a Longinian poetics was already being disseminated in the forms of capitalist cultural production Pope attacks. This helps explain Pope’s choice of Longinus as his satirical tool in *Peri Bathous*. If dulness is a deliberate parody of the commercialised “sublimity” already indulged by the “Grub Street race,”

121 Pope writes elsewhere in the *Dunciad* of “weak rebels” against Dulness who “more advance her cause.” (4.86) In his acquiescence to the logic of capital, perhaps he himself is to be counted amongst them.

122 Pope’s innovations in the book trade, which involved both the printed form of the book itself, and also the economic forms of its business practice, are documented in Foxon, *Pope*. Pope can, however, claim a certain consistency in his attack on the literary Dunces: what Pope managed to break away from was their status as paid “hack” employees, a literary proletariat at the mercy of the booksellers. Pope was proud of his independence; but this was gained not in the form of an aristocratic distance from the marketplace, as he claims, but by becoming a sort of literary stock-jobber, very much the bourgeois self-made man that Pope so much despises in his poetry. As such, the “autonomy” of Pope’s poetry can only be that of the cultural commodity itself, and must thus remain bound to the heteronomy of the market.

123 I have discussed the device of the list on pp.201-202, above. I have discussed this listing echoed in Wordsworth’s poetry on pp.164-165, and later, on pp.290-292, I will return to the issue in thinking about the structure of Hirst’s cabinets, in relation to Emile Zola’s depictions of shop-windows in Les Halles.

then when Pope leans ironically on a terminology we recognise as Longinian (“rapture,”¹²⁴ “enthusiasm,”¹²⁵ “transport,”¹²⁶ “ecstatic,”¹²⁷ “boundless,”¹²⁸ “o’erflow,”¹²⁹ and so on), not only is he mocking their pretensions to grandeur, seriousness, and high passion, but their embrace of Longinus as a means to achieve this. The notion of the sublime is contested ground, and Pope’s essay and poem stake a claim, attacking rival assertions of its meaning and usefulness.

In histories of the sublime, this uptake of Longinus into the commercial realm in the early eighteenth century has tended to receive little attention, first because it runs counter to prevailing accounts of the high-cultural sublime that increasingly attempted to separate itself from commoditised culture. It also, however, escapes detection because such a use of Longinus within commercial culture is less “theorised” in documented form than the “high” sublime, which is elucidated in many tracts of the kind which remains the bread and butter of literary scholars. But how might Longinus and the sublime have circulated in everyday discussions in coffee houses and clubs? How might ideas and terminologies have worked their way into attitudes and “ways of doing” within the exploding commercial culture of print?¹³⁰ We can not expect to find direct written theoretical expression of these general shifts in attitude, in the same way that we find written tracts of high theory; we are dealing with something already much more like an “oral” culture, and with “assumed,” often half-digested ideas and practices that never become formulated in writing. My argument thus necessarily involves a degree of speculation. Nonetheless, there is much secondary evidence of the place of Longinus in such an “oral culture” of the literary marketplace at this time: satirical uses of the notion of the sublime such as Pope’s aim at just such a common, under-developed, usage of the

124 Pope, *Dunciad*, 3.5, 4.488.

125 Pope, *Dunciad*, 2.255.

126 Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.111, 3.300, 4.74.

127 Pope, *Dunciad*, 4.33.

128 Pope, *Dunciad*, 3.68.

129 Pope, *Dunciad*, 3.5.

130 I’m interested in a “vulgar Longinianism,” just as in order to make sense of the kind of understanding of the act of seeing which informed or animated Chardin’s still lives, Michael Baxandall turns not to the optics of Newton and Locke, but to the “vulgar Lockeanism” of secondary tracts, which seem to point more to how these tracts were taken up into the body of assumptions – the background understanding – which circulated in Chardin’s milieu, “embedded [...] in eighteenth century behaviour.” Baxandall writes: “Certainly, there was no need for Chardin to *read* Locke: the culture was Lockean. It is we, outside, who need Locke, as a means of getting some sense of the pattern of the eighteenth-century mind” (103). See Baxandall, *Patrons of Intention*, 74-104.

term,¹³¹ and more elaborated theories of the sublime set themselves implicitly in opposition to everyday uses.

Traces of this kind of use and consciousness of Longinus are hinted at, for example, in James Ralph's *The Touchstone*, (published the same year as *Peri Bathous*). He describes the University education of the day, where students:

[...] grow familiar with the Title-Pages of Antient and modern Authors, and will talk of *Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Scaliger, Rapin, Bossu, Dacier*, as freely as if bosom Acquaintance. Their mouths are fill'd with the [...] true Sublime, Bombast, Simplicity, Magnificence, and all the critical Jargon, which is learn'd in a quarter of an Hour, and serves to talk of one's whole Life after.¹³²

Certainly, within the works of several of the authors whom Pope attacks, Longinus was playing an increasing role. Leonard Welsted, for example, is a target in both the *Dunciad* and *Peri Bathous*.¹³³ He had produced a translation of Longinus in 1712, which contributed to building the canon of a modern English literature to rival that of the ancients, with a system of notes on the text giving examples from modern poets, in particular Shakespeare, as illustrations of Longinus's points.¹³⁴

131 Examples of such mocking use are listed by Monk, *The Sublime*, 22-4. Theodore Wood also lists many such ironical uses in *The Word 'Sublime' and Its Context 1650-1760*, (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1972), esp. e.g. 118-9, 148-51.

132 James Ralph, *The Touchstone* (London, 1728), cited in Monk, *The Sublime*, 23. Emphasis Ralph's. It is also attested in Swift's admonishments, in *On Poetry: A Rhapsody*, that the aspiring poet learn the critical cant of the time, in order to carve a place in the critical banter of the coffee-house and the social world of intellectual life – a cant within which, Swift makes clear, Longinus is a central resource:

A forward critic often dupes us
With sham quotations *peri hupsous*:
And if we have not read *Longinus*,
Will magisterially outshine us.
Then, lest with Greek he overrun ye,
Procure the book for love or money [...]

Jonathan Swift, "On Poetry: A Rhapsody [1733]," *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. William Browning (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1910), Project Gutenberg etext, 14 December 2004, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14353/14353-8.txt>> visited 10 January 2008. To the list we might add, although a little later in the century, Johnson's depiction of his character Dick Minim, whom Samuel Monk characterises as an "honest dullard," sitting in a coffee house and pondering contemporary literature: "Sometimes he is sunk in despair, and perceives false delicacy gaining ground, and sometimes brightens his countenance with a gleam of hope and predicts the revival of the true sublime." *Idler*, 61, *Works*, (Oxford 1825), 4:330, cited in Monk, *The Sublime*, 23, note 47.

133 Welsted comes up as a butt of Pope's ridicule in *Dunciad* as a flatterer of patrons in 2.207 and as a drunkard poet in 3.167-72. He is under attack in *Peri Bathous* 400, 407.

134 The *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English* notes that it constituted "a serious piece of work [...], with copious 'application' of Longinus to modern literature, especially Shakespeare a major feature of his rendering". Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins, *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 262. Welsted is also the butt of Swift's parody of the "forward critic" in the passage from *On Poetry* I have cited in note 132, above. The poem goes on: "[...] Procure the book for love or money / Translated

The most prominent and consistently satirised Longinians in Pope's satire, however, are John Dennis and Sir Richard Blackmore. Dennis is a repeated butt of Pope's jokes,¹³⁵ and was ridiculed in the Pope-Swift-Gay comedy *Three Hours After Marriage* in the character of Sir Tremendous Longinus, for his championing of the sublime.¹³⁶ Blackmore – a poet under the sway of Dennis's idea that sublime enthusiasm should be the aim of poetry, and whose project was the establishment of a modern, English and Christian epic poetry – is the central butt of *Peri Bathous*.¹³⁷ Dennis and Blackmore are pivotal in Pope's attacks on modern literature, and in his choice of mock-Longinianism as the tool with which to attack this. However, Blackmore and Dennis do not immediately seem to fit the pattern of Pope's targets, as I have been outlining it here, so further attention to their place within this is necessary. Understanding this also helps understand the procedures of the commercial sublime.

Dennis and Blackmore seem odd targets for Pope to attack so consistently within what I have identified as primarily a polemic against commercialising literature. They do not primarily belong to the Grub Street scene, but in the earlier, altogether more courtly circle of Dryden, active when the world of

from Boileau's translation / and quote quotation from quotation." A footnote explains that it is in fact Welsted's translation which is referenced here. Welsted had claimed his translation was from the original, but, just as Swift mocks him here, in fact it was clearly from Boileau's French version. Welsted's use of the translation to buoy up British literature also serves as a clue as to the use of Longinus as a means to define and celebrate a particularly "British" literary tradition and style, and to define its canon. For more on this, see Kramnick, *Making the English Canon*.

135 Pope, *Dunciad* 1.106, 2.226, 2.239, 3.173; *Peri Bathous* 400, 413, 416, 426, 436-8.

136 Dennis's role as an innovator in the history of the sublime is well-documented and would take us far from our object here, so I shall not expand upon it in the body of the essay. However his importance needs to be noted. Dennis was central in forging the association of the sublime with an aesthetics of terror, and as such was highly influential – either directly or indirectly – on Burke. He is also known as instrumental in the reappraisal of Alpine landscape as sublimely inspiring rather than merely ugly and unpleasant, and the growth of a taste for "sublime" nature. He also championed Milton as a sublime poet in advance of Addison, and proposed a theory of the sublime in poetry which centred on its powers to raise what he termed the "enthusiastic passions." As an individual religious receptivity, the protestant theology of this theory of poetry was deeply inimical to Pope, who was Catholic. Monk outlines Dennis's theories in *The Sublime*, 45-54. A discussion and contextualisation of the notions of enthusiasm in poetry which Dennis uses in his theory of the sublime is delivered at length in Irlam, *Elations*. See also John Morillo, "John Dennis: Enthusiastic Passions, Cultural Memory, and Literary Theory," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.1 (2000): 21-41. For Dennis as champion of Milton, see in particular Leslie E. Moore, *Beautiful Sublime: The Making of Paradise Lost, 1701-1734* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 34-56. For his interest in mountain scenery see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, [1959], Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997). For Dennis's influence on the highly popular landscape poet James Thomson, see Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-27.

137 From Pope's very first textual example of bathos (from Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* – See *Peri Bathous*, 396) Blackmore predominates over all other poets: he is the bathos's "great Author [...] the Father of the *Bathos* and indeed the *Homer* of it" (399). The first chapter alone picks out no less than 14 passages from Blackmore for ridicule, and only two examples by other poets.

letters was less polarised by its increasing professionalisation.¹³⁸ Furthermore, their project for sublime epic poetry can be understood, just like Pope's, as an attempt to reclaim – in religion, nationalism and the heroic – a transcendent ground of poetic value beyond the merely economic determinations of the literary market (though their answer to this fallen modernity, as we shall see, takes a very different form from Pope's).¹³⁹ There are, of course, other reasons why Pope takes Blackmore and Dennis as enemies.¹⁴⁰ However, these two sublimicists are tied to the organising schema I have proposed for Pope's anti-capitalist satire through the particular form of their investment in the notion of the sublime, which is so very different from Pope's. In his introduction to Dennis's *Critical Works*, Edward Niles Hooker suggests that Pope attacked Dennis so vehemently because of the new resonances of Dennis's emphasis on morality, religious feeling, sincerity, pathos and passion with the aims and modes of the new forms of literature of the early eighteenth century, and their appeal to an expanding public of "middling sorts."¹⁴¹ Hooker cites Defoe and Isaac Watts as examples of this tendency; to these can be added Aaron Hill and James Thomson, whose partisanship for the sublime was clearly and directly influenced by Dennis and Blackmore.¹⁴² It can even be argued –

138 Dennis, in fact, went into retirement from London life and wrote very little after the first decade of the century. See Edward Hooker in John Dennis, *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 2:lvi. Blackmore continued writing well into the 1720s, but though his early works were immensely successful, he seems to have received little economic or critical success as the eighteenth century developed. (Solomon, *Blackmore*, 1-90.)

139 See for example, Blackmore's preface to *Prince Arthur* (London, 1695), his *Satyr on Wit* (London, 1700).

140 Both Blackmore and Dennis can be counted amongst the "Moderns" (and are satirised as such already in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*), with Blackmore having defended Bentley's philology, and, as a medical man, taking the position of a committed empiricist who preferred experimental observation to ancient authority. He transferred this into his poetic theory in his "Essay Upon Epick Poetry" (1716) which went as far as to suggest that reasoning empiricism could replace a deference to Aristotle and "the rules." (See Solomon, *Blackmore*, 85.) Both Dennis and Blackmore are furthermore implicitly "Moderns" in their production of proposals to reform modern writing, and their shared aim of introducing Christian themes into modern poetry, against the proscriptions of Boileau. (Solomon, *Blackmore*, 34.) The "enthusiastic" Christianity they espoused, and the poetic theory that came from this, regarding poetry as a religious form of inspiration, also sets them against Pope's Catholicism. Furthermore, both Blackmore and Dennis were passionate Whigs. (See Hooker in Dennis, *Critical Works*, 2:xxxix; Solomon, *Blackmore*, 76.) Given this range of dislikes, it may even be problematic of me to want to project onto Pope's poem a consistency and thematic unity in his attacks in these writings, which, after all, take a rather "scattershot" form, and come out of a whole series of commitments and controversies within which he was engaged. However, the very number of these differences speaks of a consistency in the ways that Blackmore, for instance, is lined up in opposition to Pope, which in turn suggests a structural opposition, rather than a series of contingent disagreements.

141 Dennis, *Critical Works*, 2:xxiii-xxiv.

142 For more on Thomson, see pp.356-364 later in this dissertation. For Hill, who was as much a prolific "projector" as a critic, poet and dramatist – a kind of deadly earnest version of Colley Cibber – see Christine Gerard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector, 1685-1750* (Oxford: Oxford

though I do not want to labour the case – that there is a homology between the enthusiastic Protestantism of Dennis’s and Blackmore’s poetics, with its emphasis on individual conscience, and the atomised and privatised modern forms of subjectivity on which capitalism and even consumerism depends, and which was ushered in by the arrival of the new “middling” reading public as a force in political, social and aesthetic, as well as religious, life.¹⁴³ Dennis’s and Blackmore’s sublime thus finds its place in the project of literature in sensibility rather than “the rules” which DeJean associates with the growth of a proto-middle-class, commercially produced literature. Such literature, for Pope, based as it is on sensation rather than Form, is fundamentally subject to appropriation by the phantasmatic logic of the culture industry and its restless but infertile productivity.

Pope’s identification of a synergy between Dennis and Blackmore’s sublime and the machinations of the Grub Street Race is most vividly envisioned in Book 2 of the *Dunciad*, in Pope’s description of the competition in the production of noise, in which both Dennis and Blackmore are prominent competitors.¹⁴⁴ For Pope such “noise” is simulacral – the sound and fury of signification without a signified. He opens the competition with a description of innovations in sound effects in the theatre, equating the literary efforts of the competitors with extra-literary, ersatz-effects that seek to substitute literary quality with mechanical tricks to win the applause of an ill-educated audience:

To move, to raise, to ravish every heart,
 With Shakspeare’s nature, or with Jonson’s art,
 Let others aim: ‘tis yours to shake the soul
 With thunder rumbling from the mustard bowl,
 With horns and trumpets now to madness swell,
 Now sink in sorrows with a tolling bell;
 Such happy arts attention can command,
 When fancy flags, and sense is at a stand. (2.223-230)

Here, on the modern stage, intense affect and pathos are at stake, and these are discussed in terms of the vocabulary that had accrued around the translations of Longinus in the works of his champions such as Dennis (“to move,” “raise,” “ravish,” “shake the soul,” “sink in sorrows”). But it is crude mechanical effects (fake thunder, church-bells, trumpets), rather than artistry or genius, or for that matter properly literary means at all, which are set up to produce these affects.

University Press, 2003).

143 I am thinking of Weber’s famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Eagleton’s account of the history of aesthetics in *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, and the modifications of Weber’s thesis on the harmony between the subjectivity of Protestantism and that of capitalist procedures introduced by Colin Campbell, in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism*, which, rather than the austerity of Protestant behaviour as a spur to accumulation, emphasises that introspection also stands at the heart of properly modern forms of consumption.

144 Dennis is mentioned twice in the passage. Blackmore is the final winner of the competition.

Pope's footnote to line 227 spells out the association of mustard-bowl thunder (a wonderful image of the false-Longinian lightning strike of the sublime) with Dennis's innovations in producing of this sound effect.¹⁴⁵ A few lines on Pope further links Dennis's and Blackmore's religious sublime to these stage effects, comparing such noise effects to the hectoring technique of "enthusiastic" preaching.¹⁴⁶

In Chapter 5, I return at further length to the commercial sublime as instantiated in the world of theatre when I discuss Colley Cibber, a character far less associated with the project of the sublime than Dennis or Blackmore. Cibber's literary practice was unashamedly commercial – he often seems concerned with the "serious" only to the extent it is necessary for turning a profit. Nonetheless, I find evidence of the Longinian sublime even here, in Cibber's stagecraft and literary style.

In Pope's description of such stage effects emerges the commercial imperative, impossible and ridiculous though it is, of the mechanical and repeatable production of the affects of the sublime: *hupsos* to order, commanding the flagging fancy of an enervated audience of consumers. The commercial imperative to produce sublimity is the imperative, to borrow Cibber's phrase, to "outdo" one's "outdoings"¹⁴⁷ – a phrase in its very inelegance carrying out a mimesis of capitalist culture's awkwardly hypertrophic tendencies. Such an imperative is, as always with capitalism, animated by contradiction. As my discussion of Lyotard highlighted, commodified culture – at the service of the economic "surplus" of profit with its constant danger of evaporation, and always gambling on discursive excess – is suspended between the need for calculability and the uncontrollable mutability of a remainder on which one can only speculate. This commercial imperative to calculate for the sublime, I have argued, also animates Hirst's "factory" system of art production. Commercialisation is not a contingent occurrence in an otherwise high-cultural history of the sublime, in which an aesthetic "primarily" oppositional to capital

145 Dennis's new technique, which involved a specially manufactured box, had been pioneered in a play which had been a failure. Dennis is reputed to have complained that though his play was scorned and ridiculed, his competitors would be quick to copy his sound effect. The notoriety that the incident must have had at the time is marked by the fact the English language still retains the phrase, "stealing my thunder."

146 Pope, *Dunciad*, 2.255.

147 The phrase is from the Prologue Cibber wrote to his *Provok'd Husband*. In his autobiography Cibber himself laughs at the absurdity of his own style, calling it "A most vile Jingle, I grant it! You may well ask me, How could I possibly commit such Wantonness to Paper?" Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, [1740], Reprinted from the Robert W. Lowe, 1899 ed., 2 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1966), University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998 <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Cib1Apo.html>> 11 Feb 2006, 1:51. This was just the question which the satirists of the day posed. Pope picks it out for attack in *Peri Bathous*, 436.

is later “co-opted” by commerce. Tracing the commercial sublime right back into the milieu in which Longinus was being rediscovered in eighteenth-century thought, I have been arguing for the explanatory power of the intuition that its utility to commercial culture was instrumental in the establishment of the sublime as a critical term. The commercial sublime is a “supplement,” in the Derridean sense of the term, to the high sublime, undermining the very closure of the “whole” which it supplements.¹⁴⁸ The history of the high sublime must be read in dialectic tension with the debased, commercial “supplements” it produces.

Pope and Lyotard: Some Final Words to the Chapter

This chapter has also aimed to take us to a point where we can think about Lyotard’s position in a longer historical context. Lyotard and Pope are ultimately strange bedfellows, and there is, objectively speaking, more that makes their comparison untenable than would recommend it. (The comparison is a conceit to make something visible, not a “proof.”) Lyotard’s anticapitalism is at the polar extreme to the ultra-conservative Pope, who espouses the reconstruction of a fantasied *ancien régime* golden age. The “sublimes” each propose as an opposition to capitalism are also polar opposites. Though each posits a discursive order and temporality that exceeds or transcends that of a capital which for Pope threatens to overtake the old order and which for Lyotard threatens to go on to swallow life itself, the versions of this sublime they propose seem to have little in common. Lyotard’s sublime seeks a disruptive mo(ve)ment of desiring thought, creating an “event” that would exceed that of capital itself, eluding recapture by the mechanisms of capitalisation. It is a force which shatters all order before it, throwing us into a *différend* beyond the rules of any language game. Pope, on the other hand, proposes a sublime which links our phenomenal world to ideal, eternal truth. Rather than shattering the formfulness of discourse, sublime culture is that which gives form itself. Lyotard’s sublime belongs within that tradition of the aesthetic, with its immanence, indeterminacy and reliance on affect, which Pope opposes as a product of a commoditising culture. (Ironically, Lyotard the anticapitalist here appears as the legatee of the aesthetic regime of art whose birth was fostered in the eighteenth-century by capital itself, and of the project of the sublime developed by Pope’s dunces, who otherwise foreshadow the commercially-oriented transavantgarde artists that Lyotard opposes.)

This *différend* between Pope and Lyotard extends to their diagnoses of capitalist culture. For Pope, the problem with capitalism is that it is not Idealist

¹⁴⁸ See Derrida, *Grammatology*, 141-64.

enough: it reverses the proper direction of representation, placing abstraction at the service of the circulations of the material and phenomenal world, replacing iconic resemblance with its simulacral counterpart. Ungrounded from the Idea, Pope's capitalism is dangerously irrational. For Lyotard the opposite is the case: the capitalism he opposes is too abstract, and serves to imprison the materiality of thought and desire within the iron cage of its abstract structures and logical operations of exchange.

But Lyotard's and Pope's visions of capital nonetheless share much, both belonging to a longer tradition of its representations, within which the history of the sublime is one sub-story. Both see capital as a totalising, homogenising and entropic force, and narrate their critiques of it in the form of apocalyptic fantasy. They share a vision of a "temporality" of capital. Lyotard sets the "now" of the event of the sublime against a temporality of the pseudo-eventive novelty of the "new" in capitalist exchange. Pope offers a similar representation of the pseudo-newness of the commodity. The 1742 *Dunciad* was titled the *New Dunciad*, ironically mocking the mania for the new in publishing.¹⁴⁹ Throughout, Pope is concerned with the "novelties" of the literary marketplace, and just as in Lyotard's text, "new" is an insistent term. For Pope, just as for Lyotard, the new is never in fact new: the "new-born nonsense" (1.60) of the dunces serves only to precipitate a return to the primal ooze of time before time, where the "new" is really only the newly-repeated. Dulness's "momentary monsters" (1.83) of the literary market are evanescent, leading only to the contradictory non-time of the "past, vamp'd, future, old, revived, new piece" (1.284).

The leftist and traditionalist critiques of capitalism coincide, revealing a double valence carried in the notion of the sublime, and marking a certain political reversibility.¹⁵⁰ In this history radicalism and traditionalism,

149 See in particular Pope, *Dunciad* 4.126, where the term "new" is associated with editions of the classics, updated according to the latest scholarly findings.

150 Could a lineage of transmission be drawn up between Pope and Lyotard? Such is not my task here. It would, however, undoubtedly pass through Matthew Arnold's reforming project, redolent as it is with Pope's Scriblerian injunction from *Peri Bathous*, that society be forced to "relish the sublime," and the Greenbergian modernism that draws so much from the Leavisite "culture and value" discourse which grew from Arnold's writings. Greenberg's "Avant-garde and Kitsch" sets the ground for Lyotard's "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," the title of Greenberg's essay echoing in Lyotard's. The territory on which the latter's argument, furthermore, is fought is just that which Greenberg defined: it centres on one of Greenberg's stable of artists (Newman), setting about broadening Greenberg's canon; it concerns itself with the relationship between kitschy capitalist culture and the vanguard art which opposes it; it reiterates a formalism; and it attacks the art which moved away from Greenberg's "modernist" position, replacing it with an eclectic "postmodernism." Greenberg's later and more politically conservative writings insistently pick up Pope's horror of "modernisms" and play them in terms which predict Lyotard's opposition of the new and the now. (It is Swift, in fact, in a letter to Pope of 23 July 1737, who makes the earliest cited usage of the term "modernism" that the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces, and it is in just this pejorative sense, deploring "The corruption of English verse by those Scribblers, who send us over their trash [...] with abominable curtailings and quaint modernisms." Pope, *Works*, 9:218, 1757 ed., cited in "Modernism," *O.E.D.*,

progression and regression, sublimity and bathos are involved in a dizzying set of reversals, marking a bipolarity in the sublime, which is discursively located at a point of utmost instability between socialist and conservative critiques of capitalism.¹⁵¹ Pope and Lyotard are not so much equivalents as mirror opposites within the logic of this unfolding history; as mirror images, they share a topology, inverted as it may be by the plane of reflection.

Pope and Lyotard, as mirror-opposites, share a propensity whereby the sublime and its antonyms collapse back into each other; they do not entirely manage to separate the good object of the sublime from bad object of capitalist culture. We have seen this in Lyotard's auto-deconstruction of its own position; we have also seen this in Pope, though the reversal in the latter is less a matter of the internal contradictions of an argument than the disjunction between an *énoncé* and its *énonciation*. Each author demands that culture give us "more" than the economic value served up by capitalism; yet this "more" itself involves the rationale of "surplus" on which capital itself works (it is the dash of the second *M* in the accumulative chain of transaction M-C-M').¹⁵² The two writers understand this "more" in opposing terms: for one it is the transcendent Ideal, for the other, a plunge into immanent materiality itself. But each proposes a vector which would leap outside capitalism's yoking-together of abstraction and materiality. Such a yoking-together of the material and abstract marks capital and the commodity form, and poses a structuring binary of modern thought. But the desire of either materialism or idealism to propose one of these poles as self-sufficient and primary puts into play the very economy of representation which activates the supplementarity of lack and surplus, which is that of capital (along with modern reason), itself.

2nd. ed., 1989.) In his 1967 essay "Recentness of Sculpture," Greenberg opposes the true, eternal, "aesthetic surprise" of great art (Raphael and Pollock) to the "superfluous" and momentary "phenomenal" surprise of what, rather than kitsch, he terms in this late work "Novelty art." *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4:254. This Novelty art is, he emphasises, market-led: "with Novelty art sales decide things." ("Interview Conducted by Edward Lucie-Smith," in *Collected Essays*, 4:281.). We are precisely on the ground of Lyotard's opposition of the New and the Now.

151 See also Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 26. Eagleton notes the instability of the aesthetic itself, with both radical and conservative formulations of both aestheticism and rationalism.

152 I refer here to Marx's mnemonic for capitalist exchange. "M" stands for money; "C" for commodity. The "dash" on the second "M" marks the growth in value accruing between the money invested in the commodity and that which returns on its sale. Such a chain, associated with capital accumulation, is contrasted with the non-accumulatory transaction C-M-C where a commodity is exchanged for money, allowing the purchase of a different commodity.

Chapter 5

Damien Hirst and Colley Cibber

“The theatrical shopkeeper puts on the aristocratic periwig of Sir Novelty Fashion because it is good for a laugh – but also because, as a bourgeois individual, he has no way of displaying himself that is not.”

— Michael Glover (on Colley Cibber)¹

In this chapter I turn to look more directly at the commercialised form of artistic production which Pope attacks. The central character of the chapter will be the King Duncie of Pope’s *Dunciad*, Colley Cibber.² If the fantasy in Pope’s *Peri Bathous* of an industrialised production of culture reminds us today of Hirst, it is with Cibber that Pope himself associated such a mode.³ Cibber was very much the apotheosis of the commercialised culture of the time and one

¹ Brian Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity in Colley Cibber’s *Apology*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22.3 (2002): 537. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/studies_in_english_literature/v042/42.3glover.html> visited 20/02/06.

² Cibber was in fact not the original Duncie of the poem. (There is a certain irony in the fact that Pope needs to keep updating (modernising) his attack on the modern.) Pope originally cast the Shakespearian scholar Lewis Theobald in this role, and it was only in later versions he shifts his attack to Cibber. I discuss the reasons for his enmity with Theobald, and the significance of his change in target in note 15 of Chapter 4, p.179. My analysis is that this is a matter of the changing nature of Pope’s brush with modernity, with Cibber standing for a “commercial” rather than an “intellectual” modernity. Other writers have understood Cibber’s centrality to Pope’s book in merely personal terms, as part of a developing feud between two individuals. (For such an account, see Leonard R. N. Ashley, *Colley Cibber* [Boston: Twayne Publications, 1989], 108.) Indeed eighteenth-century controversies often seem to have as much to do with clashes of personality, real or imagined slights, or the rivalry for alliances with influential figures as anything more substantial. Nonetheless, Cibber, as we shall see, was everything most inimical to Pope. His position within the *Dunciad* is so consistent with the poem’s aims and themes that this can not be just a matter of the contingency of personal relationships. For his part, Cibber seems to have, for quite some time, taken Pope’s goading with enormous good humour. Long before the *Dunciad*, Pope had fired off a number of small shots at Cibber. If there is an event, however, which thrust Cibber into the centre of Pope’s firing line, it was when Cibber did in fact respond to Pope, in his *Apology*. This seems at first glance a rather mild response: “When I therefore find my Name at length in the Satyrical Works of our most celebrated living Author, I never look upon those Lines as Malice meant to me, (for he knows I never provok’d it) but Profit to himself: One of his Points must be, to have many Readers: He considers that my Face and Name are more known than those of many thousands of more consequence in the Kingdom: That therefore, right or wrong, a Lick at the Laureat will always be a sure Bait, *ad captandum vulgus*, to catch him little Readers: And that to gratify the Unlearned, by now and then interspersing those merry Sacrifices of an old Acquaintance to their Taste, is a piece of quite right Poetical Craft.” (Cibber, *Apology*, 1.35-6.) However, Cibber’s riposte in fact hits Pope right where it hurts: in his claim to be above the commercial realm. Cibber’s revelation of their shared occupancy of the market, and his claim that this determines Pope’s poetic strategy, is far too close to the bone for Pope the literary entrepreneur. Shortly after this, Pope launched his large-scale offensive against Cibber.

³ As well as being the protagonist of the *Dunciad*, Cibber plays his cameos within *Peri Bathous*. See note 42, p.190.

of its most successful figures. He rose from the ranks of actors to take control of perhaps *the* most important theatrical venue of early-eighteenth-century London, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Under his modernising regime of populist commercial entertainment the theatre flourished.⁴ His controlling position within the London stage made him an influential figure within the wider world of English letters – an influence which can be measured through the very fact that Pope attributes him such a pole position amongst his host of Dunces. Making his fortune from this work, Cibber rose in society to the most elevated circles, even being granted the ultimate kudos of Poet Laureateship – much, of course, to Pope’s horror.⁵

There are striking echoes between Hirst’s and Cibber’s careers, personas and artistic strategies which will allow me here to explore the commercialised sublime they produce, the mode of cultural production this entails, and the subjectivities of such a production. I argue that both Hirst and Cibber are placed in (and self-consciously take up) a position where they put not just their works on the market but also their artistic selves. This analysis involves my shifting from an object-based approach towards questions of subjectivity and signifying process, and it is where my account is most clearly “characterological” in the sense in which I proposed this term in my introduction.⁶ Such an approach is informed by Queer Theory’s conceptions of a performativity lying at the heart of signification, and in particular by the ways that Queer Theory, congruently with Cultural Studies, has understood the manner in which marginalised subjects come to inhabit the dominant discourses which otherwise marginalise them, accessing these through reiterative strategies which provide a “para-sitic” access to the cultural code.⁷ Both Hirst and Cibber negotiate a sublime with

4 For biographical surveys of Cibber’s life, see Ashley, *Colley Cibber*; Helen Koon, *Colley Cibber: A Biography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

5 Cibber’s Laureateship was hardly given on account of his gift for poetry. Rather, it was for his services to Walpole. For the closeness of Cibber to the Walpole administration, whose approval he spent so much of his life courting, see for example, Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance*, 179-84. Nicholson, before discussing how Cibber’s own theory of the management of a theatre was based on Walpole’s state, notes that Cibber and Walpole were so closely linked that to satirise one was generally assumed to satirise the other (179). Drury Lane was as near to being a mouthpiece of the government line as a theatre could have been at the time.

6 See p.63, above.

7 The core work in genealogies of Queer Theory is Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). The works I will be leaning on particularly here are two volumes which deal with the question of “Camp,” and its relation to queer strategies of production: Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999). Meyer’s introduction to his volume will be of particular use. With regard to the position of the queer or marginal subject to the dominant discourse, Meyer argues that these groups are intrinsically denied access to the power to define a culture’s signifying codes. Their only power is to produce new codes by attaching them to the dominant ones, involving in particular the strategy of parody (11).

regard to which they are marked as outsiders. It is through their reiterations of sublime discourse that they negotiate a place in the social world, even if these strategies continue to position them as marginal to their own discourse, ensuring their lapses into bathos.

Comparing Hirst to Cibber does not at first seem a flattering thing to do: Cibber is remembered, thanks to Pope, primarily as a “Dunce” – a bungling, uncreative cultural producer turning out trash for the commercial stage. Yet the comparison is not, first off, intended as a judgment of quality. Furthermore, thinking about Cibber will mean pulling him out from under the weight of Pope’s judgments, which – however influential they remain – are based on Neoclassical principles not generally still embraced today.⁸ The comparison is not used to make a judgment that Hirst *is* a Dunce, but to recognise that contemporary criticism, reiterating Pope’s trope, frequently constructs Hirst as such a figure.⁹ Once we lay aside Pope’s value judgments, Cibber appears a much more intriguing – even attractive – figure, who deserves a degree of

8 Whatever the fate of Pope’s own reputation, he certainly has had a power to define the terms within which his contemporaries were to be understood and judged over the coming centuries. And yet, once we start to lay aside Pope’s Neoclassical terms of reference, we start to recognise the Universe of Grub Street as possessing a peculiar vitality and exuberance – and one on which Pope’s own poem leans. Certainly, this new world does not produce “masterpieces” of form in the Neoclassical sense, but this is not all that culture might or even should do.

9 In satire of Hirst, of course, bathos is the key tool as it was in the Pope’s poetry. His pretensions to sublimity are pricked in cartoons, advertisements and the like through the recognition of the formulaic and commercial nature of the work, and the fact that anything might be substituted within the vitrine or tank of formaldehyde – a decaying government, the vestiges of monarchy, or a plain commodity such as a sandwich, a car, or a trainer, which become ironically elevated to the status of art in the same moment the pretensions of art to transcend the commodity are brought down to earth. In more substantial criticism, Julian Stallabrass attempts to do something of the same thing when, in *High Art Lite*, he satirises the formulaic nature of Hirst’s titles by attempting to come up with some, altogether more ridiculous, alternatives himself. (Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 27.) However, the example of an attack on Hirst which reveals most fully the extent of the Scriblerianism of the pattern to which this criticism conforms is found in a series of responses to Jonathan Jones’s “blog” on the *Guardian* website. Jones – an early supporter of Hirst – wrote, in October 2006 of his disappointment at Hirst’s most recent works. One respondent, “sbsmith,” produced a series of poems in rhyming, Scriblerian couplets – very much a pastiche of Pope – satirising Jones, Hirst and the entire world of contemporary, modern and conceptual art and its institutions of display, collection, and criticism – and extending into an attack on deconstruction. Sbsmith’s poem takes for itself the form of a modern day *Dunciad*, telling the tale of the fall of culture into something very like a state of dulness, in which, in the contemporary art market, all forms of value become illusory. The same cast of pedantic professional academic critics and self-interested hacks comes on to the stage of sbsmith’s poem as we find in the *Dunciad*; the same tropes of the puncturing of pretension, and the same scatological imagery; there is even the same addition of a supporting framework of mock-pedantic footnotes (a long one attacks John Cage); the poem is fixed on the same “Neoclassical” belief in an eternal form of art betrayed by the mirages of modernity as Pope proposed so many years before. Sbsmith’s poem, however, just takes to hyperbolic extent the forms of attack not just on Hirst, but on the larger field of contemporary art – taken as “the Emperor’s New Clothes” – which we find so pervasive across contemporary discourse. See Jonathan Jones, “Fresh out of Ideas: The Problem Is Not Damien Hirst’s Borrowing from Others, but His Own Loss of Originality,” *Guardian* 25 October 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1930623,00.html>> visited 31/10/06.

sympathy and intellectual indulgence. Cibber was, to stretch the point a little, nearly as important in the development of eighteenth-century culture as Pope. Whatever the commercial qualities of his work and however we might judge the “ideological” implications of his innovations, Cibber was foundational in the emergence of several significant forms of modern popular culture. His development of the genre of the “sentimental comedy” stands at the root of the modern “situation comedy” and of other “bourgeois” forms of morally oriented comedy.¹⁰ His best-selling autobiography, with its shockingly novel self-obsession, paved the way for much that was to follow, with its confessional mode still echoed in twenty-first-century forms as diverse as the contemporary art of Tracey Emin, tabloid journalism, and daytime-television chat shows.¹¹ Cibber’s reworking of the stage character of the “fop”, which I will be examining here, was also undoubtedly culturally significant.

Subjectivities of a Commodified Art: Colley Cibber and Damien Hirst

Putting aside, then, the value judgments that Pope and others have made about Cibber, the conceit of bringing him together with Hirst reveals a startling set of similarities. Cibber remains an enlightening precursor for Hirst, both in terms of the dilemmas faced by their forms of artistic production, and also as social characters.¹² Both Cibber and Hirst start off marked as cultural outsiders, with a certain class and educational disadvantage.¹³ Hirst is born the

10 The “sentimental comedy” – a popular and rather middle-brow form of theatrical entertainment, playing to the values, expectations and competences of the expanding audiences of the eighteenth-century stage – took the rather bawdy and amoral comedic forms of the restoration stage, and made them much more acceptable for the growing bourgeois audiences of the time, placing the frisson of transgression within a “moral” framework, where “happy” endings restored the order of decency and family values. In doing this it answered the ideological needs of the growing number, power and status of the ascendant “middling sorts.” For Cibber and the sentimental comedy, see the entry on him in Philip H. Highfill (Jr.), Kalman A. Burnum and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, vol. 3 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975). For more on the transgressive nature of the restoration stage, see for example, James Grantham Turner, “‘Illustrious Depravity’ and the Erotic Sublime,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Journal* 2 (1989): 1-38.

11 Cibber, *Apology*. Brian Glover discusses the shocking novelty of Cibber’s confessional strategy suggesting that “what they [Cibber’s readers] undoubtedly did find odd was Cibber’s display of *himself*.” Glover goes on to note that at the time, “the idea of autobiography was still largely taboo.” Even “Lives” of others written at the time were often likely to contain anything but personal information about the subject of the life, and to write about *oneself* in this way was a display of such sheer egoism that it amounted to a “breach of propriety.” Cibber’s egoism knew no such bounds. Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity,” 525.

12 Such are the similarities, in fact, that when one looks at the two together for too long, one risks being overwhelmed by the uncanny loss of the sensation of the historical difference between the present and the eighteenth century.

13 Hirst’s “E in A-Level art” is part of his mythology. Hirst is rumoured not to have done well in the “academic” side of his art-college studies. Cibber for his part, in his *Apology*, reports his education thus: “I was sent to the Free-School of *Grantham* in *Lincolnshire*, where I staid till I got

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Fig. 49: Giuseppe Grisoni, *Portrait of Colley Cibber as Lord Foppington from Vanbrugh's The Relapse*, c.1700-25. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

illegitimate son of a working-class Irish Catholic from Leeds; Cibber is the son of a foreign sculptor who spent some time imprisoned for debt, a disrepute he compounded by choosing the stage for a career. Both, however, through the development of an unashamedly commercial, middlebrow and populist cultural form, although only perched on the edge of artistic respectability, amass sizeable fortunes, and ascend to the highest echelons of their societies. They both act as much as entrepreneurs and impresarios as they do as “artists.” Hirst becomes known for his curation, as a “mover and shaker,” even before he is famous as an artist, organising the Freeze (1988) and Modern Medicine (1990) exhibitions.¹⁴ He produces pop videos and music, sets up several times as a restaurateur, as a publisher, and as commissioner of other cultural work. He is now almost as prominent an art collector as an artist, with a collection worth an estimated £100 million, and plans to open a museum in which to house and display this. (Appropriately enough, this is in an eighteenth-century, Gothic manor – which speaks volumes about his path of aspiration and its atavistic resuscitation of the early modern.)¹⁵ Under his authorial signature, Hirst runs an art-producing industry with over a hundred employees working in a series of workshops across Southern England. Cibber, for his part, was similarly not just a writer or director, but also a theatrical manager and businessman.

Hirst and Cibber, furthermore, are both canny manipulators of their own larger-than-life public images, as “famous for being famous” as they are for

through it, from the lowest Form to the uppermost. And such Learning as that School could give me is the most I pretend to (which, tho’ I have not utterly forgot, I cannot say I have much improv’d by Study).” Cibber, *Apology*, 1:9.

14 The curatorial dimension to Hirst’s practice did not stop there, however, and carried on alongside his work as an artist. Later, he would curate, for example, *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away...* (1994) at the Serpentine, amongst other shows. Most recently, once again at the Serpentine, he has exhibited a series of highlights from his growing private collection of contemporary art.

15 For more on Hirst’s collection and his manor house, see Arifa Akbar, “Murderme: Hirst’s £100m Art Collection on View,” *Independent* 25 November 2006, <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/this_britain/article2013313.ece> visited 28/11/06; Campbell-Johnston, “Damien Hirst: The Murderme Collection at the Serpentine Gallery,” For Hirst’s purchase of Toddington Manor, see Steven Morris, “Hirst Snaps up Rotting Gothic Manor,” *Guardian* 1 September 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,1560335,00.html>> visited 03/11/05. Cibber’s country home, incidentally, was later bought up by Horace Walpole, and would be transformed into Strawberry Hill, the prototype of eighteenth-century Gothic taste. Images for Hirst’s video for Blur are available in Hirst, *I Want to Spend*, 272-5. (The song, ironically enough given Hirst’s more recent purchase of his own manor, is entitled “Country House”). Hirst was later to produce and perform with Fat Les on their football anthems “Vindaloo” and “Jerusalem.” He has also produced the band The Hours. Hirst’s most famous restaurant business was Pharmacy in Notting Hill, though he had previously been involved in Marco Pierre White’s Quo Vadis. (Details of the feud between the two is given in Calvin Tomkin, “After Shock,” *New Yorker* 20 September 1999, archived online at <<http://dh.ryoshuu.com/press/1999tomki2.html>> visited 11/02/06.) Hirst still runs a more low-key restaurant enterprise, The Quay, in Ilfracombe, reviewed in Tom Hodgkinson, “Table Talk: The Quay,” *Sunday Times* 6 January 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/food_and_drink/article3112596.ece> visited 7/1/8.

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Fig. 50: Upstairs at Damien Hirst's Restaurant, Pharmacy, March 2000. Image from the *Observer*, 19 September 2004, *Observer Magazine*: 22-3.

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Fig. 51: Damien Hirst as fashion supremo. T-shirt part of the exclusive Levi's "Levi's x Damien Hirst x Warhol Factory" line which Hirst designed. Fashion show, Sep 8, 2007, Gagosian Gallery, Chelsea, N.Y. The skull is studded with swarovski crystals. Image from <<http://thegreendove.blogspot.com/2007/09/httpwwwbloggercomimgglinkgifdamien.html>>.

their work itself. Cibber in his own day was as notorious for his extravagant dissoluteness as Hirst was in the mid nineteen-nineties, when we were as used to seeing his “bad boy of art” behaviour in the gossip pages of our newspapers as we were to seeing his work in the culture sections.¹⁶ If some critics claim that Hirst’s greatest creation is “Damien Hirst,”¹⁷ Cibber, three centuries before him, was also known for inhabiting off the stage the same foppish character for which he became famous on it. As the *Biographical Dictionary of Actors* notes of the character Sir Novelty Fashion, the part he wrote for himself in his first authored play: “Perhaps it would be truer to say he wrote himself into the play, for it is difficult to distinguish Cibber from the parts he played so well.”¹⁸ There is something almost Warholian, *avant-la-lettre*, about Cibber’s self-creation. That Hirst and Cibber share such a reliance on self-fashioning is, I will be arguing, tightly bound to the commercial imperatives that they grapple with as producers of work which must float on the market for commodities; in turn, of course, it is their *déclassé* origins which inscribe the motive for commercial success. As I shall argue, the form of subjectivity, a peculiarly ironic one, which emerges from their self-conscious charade of artistic selfhood also has much to do with the nature and form of Hirst’s and Cibber’s brush with the sublime, which I propose is its limit case: an irresistible but impossible tendency.

My contention is that Hirst and Cibber are barred by their position as commercially concerned cultural producers from the mode of artistic enunciation deemed by their societies as self-present and felicitous. Such a mode of speech is open only to those who, though they can assert ownership within a literary market, can also claim a ground outside it from which their work ostensibly draws its meaning and its purpose.¹⁹ For Cibber’s era this was the “gentlemanly” writer of independent means.²⁰ By Hirst’s day, the

16 For Cibber’s manipulation of celebrity, see Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity,” 523-39. Glover claims that Cibber was in fact one of the first celebrities as we now understand the term (538).

17 See for example, Glass, “Damien Hirst: Artist or Brand?,” 44-5.

18 “Colley Cibber,” in Highfill (Jr.), Burnum and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, 216. Pope himself put it more wittily in the *Dunciad*, placing these lines into Cibber’s mouth: “Did on the stage my fops appear confined? / My life gave ampler lessons to mankind.” (Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.191-2.)

19 See for example, Laura J. Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

20 I leave the gender-specific term standing here, since, indeed, in Cibber’s era it is specifically the “gentleman” rather than the “lady” who can claim such a status. Women could not, of course, claim literary (or for that matter legal) property in the same way as men, and though there were certainly a large number of women authors of the eighteenth century, their status as ideal cultural producers was, like that of class outsiders (though in a somewhat different manner) “barred,” and their work generally viewed with suspicion as inferior. For a fascinating discussion of several women’s negotiations of their gendered selves in the early eighteenth-century literary marketplace, see for example, Moore, *Beautiful Sublime*. Women’s

hegemony of the aristocracy had long faded; nonetheless, the formal position of independence over the market which was marked by the figure of the aristocrat remains with us in the form of the ideal of a high culture which seeks to resist the logic of the market. Even for us, then, the “gentlemanly” (with all its gendered connotations) haunts cultural production. The gentleman writer can claim an autonomy with regard to the imperatives of production for profit, writing for “posterity” or the sake of art, rather than gain. Pope, as we saw in the previous chapter – in however fragile a manner, and however much guile and brilliance it takes to pull the trick off, since he too is an outsider making his way up the ranks – manages to assume this stance, envisioning himself as a noble exile from modernity in an eternally Georgic Twickenham, and vigorously separating himself, through an assertion of his own economic independence, from the paid hacks he ridicules. Hirst and Cibber, however, are much more obviously subject to economic motivation, and cannot claim the position of “gentleman.”²¹ This status – extending into their very artistic selfhood as they become themselves commodities on the market, subject to its forces – undercuts any pretensions they have to be producing anything more than a commodity, begging questions about the “authenticity” of their output. Such a status positions them outside the pale of sublime artistic production, and yet also dependent on its discourses for their affects/effects. It makes necessary a complex mimetic and appropriational strategy, which can be associated with the eighteenth-century figures of the fop, the hack and the plagiarist, which I will go on to elucidate. These will help us understand the relation of a marginalised and commercial creative subject such as Hirst or Cibber to the discourses they rely on.

Appropriation or Plagiarism?

Cibber’s and Hirst’s outputs, yoked to the demands of a market, differ from the privileged model of autonomous, original art. Their work aims at the mechanical production of affect, and is grounded in the groundless phantasmagorical mediations of the marketplace rather than the spontaneity of the expressive self. This economic imperative is most obviously manifested in the processes of appropriation, assembly, collage and bricolage which are

lack of “property” over their work, the difficulty they had in asserting any form of originality, authenticity or literary value for their work and their vulnerability to accusations – just like those levelled at Cibber – of plagiarism are also discussed at length in Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*.

21 Cibber, in particular is entirely brazen about this. Cibber himself wrote at one point that he “wrote more to be fed than to be famous.” Colley Cibber, *A Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope, Etc.*, [1742], Augustan Reprint Society, 158 (Los Angeles: University of California, 1973), 9. Hirst, too, has described himself as “a conduit from art to money.” Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 192.

so much to the fore in their works, and in the anxious critical responses which these have elicited, where questions of “originality” – ultimately motivated by fears about the simulacral nature of capitalist culture – are monotonously aired. To tease out what’s at stake in them, this mode of production and the responses to it call for further examination.

It is obvious that Hirst’s work involves a series of borrowings. It draws unapologetically on modern and contemporary artists as varied as Duchamp, Bacon, Warhol, Koons, Manzoni, Judd and Beuys, and he openly discusses his debt to these figures.²² The work also obviously draws on popular culture ranging from Hammer Studio’s *Frankenstein* to Spielberg’s *Jaws* and Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers*. It explicitly resuscitates art-historical devices and themes – not least those of the sublime – stretching back at least to the Baroque *vanitas*. His mode of operation, as I approach it here throughout, is one of the orchestration and condensation of familiar references into striking images. Hirst’s borrowings have drawn on him a rain of accusations of intellectual theft.²³

22 See, especially Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, “‘Bacon’s Got the Guts’,” *Guardian* 8 October 2001, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,564992,00.html>> visited 12/01/05. This excerpt a series of interviews from *On the Way to Work* where Hirst discusses other twentieth century artists. Hirst’s interviews are so evenly peppered with such references that to pick out particular passages or interviews is generally not useful. However, Hirst’s attitudes towards many of these figures are most thoroughly discussed in his extended interview with Mirta D’Argenzio in Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 50-250. Hirst says, for example: “I came from a background where I did not think it was possible to do anything new. I was aware that I was constantly referencing people, like with the Monochrome Paintings, it was definitely Ellsworth Kelly. I just thought it doesn’t matter because you can’t do anything new. I was totally aware that the Medicine Cabinets were something to do with Koons, Judd maybe and consumerism or something like that. I had seen the show at the Saatchi Gallery and I was aware of that. They are like my version of Koons, like the Hoover piece [...] The fly killers were like Nauman, and Flavin. The boxes were like Sol Lewitt, that the flies came out of. Then Ellsworth Kelly was like the monochromes and the Spot Paintings were kind of like Richter. There were all these references but I didn’t mind about that. I just thought that it didn’t matter.” (115-6). Following Jean Fisher’s analysis, we should add to this list in particular Hamad Butt, a graduate of Goldsmiths just years before Hirst. For what Hirst takes from Hamad Butt, see Fisher, *Vampire*, 258-65. Butt is the figure who sticks out from the list, not just as less of a canonical figure, but also as the one artist amongst these others about whom Hirst does not speak in interviews. Nonetheless, as Fisher argues, much of Hirst’s artistic vocabulary appears to be drawn from Butt’s tragically short career, though somewhat shorn of its complex and critical content.

23 Though there are other cases, one need look no further than the controversy which Hirst’s *Hymn* (2000) provoked. *Hymn* was an enlargement to monumental proportions of an educational toy from Humbrol’s Young Scientist Anatomy Set, designed by Norman Emms. Emms accused Hirst of plagiarism, and the legal battle which ensued between Hirst and Humbrol was much-publicised. See Rachel Le Goff, “Plagiarism Does Not Pay, or Does It?,” *ARTnewsroom.com* 23 May 2000, archived at <<http://dh.rhoshuu.com/press/2000legoff.html>> visited 27/02/06. The legal battle was finally settled out of court, with Hirst making a large donation to children’s charities. There was a similar furore around the patterning of dots in Hirst’s contribution to the colouring book produced by *The Guardian* and *Modern Painters* for Children’s Art day in July 2003. Computer graphics designer Robert Dixon claimed that the work was copied from an original by him. See “News: Can a Copycat Change Its Spots?,” *BRIFFA: Intellectual Property and Information Management*, ed. August 2003, Available: <<http://www.briffa.com/news/art72hirst.htm>>, 27 February 2006.

Cibber, too, had a working process whereby familiar material was adapted, and, just as with Hirst, commercially motivated appropriation brought down accusations of theft on him. Laura Rosenthal, in her study of eighteenth-century ideas of plagiarism, goes so far as to claim that “no playwright has been remembered more vividly as a plagiarist than Colley Cibber.”²⁴ In an extended description in the opening book of the *Dunciad*, Pope, for example, envisions Cibber sitting in a vast heap of books, contemplating his past plagiarisms and planning his next.²⁵

But though such judgments about the plagiaristic nature of Cibber’s or Hirst’s output may point to a real difference between commercially conditioned production and high culture’s ideal mode, we should nonetheless be cautious about accepting any value judgments implicit in the distinction, loaded with ideological conceptions of “originality” as they are. As Rosenthal argues, it is not Cibber’s lack of innovation (I have already mentioned several of his significant contributions), but his status as a classed outsider to the establishment which makes him so vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism. We need to add to Rosenthal’s insight an understanding of the forms of production which ensue from the marginal position of such figures with regard to the possession of language.

As an example of the conceptions of originality on which eighteenth-century judgments rest, Rosenthal analyses Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). Young, just like most other eighteenth-century writers, does not count out all imitation *per se*. Imitation is foundational to art in Neoclassicism, with the artist drawing on the models of predecessors

²⁴ Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 162.

²⁵ To cite just the most vivid passage:

Next o’er his books, his eyes began to roll,
 In pleasing memory of all he stole,
 How here he sipp’d and there he plunder’d snug,
 And suck’d all o’er, like an industrious bug.
 Here lay poor Fletcher’s half-eat scenes, and here
 The frippery of crucified Molière;
 There hapless Shakespeare, yet of Tibbald sore,
 Wish’d he had blotted for himself before. (Pope, *Dunciad*, 1.127-134)

Cibber adapted both Shakespeare and Molière for the contemporary stage, and these adaptations provoked in their critical audiences a tirade of questions about, on the one hand, the things that Cibber changed and thus ruined, and, on the other, claims that Cibber thus appropriated and claimed as his own the work of these authors. One thing little remembered about Cibber’s Shakespeare adaptations is quite how long-lived their success was. It was in Cibber’s version of Richard III that Garrick made his name; and even in the twentieth century, there are a number of lines in Olivier’s film version of the play which are Cibber’s rather than Shakespeare’s. To cite one more example of contemporary accusation against Cibber, Fielding, in *The Author’s Farce* (1730) has Cibber giving advice to his son: “The art of writing, boy, is the art of stealing old plays, by changing the name of the play, and new ones by changing the name of the author.” Cited in Highfill (Jr.), Burnum and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, 230.

and nature itself. It is only with the different motivations for mimesis that the distinction between the good and bad copy arises. Whilst the gentlemanly copy involves “artistic purpose” the plagiaristic imitation is understood as harnessed only to the demands of “manufacture” for the market, performed by “hacks” for commercial gain and the crowd’s approval.²⁶ Young describes the difference between the forms of mimesis proper to original composition and mere plagiaristic imitation thus: “An *Original* [...] rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows*, it is not made. *Imitations* are often a sort of *Manufacture* wrought up by those *Mechanics, Art and Labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own.”²⁷ The gentleman’s effortless, organic originality is contrasted with the highly loaded metaphor of the labour or “industry” of imitation. Just the “industry”, of course, of the bug which Pope makes Cibber into,²⁸ and which is revealed in the extended description of the commodification of literary production in *Peri Bathous*.

Once more we are on the ground of anxieties about the simulacral nature of the commodity; for if the origin of the work of art is not to be anchored in the natural outpouring of the individual creator, then where within the flux of goods and prices can it be located, and how can its value be secured? Artistic production becomes a matter of the monstrous, unstable and insubstantial representations of the phantasmagoria. Such productions, it seems, are without origin just as they are without final purpose, and this would seem to be what the fears about the disappearance of “originality” in commercial production are about. After all, Cibber, the most notorious plagiarist of them all, was one of the most influential innovators of his time.²⁹ His crime was not a lack of creativity, but to have been creative in the wrong ways, and for the wrong reasons.

Many also complain – although, in spite of his multiple borrowings, it is an equally strange complaint – about a lack of novelty in Hirst. The strange thing about Hirst – and the proof, in the end, of his “creativity” – is the riddle that his work can appear simultaneously to be so *entirely* lifted, as if without remainder, from so many utterly different and incompatible sources. How can something be at once so utterly “Bacon,” and yet also so utterly “Warhol,” and also so utterly “Judd”? The work is made of an impossible surplus of overcoding, not nearly exhausted by how entirely it resembles any particular

26 Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 13.

27 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition, in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*, 2nd. ed. (London: 1759), 12, cited in Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 26. Emphasis Young’s.

28 See note 25, above.

29 For more on quite how substantial Cibber’s theatrical innovations were, and in particular the way that his reformatting of the craft of the stage transformed styles of acting, see Ashley, *Colley Cibber*, 76-82.

source. Unsurprisingly the same worries about the effects of economic motivation recur prominently in condemnations of Hirst as a plagiarist. The “crime” is often figured primarily as that of robbing an economic rather than an aesthetic value, or at least it is the transformation of aesthetic robbery into economic value that is placed at the root of its perniciousness. Raichel Le Goff’s article on the controversy around Hirst’s *Hymn* (2000) is typical here. Hirst had recreated, on monumental scale, an educational anatomical model. When Hirst was sued by its original designer, a media furore ensued. Le Goff’s article, exemplary of the logic of the debate, after bemoaning the mean and non-art status of the object transmuted into art, concentrates on the million-pound price of Hirst’s sculpture. This price tag – contrasted with the £2,000 paid to the toy’s designer – is insistently repeated throughout, and the question of aesthetic originality soon gives way to anxieties about the destabilisation of economic value that the piece threatens. The article mentions (unnamed) “sceptics” who “in fact have voiced doubts that Saatchi really parted with that much money for *Hymn* and maintain it is another ploy to inflate the art he collects.” The article ends up with an alarming image of the absolute ungrounding of the value of art, where the very controversy which Saatchi and Hirst have stirred up, in making it the “world’s most famous contemporary sculpture,” has ended up “doubling or tripling” the value of the work itself and “escalated the market value not just of *Hymn* but of everything else Hirst produces.”³⁰ As in previous chapters, we are dealing with apprehension about a plunge into a terrifying – even sublime – realm of unanchored representation and value, a world of pure apparition thrown up by capital.

What condemns Hirst and Cibber is the fact that they can or will not live up to the ideal of the gentleman scholar. But the appropriative strategies which the two take up may also be understood as the alternative strategies of subjects for whom such a privileged position in the symbolic order is barred. Appropriation is a response to an impossibility inscribed at the heart of their relation to discourse. Later I shall be arguing that the kind of ambiguous access provided to the apparatus of representation by such a strategy – ironised, ambivalent, yet nonetheless invested, allowing a certain room for manoeuvre, but also reiterating the very codes which marginalise – is clarified by the insights of Queer Theory. As a matter of subjectivity itself, for both Hirst and Cibber these strategies of appropriative mimesis pervade not just the work, but their very creative personas, which undergo a theatricalisation. They are personas which themselves are floated on the market as brands.

³⁰ Le Goff, “Plagiarism,” n.p. This figure of the meta-discursive or theoretical axis creating the practical effect of an economic excess, and radically destabilising the grounds of value may remind one of the arguments which de Bolla has put forward about the mechanism of national debt. (See pp.143-148, above.)

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Fig. 52: *Hymn*, 1999-2000. Painted bronze. 610 x 274 x 122 cm. Collection of Charles Saatchi. Image from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 217.

Gentlemen and Fops

Cibber made his name acting – and writing for himself the roles of – the comic figure of the “fop,” a stock character of the late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century stage. It was also as such a character that he forged his public persona, with the “real,” off-stage Cibber and his on-stage characters merging seamlessly into each other. According to one of Cibber’s biographers, the greatest laughs and cheers that Cibber would raise from his audience were through just this play between real and fictional personas. Forgetting his lines, Cibber would take a pinch of snuff, bow elegantly to the leading lady to beg her excuses – “Your humble sa-a-arvant, madam” –, amble over to the prompter and, without breaking character, inquire: “What is next?”³¹ It is through this character of the fop that Cibber negotiated his social place.

The fop on the eighteenth-century stage was a clownish character, whose comedy rose from his overvaluation of appearance, and his slavish imitation of the latest fashion. In the criticism of the time, the on-stage fop was, moreover, understood as a satire on a type that could be met with in society itself.³² Earlier, on the Restoration stage, the fop had served to ridicule the loss of martial virtue in the aristocracy, but with the approach of the eighteenth century, he took on a new significance. Sumptuary laws had been progressively relaxed and clothes in the latest styles were being turned out increasingly cheaply and in numbers, and in London spectacular spaces of conspicuous consumption and leisure sprang up where these commodified fashions were being worn. Fashion was thus becoming consumed ever more broadly across social class. Such a commodifying clothing industry contributed to unmooring the appearance of social status, as presented in dress, from its reality.³³ In this

³¹ Koon, *Colley Cibber*, 109.

³² For example, this is what Steele has to say about one of Cibber’s own creations, Lord Foppington, in *Spectator* 370 (5 May 1712): “if Lord Foppington were not on the Stage, (Cibber acts the false Pretensions to a genteel Behaviour so very justly), he would have in the generality of Mankind more that would admire than deride him.” (Original emphasis.) Clearly here, for Steele, not only is the fop a character we are as like to meet in real life as in the theatre, but there is also a certain alarm that whatever comedic effect the fop produces as a fictional character, he is likely in real life to receive nothing but applause, since, thinks Steele, his society overvalues appearance as much as the fop does. The fop appears as many times in the *Spectator* papers in discussions of society as he does in reviews of the stage. See also, for example, issues 16, 45, 150, 280 and 311, of Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, *The Spectator, in Four Volumes*, [1711-2; 1714], ed. Henry Morley (London: 1891), Project Gutenberg etext, 14 April 2004 <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/2/0/3/12030/12030-h/12030-h.htm>> May 2004.

³³ For quite how far down the social ladder the commodification of fashion penetrated, see for example John Styles, “Custom or Consumption?: Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 103-15. For the spaces of consumption and display of eighteenth-century London, see in particular Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London’s Geographies, 1680-1780*, Mappings, Society/ Theory/ Space (New York & London: Guilford Press, 1998). Susan Staves, in “A Few Kind Words for the Fop,” *Studies*

context, the fop – a character who overvalues such appearances – became increasingly a figure through which anxieties about the way commodity relations were undermining the boundaries of class were articulated. Thus whilst Restoration fops were generally wealthy aristocrats, as the seventeenth century came to a close the figure became – as was so with the famous fops created by Cibber (and with Cibber himself, in his off-stage guise) – a vulgar *nouveau-riche*, with pretensions to seem or be aristocratic. It is around such figures that anxieties about the unmooring of social appearances and origins – anxieties linked to more general fears about the apparitional nature of capitalist economic and social life – could be articulated and dispelled.³⁴

A particularly striking example of the figure of the fop as articulating such anxieties is given by Sir Richard Steele in *Spectator* 88.³⁵ Here the fop appears within a discussion of the unruliness of servants. A correspondent complains of their behaviour, which he understands as a result of their high wages, plentiful leisure and freedom to change masters – in other words, precisely by the kinds of liberty created by a wage economy rather than feudal relations.³⁶ Steele agrees with his correspondent's diagnosis, emphasising the new forms of disposable income that servants have.³⁷ He associates such a turn to monetary relationships with one's inferiors with the endemic growth of a mimesis of their masters. When, thanks to the commodification of hospitality, servants, as possessors of money, can dine or drink at the same place as their masters, they increasingly understand themselves as being of a similar "kind"

in English Literature, 1500-1900 22.3 (1982), also discusses this in relation to the figure of the fop, discussing the effects of the steady relaxation of sumptuary laws, and the decrease in the ornateness of male dress. Both of these factors contributed to a situation in which "men who were rich and not aristocratic were able to purchase the elements of magnificence, thus devaluing them as tokens of exclusivity" (426). It is precisely as clothes lose their status as sure marker of class that the fop is transformed into its eighteenth-century form.

34 Staves lists a series of plays of the period whose plots revolve around foppish characters who cause problems because they appear to be of a class they are in reality not. In Baker's *Tunbridge Walks* (London, 1703), for example, the fop character, Maiden, turns out to have been a milliner. The heroine of the play – echoing Steele's anxieties about class and appearance which we shall see just below – comments: "The greatest Beaus we have about Town, now are Milliners, Mercers, Lawyer's Clerks, and 'tis such upstart fellows that ruine so many poor Tradesmen; for amongst 'em all you'll scarce find a periwig paid for." (Baker, *Tunbridge*, 60, cited in Staves, "Kind Words," 428.) Here the relations between fears about the proper performance of class (not to mention gender) and fears about the illusory nature of commodities become clear. The foundation of credit as a function of the sureness of social appearance has itself been undermined, mirroring larger insecurities in the economic conditions of early capitalism.

35 Steele, *Spectator*, 88 (11 June 1711).

36 The correspondent, in fact marks out such a shift, contrasting the modernised status of such relations between employers and employees in Britain in relation to the rest of Europe, where more traditional forms of relation remain.

37 He picks out, for example, the practice of giving of "Board-wages," rather than feeding servants, which accords them a certain power of how they choose to spend these. They can not only be spent on food, but whatever the servant likes.

to their superiors, if at a lesser degree, rather than a different sort altogether. Money has collapsed qualitative class differences into quantitative ones. In Steele's essay the corrosion of class difference begins in the servants' address of each other by the titles and names of their masters, creating a carnivalesque reversal of high and low. But this merely opens the door for more serious forms – altogether more consequential, real and effective – of insolent impersonation. The deceptive nature of clothing appears in the act of class transvestism of a servant who dresses in his master's clothes for the purposes of playing out amorous assignations under his identity. For Steele this is merely a hyperbolic figure of the more pervasive forms of imitation and camouflage created in the commodity economy, the result of which is that "you have people in Liveries, Beaux, Fops and Coxcombs, in as high perfection as among people that keep Equipages."

The stage fop, in this context, is a figure who provides reassurance: the comedic effect is provided by just how obvious and absurd his masquerade is. The reassuring moral of such a stage character is that impersonation will reveal itself in life, too. In another of his journalistic articles, Steele thus discusses the difference between Sophronius, the truly gentlemanly "Man of Conversation" whose good judgment is an indwelling and "original" property, and the foppish Jack Dimple, a "Pretty Fellow" who is merely his imitation:

An imitation of this agreeable being [i.e. Sophronius] is made by that animal we call a Pretty Fellow, who, being just able to find out what makes Sophronius acceptable, is a natural behaviour, in order to the same reputation, makes his own an artificial one. Jack Dimple is his perfect mimic, whereby he is, of course, the most unlike him of all living men.³⁸

The foppish Dimple is then depicted as gazing narcissistically into a mirror, attempting to perfect the appearance of nonchalance. The fop, captivated by his own reflection, focused on seeming rather than being, is always caught out, within the realm of appearance itself, by his overly obvious concern for appearance, in the absurd position of the careful study of artificially-achieved naturalness.

The fop, because of his reliance on visibility, cannot take on the ideal position laid out in the very first of the *Spectator* papers, of Mr. Spectator, who claims to "Live in the World rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species," who characterises himself through his circumspect silence during his

38 Steele, *Tatler* 21 (26-8 May 1709), available in Sir Richard Steele, *Tatler*, ed. George A. Aitken (New York: Hadley and Matthews, 1899), Project Gutenberg, 5 October 2004 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13645/13645-h/13645-h.htm>> 6 March 2006. We find an almost identical definition in *Spectator* 280 (21 Jan 1712) where Steele differentiates the fop from the agreeable man: "What we call an agreeable Man, is he who is endowed with the natural Bent to do acceptable things from a Delight he takes in them as meerly as such; and the Affectation of that Character is what constitutes a Fop."

education³⁹ and through his preservation of anonymity within the crowd.⁴⁰

What we are faced with is a structure parallel to that of the plagiarist, as described above by Young. Like the plagiarist, the fop, located in the market, attempts to construct his value within the realm of appearance, where, shorn of “origin” and authenticity, he is barred from taking up the fully autonomous position of a knowing and owning subject. Laura Rosenthal has noted just this coincidence of the plagiarist and the fop: “the position of the fop converges with the position of the plagiarist, for the fop does not inhabit the [...] position of ownership, but takes the social world as text from which to borrow. He incessantly copies his ‘betters’.”⁴¹ The fop is a plagiarist of character, just as the plagiarist is a literary fop. He reveals the extent to which appropriative mimesis permeates the creative subject as well as its products.

Rosenthal also clarifies the dimension of gender at stake: the fop is a “feminised,” emasculated figure of fun. His concern with appearance marks the impossibility of his taking up the properly “masculine” position of the subject of Western culture, associated with being rather than appearance, mind rather than matter, knowing rather than being known, man rather than woman. The concern about the effects of commodity relations on social identity is mapped onto these structuring binaries of Western thought. The fop and the plagiarist, like Belinda in Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, are people made up out of commodities.⁴² This makes them, for the eighteenth century, reprehensibly un-masculine.⁴³ The form of production of the fop or the plagiarist is too closely contaminated by feminised consumption.⁴⁴

A third figure brings the fop and the plagiarist together: the “hack.” Though the term originally and literally designated a horse for hire, the word had primarily at this point taken on the metaphor of prostitution, and from this

39 Compare to Cibber, who in the *Apology* tells of how he gained the enmity of both his teachers and his schoolmates for his garrulousness. (Cibber, *Apology*, 1:9-14.)

40 Addison, *Spectator* 1 (1 March 1711). Addison’s Mr. Spectator is, of course, very much the prototype of the modern figure of the Baudelairian *flâneur* in this.

41 Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 198.

42 See Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 130.

43 See also Susan Staves’s remarks on the gendering of the fop: “Fops are delicate [...] fops are in various ways effeminate [...] [T]hey are asexuals who like to spend their time with the ladies. As connoisseurs of fashion, they have interests in common with women.” (Staves, “Kind Words,” 414.) Staves cites an issue of *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 6 (1736), where the journalist worries: “I would fain know whether such Creatures, who if they are not Women, are at least Hermaphrodites, in their very souls” are male or female. The journalist asks, “Do such nice young Gentlemen, who dress and play with their Bodies, as with Puppets, promise their native country either refined and active Statesmen, or hardy and intrepid Soldiers?” (Cited in Staves, “Kind Words,” 420.)

44 See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For the conventionality of the relation between commerce and femininity in eighteenth century see Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 49-52.

came to refer to anything sullied through commercial exploitation.⁴⁵ The hack, like the plagiarist and the fop, is on the market, him- or herself a commodity, excluded from the self-sufficient mastery of property, whether this be legal, intellectual or the possession of the very self.

The subjectivity of the plagiarist, the fop and the hack is structured like bathos. Bathos involves the pretension to the lofty heights of the sublime or the noble with only base material with which to carry this out. Bathos is the subject's failure to achieve the sublime, and to achieve the full subjectivity which the Longinian master orator asserts in his command over language. (A mastery which the eighteenth century interpreted in the gendered terms of a sexual conquest of the audience.)⁴⁶ Fops, hacks and plagiarists cannot construct themselves as such an orator does, coming into full presence through a commensuration between the subject as it reveals itself in the speech act and the position it takes up through its enunciation. Rather, as with Longinus's drunken orator, it is the fop or the plagiarist, rather than the audience, who is carried off by signification, "ecstasied in front of an unecstasied audience."⁴⁷ Reclaiming the ideal position of sublime mastery is the impossible task of the fop, the hack and the plagiarist, as subjects of commercial modernity.

Cibber and the Fop

But given such an impossibility, why does Cibber so willingly embrace the persona of the "fop"? How does it become a viable – even successful – position to take up? How and why does Cibber go about forging a place in the world with such unpromising materials? The answer to the "why" of the matter is simply that Cibber has no choice. Equipped with a social status so very distant from that of the gentlemen, he is placed in an always-already untenable position. Cibber, the bourgeois "theatrical shopkeeper" (as Brian Glover puts it in the quote with which I started this chapter) "puts on the periwig of Sir Novelty Fashion⁴⁸ because it's good for a laugh." And because, "as a bourgeois

⁴⁵ See Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 188.

⁴⁶ See for example John Dennis's paraphrase of Longinus in *The Grounds of Criticism*, excerpted in Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*, 37. Here the orator "ravishes" his [sic] feminised audience. For the continuing gendering of the sublime, see, Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*; Gould, "Intensity and Its Audiences," 305-15; Zylinska, *On Spiders*; Battersby, *The Sublime*.

⁴⁷ Longinus, *Peri Hupsous*, 3. My trans. of ἐξεστηκοτες προς ουκ εξεστηκοτας. The Fyfe and Russell translation runs: "while they [i.e. the bad orators] are in ecstasy their audience is not." Longinus, "Longinus on the Sublime," trans. W. H. Fyfe and Donald Russell, *Aristotle, Poetics; Longinus, on the Sublime; Demetrius, on Style*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, 2nd ed., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 171.

⁴⁸ This is the name of the highly popular character which Cibber wrote for himself in his first play, *Love's Last Shift* (London, 1796).

individual, he has no way of displaying himself which is not.”⁴⁹ He is condemned in his very social being to a condition of bathos.

But Cibber’s assumption of the role of the fop is complex. It involves a certain self-consciousness, albeit a profoundly divided one. Cibber’s persona is not simply a failed attempt at aristocracy. His character, rather, fully acknowledges the inevitability of such a failure, but carries on with it nonetheless. It is a character structured as a joke (“good for a laugh”). Through laughter, Cibber commands a certain affirmation from his audience. But Cibber’s aristocratic desire to be more than a “bourgeois shopkeeper,” however ironically assumed, and however disavowed it may be, is nonetheless real – and even effective in the wealth he accumulated, his access to the corridors of government and court, his Laureateship, and his rise to the respectability of Richardson’s ultra-polite literary circle.⁵⁰ Cibber does not cease to want to be an aristocrat, even if he knows and accepts that this is impossible; in assuming the figure of the fop, he embodies this longing.⁵¹ He both courts ridicule and also attempts to transcend the status of the mean and ordinary with which he is stamped as a bourgeois individual.

Indeed, Cibber’s manipulation of this situation and its paradoxes is subtle. Lois Potter has argued that Cibber’s recreation of the figures of the fop (both on- and offstage) was instrumental in redefining the conventions of their portrayal.⁵² Cibber’s fops, compared to those that come before, are sympathetic, witty and positive characters, rather than dullards and villains. They become characters that the audience could – also, of course, with a certain ironic enjoyment – cheer on and enjoy; Cibber’s own *sang-froid* daring in treading the tightrope of his character in the perilous eighteenth-century social world itself was an exciting spectacle, one which must have spoken to the more general imperative on many audience members to forge a character for themselves within this same world. The dilemmas of such fops, attempting to float within the universe of the signs of privilege, and their response to this in a witty play with appearance, made them characters who the ever-more “middling”

49 Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity,” 537.

50 For this last, see Highfill (Jr.), Burnum and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, 235. This notes that Cibber, however, was “too liberal in his views to remain acceptable for long.” There is always a limit to the success which is engineered through a ruse such as Cibber’s.

51 As Brian Glover puts it, Cibber engineers himself as a “ludicrous, parodic version of aristocratic character that is also a serious attempt to represent an ideal self.” Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity,” 536.

52 As Potter explains Cibber’s achievement, “Cibber’s particular situation contributed to the transformation of a familiar comic type (the fop), and [...] this in turn allowed him to manipulate his audience’s response to him as a human being.” Lois Potter, “Colley Cibber: The Fop as Hero,” *Augustan Worlds*, eds. J. C. Hilson, M. M. B. Jones and J. R. Watson (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), 154.

audiences could – however surreptitiously – identify with, presenting a mode of living with the antagonisms of their own everyday experience. Cibber's redefinition of stage convention had its share, this is to say, in the renegotiation of real social roles, at the same time that it allows Cibber a means of social advancement.

Of course, as with all forms of disavowal, this remains something of a defensive construct, and in no clear way simply conjures away the antagonisms which form it. Cibber's character is a symptom more than a solution to the bathos of being *petit bourgeois*, and doesn't escape the impossibility on which it is founded. It can even be understood to reinforce and reiterate – to dramatise and turn into a morality play – the terms of class exclusion with which he is, in the first place, burdened.⁵³ However, as Judith Butler, in her writings on performativity and identity has argued, iterations involve a repetition with an inevitable difference.⁵⁴ When interpellated subjects speak back to power, they always get their lines just a little bit wrong.

In addition, Cibber's performance of identity is significant in its valorisation of theatricality and artificiality over the natural and given. It celebrates the malleability of identity constructed through the signs and images of consumption, and makes him a pioneer of the techniques for swimming in the growing modernity of eighteenth-century print culture, with its already prodigious appetite for gossip and celebrity. Cibber fashioned his life into a public art form in a way that foreshadows Warhol and his successors such as Hirst and Jeff Koons.⁵⁵ Cibber's fops, in many regards, are prototypes for the modern artist and the modern urban character itself (as canonised in cultural theory through Baudelaire and Benjamin), thrown as it is into the world of appearances, and forging itself in an auto-poetical act of the synthesis of these appearances. The name of Cibber's famous character, Sir Novelty Fashion, reverberates with the connotations of what would become the central themes the literature of "modernity" developed over the next three centuries: fashion and self-fashioning, appearance, the always-new, the consciousness of a rapidly

53 Although Lois Potter and Susan Staves, whom I cite here, find something progressive in Cibber's fop, and explore the ways in which his refashioning of the role proved emancipatory for Cibber and for his audiences, Stephen Szilagyi has, on the other side of the equation, noted the ways in which his performances served not to undermine but to reinscribe and reiterate the class structures of his day. Stephen Szilagyi, "The Importance of Being Easy: Desire and Cibber's *The Careless Husband*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41.2 (1999): 142-59.

54 See for example, Judith Butler, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 448-62.

55 For Hirst on Warhol, Koons and his own attitude to the public performance of being an artist, see Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 60-1.

passing time of perpetual and total change.⁵⁶

The Hirstean Masquerade

Cibber's social trajectory and his strategies of artistic and subjective appropriation serve to elucidate Hirst's strategies of selfhood and of cultural production. In spite of the gap of centuries, Hirst, too, inhabits something of the same double bind, the same impossibility of full self-presence in sublime speech. Hirst, too, coming from outside the pale of class, takes up an ironic, exaggerated, theatricalised performance of artistic selfhood. Hirst became the household name he is because of the mediagenic nature of his assumption of the role, as John Walker puts it, of "an entertaining, laddish, almost cartoon 'character,'"⁵⁷ which is to say, a self-parody. And recognising this same tactic and position helps understand something of the uncanny effect of the similarities between the two figures. Hirst, too, fashions himself as a character who is "good for a laugh," even if it is not powder and periwigs which he dons, but the overdone trappings of the 1980s "lad."

As such a difference in the characters taken up by Hirst and Cibber implies, there are important distinctions between the kinds of clowning involved. Where Cibber takes up a parodic performance of aristocracy, Hirst's charade is one of his own "working class" credentials.⁵⁸ (As Stallabrass notes this pose constitutes an "urban pastoral" mode.)⁵⁹ As a result, though Hirst's mimesis – done with a wink and a nudge – is just as theatrical as Cibber's, it is a performance which seems to leave everything (class, gender, sexuality)

56 Aside from Benjamin's great works on modernity, (especially the *Arcades*), see for example, Lynda Nead on the "Swell" as a development from the fop of this archetypally "modern" character and of the anxieties about class, masculinity and appearance which resound through the nineteenth century. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

57 John A. Walker, *Art and Celebrity* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 244.

58 Whether Hirst is as "working class" as his myth implies is, I think, a more contentious question. Would it be possible to think of Hirst as springing from "petit bourgeois" roots? Could this be a line of commonality between Hirst and Cibber, who was also not entirely of the "grand" bourgeoisie who were in alliance with the aristocracy, and who could easily afford, like Sophronius, to seem what they were? Hirst and Cibber, if essentially "theatrical shopkeepers" rather than the grand owners of the means of production, would belong to that "middling" class, always growing up between the established estates, and whose essence has been social impersonation and camouflage, where aspiration and blending, become a mode of being itself, for those otherwise denied any truth. T.J. Clark's analysis in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, Revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) of the Folies B ergere as a social space is a particularly brilliant exposition of their perpetual masquerade of both the popular below them, and the elite above them. (See 205-58.)

59 Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 237-56. Drawing on Empson's use of the term is highly appropriate here: the notion of "urban pastoral" is developed by Empson to discuss just the Scriblerian milieu which we have not left during the last two chapters. See William Empson, "The Beggar's Opera: Mock-Pastoral as the Cult of Independence," *The Twentieth Century's Interpretations of the Beggar's Opera*, ed. Yvonne Noble (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 15-41.

in its place. Hirst constrains himself to miming out what he can already be understood to be, so seems to have little jarring effect within our culture. The artifice of his performance (like that which is at the heart of any norm) can be easily obscured. In addition, the chosen pose has particularly unfortunate results in the play of gender in Hirst's self-presentation and his work, which has a tendency to run to misogyny.⁶⁰

The difference in Hirst's and Cibber's historical moments is also significant. All strategies of ironic performance are profoundly ambivalent, but if in Cibber we find a moment where irony works to erode inflexible and supposedly natural hierarchies, it is the recuperative moment which comes increasingly to the fore in the present-day case of Hirst. In a context where identity is recognised already to have been put into the radical flux of representation, irony increasingly becomes a tactic through which one can adhere to old ideologies in spite of their disavowal. Such an "ironic" repetition of older ideologies of masculinity are, of course, the stock in trade of the 1980s rise of the new "lad," and there is a sense in which Hirst's character can be placed all too easily within the context of such a tendency.

This said, Hirst's persona is still not purely retrograde. It retains – in some small dose – the fundamentally double-edged nature of irony. It involves itself in the continuing sundering of identities from ideas of the "natural," and the consequent erosion of the forms of power invested in such hierarchies of difference, which has extended from Cibber's time to our own, and if it fits into a new "laddism," we can also find a place for it within the canons of a certain carnivalesque play more generally associated with contemporary art, aligned with a social and sexual liberality. Such contemporary art can be understood to pursue that project of which Susan Sontag associates with Camp, which as a matter of the privileging of the aesthetic over moral strictures, "is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."⁶¹

The Ironic Subject of the Sublime

Crucial as these differences between Hirst and Cibber are, it is nonetheless what the two figures share in terms of their self-parodic performances of identity that helps understand the relation they both take up to the sublime.

60 The element of sexism which creeps into Hirst's work through his laddish posturing is not often discussed. However, see, for example, David Shapiro, "A Response to Jerry Salz" for a searing indictment of how this creeps into his work. Besides any such return of sexism in "content," however, is the bald fact of the reiteration, in the persona he forges, of the "muscularity" and masculinity of artistic genius.

61 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (London: André Deutsch Ltd, 1987), 290.

Sublimity, like the gentlemanly position of the ideal (and ideally male) subject, remains at once a desired goal and an impossibility, and this position throws Hirst and Cibber into the double bind of an ironic sublime. Although it is an impossibility for such a subject to take on the load of the sublime, it is nonetheless the limit to which such a subject is oriented, and as such cannot be let go. Cibber for one, though he is remembered as a comic actor and playwright, and for his clowning personation of the fop, was throughout his career as concerned with tragedy as with comedy.

To see this at work – and hence understand Cibber’s investment in the sublime – I shall turn to a passage from a somewhat less hostile critic than Pope. This is to be found in *Spectator* 546, where Steele visits a rehearsal at Cibber’s theatre, in order to check for himself the furore surrounding Cibber’s staging of his translation-*cum*-adaptation of Corneille’s tragedy *Le Cid*.⁶² Controversy has been raging around this, even before its performance. Is it shallow plagiarism or authentic theatre? And what literary merit does it have?

In search of answers, Steele visits rehearsals intending to approach the play as a “text” whose formal and rhetorical properties can be clearly judged. However, what he is faced with in Cibber’s rehearsal is quite a different dramatic object – one which Cibber was soon to theorise and explicate under his favourite term “theatricality.”⁶³ This object resists Steele’s powers of judgment, and leaves him bewildered; it is, that is, a play which relies on the obscure rhetorical technics of sublime affect, rather than the clarity of beautiful form.

Steele describes his visit thus:

When I came to the Rehearsal, I found [...] that they gave every thing which was said such Grace, Emphasis, and Force in their Action, that it was no easy matter to make any Judgment of the Performance. [...] The Passions of Terrour and Compassion, they made me believe were very artfully raised, and the whole Conduct of the Play artful and surprizing. [...] *Cibber* himself took the liberty to tell me, that he expected I would do him Justice, and allow the Play well-prepared for his Spectators, whatever it was for his Readers. He added very many Particulars not uncurious concerning the manner of taking an Audience, and laying wait not only for their superficial Applause, but also for insinuating into their Affections and Passions, by the artful Management of the Look, Voice, and Gesture of the Speaker. I could not but consent

⁶² Addison and Steele, *Spectator* 546 (26 Nov 1712).

⁶³ Cibber makes this explication in the Preface to this very play, written for its publication (*Cibber, Ximena, or The Heroick Daughter* [London, 1719]), in which he discusses and defends his adaptation, and the methods he uses to transform it from a literary work into a stageable and entertaining production. Cibber’s preface is discussed at length in Koon, *Colley Cibber*. She summarises that the position here, just as we will find it in Steele’s encounter, is that “he aims for a strong impact by using the stage’s resources: visual and audio effects, variety in scene and costume, unusual characterisations” (93). Ashley wrote of Cibber that ““He insisted on the ‘theatrical’ qualities of plays until the word became a joke around London.” Ashley, *Cibber*, 63.

that the Heroick Daughter appeared in the Rehearsal a moving
Entertainment wrought out of a great and exemplary Virtue.

If Steele expects a play's performance to be a matter of transparent presentation of the form of its text, Cibber is largely dismissive of his work as the kind of purely literary artefact in which such textual form might be distinguished; for him, it is primarily an entertainment to be viewed: he wishes it "well-prepared for his Spectators, whatever it was for his Readers." Steele seems bewildered to find Cibber waxing lyrical not about what he has wrought in writing the play but about the techniques of its performance – the "artful Management of the Look, Voice and Gesture of the Speaker."

This shift from the textual to the visual and from the literary to the theatrical marks a shift from a poetics of form, which can be judged rationally and dispassionately (resulting, in Cibber's terms, in "superficial Applause," a phrase which demeans it as only a secondary merit which does not perturb or move its spectator), towards an aesthetics of affect which moves below the rational "surface" of mere approval, "insinuating" itself into an audience's "Affectations and Passions" to provide an emotionally compelling experience. This shift from the rationality of form to the irrationality of emotion is, of course, precisely a matter of the Longinian sublime.⁶⁴ It is hardly surprising, then, that amongst the phrases Steele uses to name the affective impact of Cibber's play, those such as "Passions of Terrour and Compassion," and "surprise," which over the next half century would take their pride of place in the terminology of the discourses on the sublime are prominent.⁶⁵

In fact, the language that Steele has Cibber use to justify his stagecraft seems modelled on the first chapter of Longinus's treatise, where he describes the power of the sublime orator over his audience as a power to compel and transport them, to throw them into ecstasy, a power so absolute as to amount, in the eroticised terms in which eighteenth-century English criticism translated this passage, to a "ravishment" – or even, in John Dennis's phrasing, a "pleasing Rape upon the very Soul."⁶⁶ If the beautiful persuades, the sublime,

⁶⁴ See Longinus, *Peri Hupsous* §1, where Longinus contrasts the transporting "startling and amazing" effects of the sublime to the merely reasonable "charming and persuading." (Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 4.)

⁶⁵ For the relation between the "sublime and the pathetic" see Monk, *The Sublime*, 43-62. By the time of Steele's visit to Drury Lane, Dennis had already (in 1704) foregrounded the terrible as the emotion most conducive to sublimity. (See Monk, *The Sublime*, 51-4.) This remains so in the case of Burke – See Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 2, Sect. 2, 101. For "surprise" as a notion to be linked with the sublime see Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 1, Sect. 3, 82. For a sustained discussion of the role of "compassion" in Burke's account of the sublime, see Gibbons, *Burke and Ireland*. As well as being a prominent theme in Monk (43-62, as above), the links between compassion, sympathy and notions of the sublime are also brought to the fore in the selection of essays collected in Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*.

⁶⁶ John Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, vol.

like Cibber's theatre – like the commodity itself – demands submission. The final impression Steele's encounter leaves is of his having been overwhelmed and left in a state of some disarray by Cibber's theatrical technique. As a text, its logic is strained to the point of disintegration. Just as in Longinus's account of the sublime, his critical judgment, which comes to the theatre to be persuaded, is ultimately quite overcome, and he gives his approval quite in spite of himself and of everything he expects a play should be. The wording of his affirmation is telling: he writes, "I *could not but* consent" (my emphasis).

Steele's text reveals an ambivalence towards his role as such a spectator or consumer.⁶⁷ There often seems something sinister in Cibber's theatrical power over a viewer: the word "artful," for example, may suggest consummate skill, but also evokes something underhand. Cibber is presented as "taking and laying in wait" for an audience, a metaphor of violent and perhaps sexual ambush amplifying Longinus's language of power and mastery. The Cibberian actor is depicted as "insinuating" himself or herself into the inner being of the spectator. Here too, it would not be too far a stretch to understand the emotional power of theatre as being figured in terms of sexual conquest, seduction, and penetration.

Steele's unease is amplified and given sense by the context of his visit to Cibber's stage within a longer passage which discusses the deceptive, theatrical and illusory practices of salesmanship in the glittering but not always golden world of London's bustling shops, which of course makes Cibber's theatricality firmly a matter of anxieties about practices of commercial culture more generally. It is, after all, an investigation of the spectre of plagiarism as a matter of commercial exploitation that has taken Steele to Drury Lane in the first place.⁶⁸

2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), 459. See also, for example, William Smith's 1743 translation of this same Longinus passage, which similarly translates Longinus in terms of an eroticised struggle of sexual domination between the orator/poet and the audience/reader. (Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*, 22.)

67 The articulation and fostering of such an ambivalence could be understood to be the very project of the *Spectator* papers, and lurks in the very character of Mr. Spectator, around which they coalesce. The papers serve to both embrace and to distance oneself from the spectacles of modern consumption and culture.

68 The paper starts: "It gives me very great Scandal to observe, where-ever I go, how much Skill, in buying all manner of Goods, there is necessary to defend yourself from being cheated in whatever you see exposed to Sale. My Reading makes such a strong impression upon me, that I should think my self a Cheat in my Way, if I should translate any thing from another Tongue, and not acknowledge it to my Readers. I understood from common Report, that Mr. *Cibber* was introducing a French Play upon our Stage, and thought my self concerned to let the Town know what was his, and what foreign." After his discussion of Cibber, Steele goes on to say that it had been his intention "to give the Lecture of this Day upon the common and prostituted Behaviour of Traders in ordinary Commerce" and to bemoan "The scandalous abuse of Language and hardening of Conscience, which may be observed every Day in going from one Place to another" and which "makes a whole City to an unprejudiced Eye a Den of Thieves."

However, in spite of these negative terms of engagement, Steele also finds Cibber's presentation "not uncurious." The acting method's power to delve into the "Passions and Affectations" remains something which goes beyond the merely "superficial." And ultimately Steele gives his assent to the value of the play. The theatricality of the stage is only ambiguously linked to the unambiguously deceptive theatricality of commodity display.

Opened up for us in this encounter is a different Colley Cibber: rather than the fop, the comedian, or the pompous but mediocre Royal versifier, Cibber appears in the guise of an innovator in the development of a technique of the "theatrical sublime" which was to grow so important throughout the eighteenth century, and which, I propose, forms a cornerstone of twentieth-century mass entertainment, and persists in Hirst. Cibber turned all the extra-textual elements of the stage from scenery and sound effects to the "artful Management of the Look, Voice and Gesture," to the end of producing strong and startling effects. This micromanagement of the actor's expressiveness in particular would go on with David Garrick to become the cornerstone of the revival of the Shakespearian sublime on the stage. It is hardly accidental that it is in Cibber's adaptation of *Richard III* that Garrick first made his name – a text pre-prepared for the arrival of his acting style.⁶⁹ Garrick's acting, like Cibber's, departed from the transparent presentation of a text, instead opening up the interiority of the character through an increasingly minute taxonomy of the "passions" as reflected in gesture, facial expression and modulations of voice.⁷⁰ E.J. Clery argues that the naturalism of Garrick – deployed to its most intense effect in scenes of the supernatural sublime – involved an understanding of human expression which made the body something both naturally communicative and yet also synthesisable through a codification of its regularities, a process we

⁶⁹ See Koon, *Colley Cibber*, 155-6. Garrick was even taking up the very role Cibber had prepared for himself, but in which he was far too much the fop to succeed.

⁷⁰ E.J. Clery's *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* details Garrick's celebrated acting technique, and the way that it was involved in the realignment of acting to the literary text. (Clery, *Supernatural Fiction*, 37-59.) Garrick's most famous set piece would become his playing of Hamlet faced by his father's ghost, which seems to have elicited powerful physical responses from his audience, through Garrick's careful and detailed "naturalistic" management of his expression. Whilst it had been commonplace that *Hamlet* was a play whose sublimity could not be represented on the stage (in part because actors could hardly be expected to convincingly take on the range of moods and personas which Hamlet undergoes) and thus a key example of the inadequacy of theatrical representation to literary merit, Garrick's acting presented itself as more than adequate to the task. The horror of the scene was not to be represented through the literal transcription of the action, but rather through Garrick's own careful registering of the physiological shadow of the changes in Hamlet's mood. The "sensitive" audience was filled with terror in a sympathetic identification with Garrick's virtuously portrayed Hamlet's responses, rather than by the depiction of the events per se. Clery quotes at length the account that Lichtenberg gives of a performance, which describes in detail the kinds of techniques that Garrick used, and the powerful affects of sympathetic terror they induced in the audience and in himself. Such an acting plays the game of seeming at once "nature" and at the same time "technique" which also marks the Longinian sublime.

have already seen begun on Cibber's stage.⁷¹

This theatrical sublime had echoes beyond the stage. Clery points out the synchrony between the peak of Garrick's success and a period of intense interest in techniques of public speaking, giving evidence for mutual influence between Garrick's acting and the many books codifying the art of sublime oratorical delivery – books which are also discussed at length in Peter de Bolla's *Discourse of the Sublime*.⁷² In these manuals, the entire array of gesture and its motion through the space around the speaker has been codified to the extent that it can be reduced to a notation that can be appended to the text. Such a sublime of theatrical gesture and its sympathetic effect could also be found in the works of painters such as Fuseli.⁷³ Cibber's theatrical technics, then, has its place within a history of the wider transformation, centring around the sublime, of discourse. To understand Cibber, we must understand the extent to which his theatrical project – however much it was forced to focus on comedy, and however much Cibber is remembered for his lapses into the ridiculous – was oriented to the sublime.

However, although Cibber developed a complex technics for tragic theatre, his success was always mixed in a way his dealings with comedy were generally not. As an actor of tragedy, Cibber was routinely derided by the critics. In 1734, the *Grub Street Journal* wrote of his performance as Richard III that “he foams and struts and bellows with the voice and cadence of a watchman rather than a hero and a prince,” and Aaron Hill, in *The Prompter*, described his performance as “the distorted heavings of an unjointed

71 Clery writes: “Garrick's gift was wonderful, but it was not, to the trained eye, incalculable, inexplicable, or even unpredictable. For behind the miracle of acting lay a body of knowledge, a knowledge of the body – a taxonomy of the passions.” (Clery, *Supernatural Fiction*, 43. Original emphasis.) To claim a continuity, as I do here, between Cibber and Garrick is, of course, somewhat controversial, where the latter is more often understood as effecting a decisive break from the mannered style associated with the former. (See Koon, *Colley Cibber*, 154.) Leigh Woods understands Garrick's theatrical revolution as one which breaks away from Augustan drama, “which stressed speech as its primary expressive mode,” and was essentially “declamatory.” (Leigh Woods, *Garrick Claims the Stage: Acting as a Social Emblem in Eighteenth-Century England*, [Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1984], 30-1.) However, the evidence which Steele presents us in the *Spectator* belies the claim to the absolute novelty of Garrick's break. Cibber's interest in “theatricality,” and in the use of voice, gesture and look to deliver emotion to the audience seems, rather, however mannered it remained, to involve an important set of developments in the conception of drama on the basis of which Garrick's style could emerge.

72 de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime*, 143-85.

73 See for example Martin Myrone, ed., *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006). Fuseli treads the same Shakespearean ground, and has the same concern with the supernatural sublime as Garrick. His paintings rely on the same technics of gesture. A fine example is his *Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and the Ghost*, which survives as an engraving by Robert Thew, published by John and Josiah Boydell in 1796. This is just the scene which Garrick made his name in, and the engraving gives some sense of what the atmosphere and acting style of such a staging may have been.

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Fig. 53: William Hogarth, *David Garrick as Richard III*, 1745. Oil on canvas. 190.5 x 250.8 cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Hogarth-Garrick_as_Richard_III.jpg>

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Fig. 54: Robert Thew, engraving from a painting [1789] by Henry Fuseli of the ghost scene in *Hamlet* for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery. Plate XLIV from Boydell's *Shakespeare Folio*, Vol. II, 1796. 50 x 63.5 cm. Fuseli's painting (now lost) depicts just the scene Garrick was most famous for. Fuseli also depicted Garrick in *Macbeth*. Image from *Gothic Nightmares*, 137.

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Fig. 55: Diagrams and annotations from Gilbert Austin's system of oratorical delivery. Here the delivery of sublime oration is precisely programmed for the speaker. The text is Edward Gray's *Elegy*. Images from Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime*, 184-5.

caterpillar.”⁷⁴ Similarly, (however influential they were) his attempts at writing the sublime, and at theatrical adaptations of serious and sublime works were increasingly reviled by both critics and audiences. By 1724, Cibber’s *Caesar in Egypt*, another adaptation of Corneille, was being hooted off the stage as soon as it opened, and Cibber decided that he could no longer produce works in his own name.⁷⁵ This cleaving to the sublime and tragic mode which was nonetheless constantly undermined marks a contradiction in Cibber’s artistic subjectivity, which has at its root his marginal status.

Quite how contradictory Cibber is as a subject becomes clear in his autobiography. The form of split subjectivity revealed in this mirrors the only-divided access he has to the sublime. As the object of the book’s attention, Cibber presents himself to the reader as absurd, vain, foolish and a man of rather mediocre talents, whose taste is suspect, whose morals are questionable and whose intelligence is distinctly limited; and yet as the knowing, authorial subject of the book, rather than its known object, Cibber presents himself as a man of taste and judgement, whose opinions of the times, events and characters he describes we are expected to trust, and who can sit in philosophical judgement over the life of the creature he studies, even if, in fact, we are still to take these two beings as one and the same.⁷⁶

Hirst, too, is subject to the splitting effects of the impossibility of the ironic assumption of the sublime, around which his work, I have been arguing, is ineluctably structured. Hirst’s interviews proceed in a series of contradictory statements. One of Hirst’s most famous phrases, “life and death and all that stuff,” mimes out the bathos forced on such a split subjectivity.⁷⁷ The phrase starts by expressing an aspiration to the grand tradition of an art concerned with life and death themselves, but then undercuts itself with the colloquial phrase “and all that stuff,” denying the very seriousness and sublimity he attempts to impart to what he does, but which he knows will seem absurdly pretentious in any case, if he, a populist and commercial artist, embraces it seriously. Another of Hirst’s pronouncements is typical of this enforced irony:

⁷⁴ Both cited in Highfill (Jr.), Burnum and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, 217.

⁷⁵ Koon, *Colley Cibber*, 108.

⁷⁶ For further discussion of this dilemma in Cibber’s autobiography, see Glover, “Nobility, Visibility and Publicity,” 523-39.

⁷⁷ I have not traced the precise origin of this notorious phrase of Hirst’s; it is quoted in the catalogue for the fourth British Art Show, in Manchester, 1995, as cited, for example in Adrian Searle’s review of this exhibition. (Adrian Searle, “British Art with Attitude,” *Independent* 14 November 1995, also available FindArticles.com, 09 Jun. 2008. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19951114/ai_n14017928> visited 9 June 2008.) In interview with Charlotte Gill, David Lee of the *Jackdaw* has said that it was in an interview with him that Hirst used the phrase. (Charlotte Gill, “Has Damien Hirst Gone Too Far This Time?,” *Daily Mail* 22 June 2006, <<http://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/news/article-391913/Has-Damien-Hirst-gone-far-time.html>> visited 8 June 2008.)

"I try to say something and deny it at the same time."⁷⁸ This makes explicit a gesture not just restricted to Hirst's style of speech. Flip humour and pat reiterations constantly undermine the orientation of the work itself to "life and death and all that stuff," which can only be taken up half seriously, half comically.

Hirst and Cibber are artistic subjects suspended between sublimity and bathos. But not only would I argue that this condition is endemic and structural to the impossibility of their aspirations as classed social and cultural beings – as "hacks," "plagiarists" and "coxcombs" – but also that it is structural to the aesthetics of the sublime, which always leave us in this place. The sublime, after all, does not come to the fore as the aesthetic category of the aristocracy, but with the rise of the bourgeoisie – with the rise of the class of theatrical and other shopkeepers of which Cibber was a part.⁷⁹ Sublimity is not the aesthetic of the aristocrat, who is oriented to classical beauty. It is for the bourgeois who cannot possess it that the sublime is an object of fascination and aspiration, to be pursued at all costs, even if instead it repeatedly precipitates them into the ridiculous. This leads to an argument – close to that of the last chapter – that it is structural that the sublime gets "taken up" in commercial culture and by its consumer audiences (who, just like its producers, find it imperative but also impossible, except with irony, to embrace it as an aesthetic), for it is in the commercial realm that the paradoxes which produce it are forged.

The extent to which the sublime is essential to such a split subject – as a mode of that subject's constitution (unfinished, loosely held together, produced as it is out of contradiction) – and the nature of the particular sublime that emerges from it is, I think, particularly clearly revealed through a reading of Fielding's attacks on Cibber's *Apology* in his *Champion* essays. In these, Fielding resurrected the basic joke of Pope's *Peri Bathous* to mount a sustained attack on Cibber's prose style. On 22 April 1740, Fielding opened his attack, ironically

78 Cited, for example, in Shani, "Damien Hirst's Drawings," n.p. These examples I give are not the only ones, but are indicative of a larger phenomenon in the way that Hirst discusses his work, and which seems structural to the kind of ironised subjectivity which Stallabrass finds endemic to Hirst's artistic processes. (Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 20-1.) Another fine piece of evidence of this divided condition in which Hirst's work and his commentary on it exists is in the interview which Hirst gave Adrian Danant in 1995. When asked whether the works are metaphorical, Hirst gives the usual contradictory answer: "They both are and they aren't." He goes on to elucidate at length the "metaphor" involved in his use of the cigarette (which represents the fleeting life and death of an individual), but then pulls back from embracing this: "But as soon as you read it like that you feel ridiculous." Hirst concludes; "I feel ridiculous being metaphorical anyway, but it's unavoidable." (Dannant, "Life's Like This," 62.) Such, I am suggesting here, is the very condition and relation to the sublime. The sublime involves a certain rhetorical over-reaching (metaphorical or otherwise) in order to address grand issues. But for Hirst and Cibber there is a certain bathetic impossibility in doing this, just as there is an unavoidability. Bathos here is lived as an experience of the artistic subject within a commercial cultural economy rather than merely being a matter of an accidental rhetorical failure.

79 I note this in the last chapter, and cite, for example, Furniss, *Aesthetic Ideology*.

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Fig. 56: *Loving in a World of Desire*, 1996. MDF, steel, air blower, beach ball. 200 x 200 x 60 cm. Installation view, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005. Photo Luke White.

Loving is a work in which Hirst's irony – saying something and not saying it at the same time – becomes disabling. It restages the metaphor of *I Want to Spend...*, where the floating ball indicates a “human condition,” in which the individual floats precariously on nothingness. But the pathos of the “unbearable lightness of being” in *I Want to Spend*, bound as I think this was with its materiality, is now entirely lacking, subsumed within the glossy, poppy surfaces of *Loving*, which seems to want to say something about the nature of celebrity and consumption, but is singularly unengaging. It is not that *I Want to Spend* is without irony: it is charged with it, and with a sense of the absurdity of the metaphor it offers; but nonetheless, it wrings a charge from this irony and this insufficiency, which *Loving* fails to do.

proposing that Cibber is the “most absolute Master” of the English language, “for surely he must be absolute Master of that whose Laws he can trample under Feet, and which he can use as he pleases.”⁸⁰ His work, suggests Fielding, echoing Pope’s terminology, “abounds with many flowers of that *exquisitely sweet silver* Stile called the Profound.”⁸¹ Pretending to laud them as evidence of a Longinian disregard of the proper techniques and rules of good writing – and even of syntax and grammar – Fielding unleashes an avalanche of examples of Cibber’s grammatical, stylistic and semantic failures. Parodying Longinus’s praise of Homer,⁸² Fielding suggests that “our great *Master* hath tortured” his language, in an assertion of his “absolute Power” over it.⁸³

The following week, Fielding carried on:

Now in all these Instances, tho’ a Boldness of Expression is made use of, which none but great Masters dare attempt [...] yet we may with some little Difficulty without the least help of Grammar, have a guess at his Meaning. But there are other parts of his Work so very sublime, that Grammar offers you its Aid in vain; the following Stile carries a βίαν ἀμαχον,⁸⁴ according to *Longinus*, along with it, *and absolutely overpowers* the Reader [...] so can our Author; this Stile comes upon you, says the former Critic like a *Thunderbolt*, or to use a Word which may give a more familiar Idea to my Reader, like a *Blunderbuss*, and carries all before it.⁸⁵

Fielding’s critique, most literally understood, heaps ridicule on Cibber’s sloppy writing. The *Apology*, as Fielding demonstrates, is riddled with linguistic, rhetorical and semantic absurdities. Yet Fielding’s utilisation of the figure of bathos to attack Cibber, in the light of Cibber’s orientation to the sublime, is more narrowly appropriate. Fielding’s criticism teases something highly significant from Cibber’s style and its aspirations. Cibber’s style in the *Apology*, as elsewhere, is gushing and unrestrained, a barrage of undisciplined effects. Like his “sentimental” theatre, his very literary style is aimed at the production of pathos and “nervous” energies. It proceeds after these in hysterical leaps. Cibber himself, who was always last to disagree with those who accused him of technical deficiency, describes his own style in not so different terms:

My style is unequal, pert and frothy, patched and party-colour’d like the Coat of an Harlequin; low and pompous, crammed with

⁸⁰ Henry Fielding, *Contributions to the Champion and Related Writings*, ed. W. B. Coley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 292.

⁸¹ Fielding, *Champion*, 292. Emphasis Fielding’s, as it will be in following quotations.

⁸² “He has in the words *hypek thanatoio*, forced into union, by a kind of unnatural compulsion, prepositions not usually compounded. He has thus tortured his line into the similitude of the impending calamity.” (Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, 10.6. Roberts trans.)

⁸³ Fielding, *Champion*, 293.

⁸⁴ See *Peri Hupsous*, 1.4: “irresistible power.”

⁸⁵ Fielding, *Champion*, 296.

Epithets, strew'd with Scraps of second-hand Latin from common Quotations.⁸⁶

Fielding's attack thus latches on to the fact that the "errors" in Cibber's prose involve a certain chaotic flight of language, aimed at a heightening of affect. As Fielding puts it, "his Genius (to speak in our Author's Stile) ascends into the elevated and nervously pompous Elements of the Sublime," where "the ladder of Grammar offers itself in vain to the Feet of the Reader's Understanding."⁸⁷ Fielding's words can be read not only in the hostile sense in which they are meant; they also tell us something about what it is in the *Apology* that made it a best-seller, not just in spite of but because of its mad and often ridiculous style, which makes it, even today, a compelling and highly entertaining read. What makes it readable is certainly not any measure of correctness in his writing, but the economy of rhetorical excess and deficiency which it unleashes. What we have in Cibber, in fact is a variety of a sublime style, marked and constituted by the splitting of selfhood or subjectivity, and its ironically ecstatic flights between sublimity and bathos.

This ironised sublime takes me once more to the territory of "Camp."⁸⁸ Is there a form of kinship between Camp and the sublime, at least as we have it in commodified culture and with its commercial subjects such as Cibber? Are the two sensibilities rather more in accord than usually assumed?⁸⁹ Is there something of the Camp at the heart of the commercial sublime and its modes of pleasure? Conversely, is there something of the rhetorical "too much" of the

86 Cibber, *Apology*, 1:43. It is worth noting that even in Cibber's own auto-critique here, are a series of "false" sublime (the pompous, the pert, the crammed, etc.), and a recognition of a highly-strung excess at the heart of the writing, which is always constantly over-reaching itself.

87 Fielding, *Champion*, 296.

88 Even though I rather problematise the distinction involved, I am here following Moe Meyer in capitalising "Camp" when used to refer to a "queer aesthetic," differentiating this from "camp" (with a small "c"), which he uses for the reappropriations of Camp strategies and sensibilities within mass culture.

89 Any form of irony has often been thought to be inimical to the seriousness and transcendental orientation of the experience of the sublime, and hence the "camp" would often seem to be a diametrically opposed form of sensibility. Thus Thomas Weiskel, for example, in the introduction to his seminal book on *The Romantic Sublime*, writes that "we have long been too ironic for the capacious gestures of the Romantic sublime." (Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 6.) Yet the jaded and ironised sensibility of the media culture of the late twentieth century has found itself to be quite compatible with its obsession with sublimities. In fact, when we go back to the eighteenth century and think about the popular flowerings of the sublime in the Gothic novel, we see this rise in direct proportion to levels of ironic sophistication. Thus in a letter to Hannah More, Horace Walpole describes the *Castle of Otranto* as written for an age "in which much was known; that required only to be amused [...]; that could not be spoiled; was in no danger of being too credulous; and rather wanted to be brought back into imagination." (Walpole to More, 13 November 1784, cited in Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, 4.) E. J. Clery has argued that the development of the taste for the supernatural at the same time was also a matter precisely of the growth of a distance between urban dwellers and traditional superstitious folk beliefs, and it is with this distance that they could be taken up with an enjoyable frisson. (Clery, *Supernatural Fiction*, 2-4 and throughout.)

sublime in the exaggerations of Camp?⁹⁰ In Sontag's "Notes on Camp," she proposes, for example, the roots of the Camp sensibility to lie in just the period we are studying here, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the sublime was also in its ascendancy.⁹¹ She picks out as a source of Camp the concern of that culture for the production of "instant feeling and the total presence of character," in particular through highly conventionalised formulae⁹² – aspects which I have here been exploring as part of the manner in which the sublime is conjugated within a commodified cultural economy.

The notion of Camp, furthermore, helps us understand Colley Cibber's relation to the sublime. As defined by Moe Meyer, Camp, as a queer aesthetic, involves "an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the self as unique, abiding and continuous, while substituting instead a concept of the self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts."⁹³ Such a self is emphatically that which I have been arguing here is presented and constructed by Cibber in his brush with the sublime and through his class impersonations. For Meyer, such a masquerade is a "critical manoeuvre not limited to sexualities, but is one that has valuable applications for marginal social identities in general."⁹⁴ It is "queer" for Meyer not in the sense that it stems from a particular biologically essential difference, or from a defined set of sexual practices, and it cannot thus be reduced to the hetero-/homo- binary. Rather, for Meyer, Camp, as a queer aesthetic, resides in highlighting the performative nature of identity, and shattering a supposed depth of "essences" and continuities in favour of surface, play and productivity. Coming inevitably from a minoritarian perspective and using the resources given by the interpellations of the hegemonic order, Camp turns the identities celebrated by the bourgeois model of depth themselves into a masquerade, and thus becomes a tactic through which the certainties of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and the like can be undermined, and through which minority groups assert their presence in the world.

It is, this is to say, a matter of just the kinds of subjective "space" or positioning which we have seen Cibber – and even Hirst – utilising. Cibber is

90 For the camp as inherently a matter of the "too much" see Sontag, "Camp," 283-4. Here the Camp is discussed as being structured as a form of hyperbole, just like the sublime.

91 See also, for example, Thomas A. King's "Performing 'Akimbo': Queer Pride and Epistemological Prejudice," in Meyer, ed., *Politics and Poetics*, 23-50. King, though he reads the situation rather differently, argues for the emergence, as I do here, of Camp strategies in the confrontation between aristocratic and bourgeois modes of signification and identity.

92 Sontag, "Camp," 280-1.

93 Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.

94 Meyer, "Reclaiming," 3.

barred from the centred space of the “master” position of the gentleman who can own language and who is not owned through it. Rather, his commercial sublime, the sublime of the hack, the plagiarist and the fop, involves a certain ex-stasis (being outside) in relation to language and the positions of speech which it offers; Cibber’s fate is always to be, to inhabit and to exploit such an ex-stasis, and this is the source of his nervously hyper-sublime style.

But if Cibber makes an acceptable Camp icon, thinking Hirst in terms of the Camp is rather more problematic. To start with, Hirst’s laddishness, which I have already noted, sits uneasily with the notion of Camp. And though Hirst’s work and his persona are decidedly matters of performance, and of the self as “processually constituted by repetitive and stylistic acts,” and of certain forms of irony, simulation and exaggeration which may be associated with campness, Hirst’s masquerade (Stallabrass tellingly, though in a different context, calls it a “masquerade of a masquerade”⁹⁵) nonetheless also reiterates and reinforces, as its content, myths of artistic genius on which the bourgeois model of the depth and continuity of the individual self leans as ideological support – all at the very moment that he could be understood also, with his machine-produced aesthetic and factory system of production, to undermine them.⁹⁶ The gendered and classed roles he takes up – however absurdly performed – reiterate his given position in the symbolic order of society and appear to be at the service of its reproduction.⁹⁷

Nonetheless, the conception of the performativity of identity, and the minoritarian tactics offered by the Camp, surely at least elucidate the strategy

⁹⁵ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 47.

⁹⁶ This, again, may best be understood as a form of split and denied subjectivity. Hirst in interview often discusses his relation to the desire to be a “painter” rather than a “sculptor.” For Hirst, to be a painter clearly signifies the full status of the Romantic, expressionistic artistic self. Yet Hirst finds himself “unable” to be a painter, however desirable and ideal such a role may be. His mode of production, rather than expression as such, is one of “collage” - placing things together - a mode which he associates with “sculpture” rather than with the painter’s existential confrontation with making a mark. (See, for example, Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 69.) But what Hirst undertakes in his collages is simulation, in the realm of collage, of the effects of painting. Within the slickly produced surfaces of the vitrines, “expression” rears its head again.

⁹⁷ In this regard, the highly “decorative” nature of Hirst’s work is interesting. The decorative, of course, is a term demeaned within contemporary Western culture through an association with the feminine, and it also speaks a certain attachment to surface rather than depth, which echoes the tactics of the Camp and its refusal of “bourgeois” depth. (Sontag writes: “Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content.” Sontag, “Camp,” 278.) Hirst embraces such a decorativeness, for example, in interview, when discussing points where he has been criticised for “flower arranging” and “curtain design.” In one interview he says: “I remember being told very early on at art school that there was a lot of flower arranging going on in my paintings. As if it was a really bad thing. With this diamond skull, there certainly is a hell of a lot of flower arranging going on.” (Gayford, “Damien Hirst,”) For curtain design, see Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 125. But through its integration into an otherwise rather macho rhetoric, Hirst nonetheless is in a position to avoid the ghettoisation to which women and gay artists who privilege decoration in their work have been subject, when they have challenged its (and their) exclusion from mainstream artistic representation.

which Hirst takes up to deal with the inscriptions and circumscriptions of class which he must negotiate, and help clarify what he does share with Cibber across the centuries. It helps us understand the particular nature of Hirst's barred re-enactment of the sublime, which, in spite of the reservations just given about Hirst's alignment with a politics of Camp, as elucidated by Meyer, it seems quite reasonable to term "camped up." Furthermore, what these two figures share also throws light on some broader tendencies of other – even less authored – forms of the commercial sublime, with their address to a "popular" (non-elite) audience and its pleasures.

Meyer himself would certainly resist a utilisation of the notion of Camp to apply to Hirst. He discusses at some length the absorption of a Camp aesthetic within mainstream popular culture, wishing Camp to refer properly to a set of critical and oppositional tactics used by minority groups, especially sexual minorities.⁹⁸ For Meyer, the popular appropriation of Camp offers merely the reassuringly affirmative pleasures of an irony which leaves the ontological grounds of bourgeois identity and subjectivity untroubled. This would be one way of interpreting Hirst's work, as the "residual camp" of a society absorbing the challenge of Camp strategies. However, as Fabio Cleto has argued, Meyer's argument reintroduces a form of ontologising binarism – between authentic and inauthentic, queer and straight – that his account otherwise attempts to resist, and which a "politics and poetics of Camp" might be expected to erode.⁹⁹ With these lines understood as unfixed and fluid, the appropriations of Camp taste by late-twentieth-century popular culture (of which Hirst is read here as a part) can be understood in a less purely negative light. Just as Camp is appropriated and defused by the mainstream, it also enters that mainstream as an irreducibly

⁹⁸ Meyer, though this seems to contradict what he writes about Camp and the queer as not reducible to particular sexual identities, wishes to understand the Camp as historically dependent of the referent of the "homosexual-as-Type." See Meyer, "Reclaiming," 1-2, 6-7, 15-8. The problem of the relation of the Camp to the "mainstream" and to the "popular" is not a theme restricted to Meyer's discussion of the notion. In Susan Sontag's seminal essay, this is also a concern. Sontag worries that even her writing about Camp amounts to a kind of a betrayal of it, ceding its ownership to a broader public in opposition to which Camp defines itself, and in opposition to which it serves as a marker of cultural and social difference. But Sontag holds back from seeing it as a solely or properly "homosexual" sensibility, preferring to see homosexuals as having, for historical reasons, formed the bulk of a "vanguard" of Camp taste. (Sontag, "Camp," 290.) The role of Camp strategies within the rise of pop in the late twentieth century has also been influentially discussed by Andrew Ross, in his book on intellectuals and popular culture *No Respect*. Ross documents the way that Camp is taken up as a subcultural or pop-cultural tactic in its appropriations of the signifiers of authority, but also notes the way that as an aesthetic it created a mode for intellectuals to appropriate, whilst also marking their distance from, an increasingly hegemonic popular culture. Meyer's argument against the notion of a Pop Camp takes Ross as its primary target. (Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* [London and New York: Routledge, 1989], 135-70.)

⁹⁹ Cleto, "Introduction," in Cleto, ed., *Camp*, 16.

disruptive presence.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the insights of Cultural Studies into the nature of “popular” consumption suggest a homology between the “queer access to the apparatus of production” described by Meyer¹⁰¹ and the inherently dispossessed situation of the “subordinated” consumers – and hack producers – of mass culture, denied full and autonomous access as they also are to the means and discourses of cultural production, and similarly reliant on strategies of appropriation within the confines of a given code.¹⁰² The double-edge of such an appropriation of Camp is of much use in understanding the complexity of Hirst’s position as an embodied, classed and interpellated subject within the symbolic system of contemporary society, and helps us acknowledge the ways that his work both parodies and reiterates it.¹⁰³

Considering such a relation to Camp also, if I may slip into the register of art criticism for a moment, helps understand where Hirst’s appropriations of the sublime are strongest, and where they are most bathetic. The best of Hirst’s work is where it approaches Camp most closely. This does not, however, mean Hirst’s most “knowing,” ironic work, since such work – which increasingly dominates Hirst’s career as it goes on, as his self-consciousness as a brand-name artist becomes overriding – actually fails as Camp for the reason that Sontag remarks is typical of the failure of much “deliberate camp.” It lacks the vitality, the play, exuberance and absurd ambition which marks out successful Camp. Sontag writes of such failures as “extravagant [only] in an inconsistent or unpassionate way.” Such work, rather than springing from an “irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility,” falls into a “safe” form of “pseudo-Camp.” Such works “lack fantasy” and reveal an underlying “contempt for their materials.”¹⁰⁴ Such may be said for much of Hirst’s mid-career work. This is not, however, to divide his early work from his later work along the lines Sontag proposes between “naïve Camp” and “deliberate Camp.” Hirst’s early work is quite knowing enough, quite aware of the extravagance of its overreach, and of its self-theatricalisation as an artistic gesture. It holds in tension

100 Meyer, too, notes this effect. He writes that, in its appropriation of a queer discourse, “Pop camp becomes the unwitting vehicle of a subversive operation that introduces queer signifying codes into dominant discourse” (Meyer, “Reclaiming,” 13.)

101 Meyer, “Reclaiming,” 5.

102 See for example Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 1.

103 It is one of the advantages of Queer Theory, especially as it draws on Judith Butler’s conceptions of performativity, that it allows us to understand how the discourses of marginalised groups do not just challenge dominant discourse, but, made “parasitic” on it, often serve to reiterate and reinforce it. As Meyer writes: “Camp appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the spectre of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order.” (Meyer, “Reclaiming,” 11.)

104 Sontag, “Camp,” 282-4.

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Fig. 57: From Camp to Kitsch? Hirst's *Sacred XVII*, 2005. Perspex, steel, animal heart, dagger, and 5% formaldehyde solution. 43 x 30.6 x 15.2 cm. Installation view, San Carlos Museum, Mexico City, 2006. Photo Andrew Winning / Reuters.

the awareness of the impossibility of its desire and that (sublimely impossible) desire itself. This tension is constituent of the commercial sublimines I have been discussing. It disintegrates too far in much of Hirst's later work, which remains more formulaic, less exciting. It is only in some of the most recent (and most extravagant) work – in particular Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), surely Hirst's most darkly camp work yet – that something of the vitally over-ambitious returns, giving us the "too much" at once of the Camp and the sublime.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, by highlighting the striking similarities – across the intervening centuries – between Hirst and Cibber, I have been teasing out a logic of the positionality of commercially oriented producers within the realm of modern cultural production, and of the way this position determines both the artistic procedures and the very subjectivity of such producers. Like Pope, I have discovered at the heart of the positionality of such subjects a relation to the sublime, as an impossible limit case with regard to which their work emplots itself. Both Hirst and Cibber, by dint of their class positioning and by their enmeshment within commerce, are excluded from the position of full speech which is the ideal of the Longinian orator, just as it is that of the autonomous "gentleman scholar"; as subjects they are, in effect, structured like (and by) bathos. But the experience of the commercial fop, hack or plagiarist is exemplary rather than exceptional within the discourse of the sublime: the sublime – unrepresentable, lying beyond the subject's grasp – is by definition an impossibility, the matter of a subject's orientation rather achievement. Even in Longinus we can see such a structure, and perhaps this is a part of the reason why *Peri Hupsous* became such an important text at the particular moment that it did. Though it takes as its ideal the masterful orator, Longinus's rhetorical advice nonetheless inhabits the middle ground between sublimity and bathos: he has as much to say on the pitfalls of sinking as on the means to soar, and the text is haunted by the ambivalent and recurrent figure of the intoxicated orator, who may be ridiculous – revolting even – to an audience left sober by his flights of fancy, but who nonetheless is also the only subject of sublime speech, the source of which lies in intoxicated *ekstasis*, a mode of being-outside-of-oneself, (dis)possessed, even.¹⁰⁵ As Longinus stresses, good and bad writing, failure and

105 Compare, for example the drunken orator of Longinus's *Peri Hupsous*, §3 (quoted above), who is intoxicated whilst his listeners are not, with his contempt for Hyperides whose "staid utterances of a sober-hearted man [...] leave the hearer unmoved." (§34) By contrast to Hyperides, Demosthenes's speeches rise to an ecstasy which displaces him from the centre of his own discourse – it is no longer even "human" – and which seems to have carried him off into a Bacchic, inspired state, just as it also overpowers his auditors and readers. In this passage,

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Fig. 58: Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007. Platinum, diamonds and human teeth. 17.1 x 12.7 x 19.1 cm. Owned by an anonymous investment group. Image from *Telegraph Magazine*, 2 June 2007: front cover.

success, spring from the same sources.¹⁰⁶

Asserting the typicality of the commercial sublime is entirely commensurate with the fact that the sublime rose coterminally with the cultural consumption of the “middling sorts.” An aesthetic of alienation, the sublime expresses their – always somewhat marginal – access to the position of the subject of discourse and representation, a marginality which enforces a certain self-divided irony which has proved central to modern forms of consumption and subjectivity.¹⁰⁷ It is from the paradoxes of such a subject that I have been proposing the sublime emerges as an aesthetic. I have sought here to understand this ironic mode of access to the sublime through the insights of Queer Theory and Cultural Studies into the production and consumption of marginalised groups (however much a numerical majority they may constitute), and proposed – however problematic the concept might remain in the case of Hirst and Cibber – a “Camp sublime” at the heart of commodity-cultural production: there is, I argued, something “Camp” in the very exorbitance of a pretension to sublimity. It is through such tactics of camping-up as a way of negotiating their outsider positions that Hirst and Cibber – “putting on the periwig of Sir Novelty Fashion” – forged their careers and claims to cultural value. Their success, as is inevitable due to their inherently contradictory and untenable position, and due to the two-edged nature of ironic appropriation, is only partial, and like all commodity culture, they remain suspended between the sublime and the ridiculous, hupsos and bathos.

it seems clear that it is only by becoming carried off, intoxicated by a speech one no longer fully owns, that the sublime can have the same effect on its audience.

106 Longinus, *Peri Hupsous*, §5.

107 As an aesthetic of the presentation of the unrepresentable which must thus only say what it says through saying something else it has at its heart such an irony. For the later fate of the sublime in German Idealist and Romantic thought, see Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996). Bowie notes the influence of the incommensurabilities of the sublime on the conceptions of Romantic Irony developed in particular by the Schlegel brothers.

Interlude 2

The Sublime in the Butcher's Shop Window

One of the most striking prefigurations of the commodity sublime of Hirst's vitrines comes in Emile Zola's novel *Ventre de Paris* (1874), in a passage where Claude Lantier, Zola's archetypal character of the avant-garde artist,¹ discusses his one "true" masterpiece. This masterpiece, in contradiction to the failed masterpiece he paints in *L'Oeuvre*, is not a painting, but the arrangement of a butcher's shop window:

Shall I tell you what was the finest thing I ever produced since I first began to work, and the one which I recall with the greatest pleasure? It's quite a story. When I was at my Aunt Lisa's on Christmas Eve last year that idiot of an Auguste, the assistant, was setting out the shop-window. Well, he quite irritated me by the weak, spiritless way in which he arranged the display; and at last I requested him to take himself off, saying that I would group the things myself in a proper manner. You see, I had plenty of

¹ Claude Lantier is also the central character of another of Zola's novels in the Rougon-Macquart series, *L'Oeuvre*. Zola was close friends with a number of the Impressionists, including Manet, Monet and Cézanne, and wrote in his notebook that he would "press his friends into service, to collect their most salient features," making Lantier "*un Manet, un Cézanne dramatisé*," and sparking debate from then onwards as to which of Claude's features are drawn from which of the great artists. (See, for example, Jeffrey Meyers, "Monet in Zola and Proust," *New Criterion* 24 [2005]: 41; Aruna D'Souza, "Paul Cézanne, Claude Lantier and Artistic Impotence," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth Century Visual Culture* 3.2 [2004], <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn_04/articles/dsou.html> 23 March 2006; Thomas Zamparnelli, "Zola and the Quest for the Absolute in Art," *Yale French Studies* 42 [1969]: 143-58; Robert J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne and Manet: A Study of L'oeuvre* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986]. The above quotes, from Manet's notes for *L'Oeuvre*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS N.A.f. folio 265, have been assembled from these sources.) Lantier, however, also serves as an artistic alter-ego for Zola himself, or at least for a dimension of his artistic experience. Zola had written his 1866 salon reviews for *L'Événement* under the pseudonym "Monsieur Claude," and an early, autobiographical work was entitled *La Confession de Claude*; Lantier's obsessional enthusiasm for nudity in art coupled with his actual sexual abstinence echoes Zola's nickname of "*Le Chaste*" – but more importantly there are parallels between Lantier's project as a painter and that of Zola as a writer, both sharing the same impossible ambition for their work. *L'Oeuvre*, for example, is overburdened by its attempts to run two simultaneous plots, to provide a panoramic vision of French society and a portrait of its avant-garde, to set out an artistic manifesto and a theory of creativity or genius and to produce an in-depth psychological profile of its protagonist. Lantier's fantasy for a "Herculean" work, an enormous fresco cycle which would depict "the whole of modern life" is, after all, exactly what Zola undertook, in a literary guise, in his Rougon-Macquart series. Lantier's exclamation "Ah, to be able to see and to paint everything!" aligns itself with Zola's own descriptive mode. (Émile Zola, *His Masterpiece [L'Oeuvre]*, ed., trans. Alfred Vizetelly, 25 May 2005, Project Gutenberg, Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15900/15900.txt>>, 20 March 2006.) However, the point here is not to identify Lantier with a particular artist, but to note that he stands as a composite figure through which Zola could represent the nature of avant-garde art and creativity. Of course, these questions of who Lantier is in relation to the beginning of an avant-garde project of modern art also have a certain bearing on the knotty shape of my overall narrative, for it is Cézanne, of course, who lies at the beginning of Lyotard's genealogy of art, and whose "little sensations," so famously discussed by Merleau-Ponty, also appear to bear so heavily on Lyotard's notion of the artistic event.

bright colours to work with – the red of the tongues, the yellow of the hams, the blue of the paper shavings, the rosy pink of the things that had been cut into, the green of the sprigs of heath, and the black of the black-puddings – ah! a magnificent black, which I have never managed to produce on my palette. And naturally, the *crepine*, the small sausages, the chitterlings, and the crumbed trotters provided me with delicate greys and browns. I produced a perfect work of art. I took the dishes, the plates, the pans, and the jars, and arranged the different colours; and I devised a wonderful picture of still life, with subtle scales of tints leading up to brilliant flashes of colour. The red tongues seemed to thrust themselves out like greedy flames, and the black-puddings, surrounded by pale sausages, suggested a dark night fraught with terrible indigestion. [...] At the top of everything a huge turkey exhibited its white breast, marbled blackly by the truffles showing through its skin. It was something barbaric and superb, suggesting a paunch amidst a halo of glory; but there was such a cutting, sarcastic touch about it all that people crowded to the window, alarmed by the fierce flare of the shop-front. When my aunt Lisa came back from the kitchen she was quite frightened, and thought I'd set the fat in the shop on fire [...]. Ah, well! that was my masterpiece. I have never done anything better.²

Jacques Rancière has recently pointed out the strange anticipation which this scene makes of contemporary installation art:

[I]nallation is one of the central forms of contemporary art. But you will find an extraordinary passage in Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris* [... where] Lantier explains that his most beautiful work wasn't a painting. Rather, he created his masterpiece the day he redid his cousin the butcher's window display. [...] At that time, then, no one made installations, but an indecision between the art of the canvas and the art of display can already be marked. An art that has only developed in the last twenty or thirty years had, in some sense, already found its thought and its visibility.³

Rancière's purpose in discussing this example is to discover a single "aesthetic regime of art" which unites contemporary art with the Romanticisms and Realisms of the nineteenth century, denying those fetishised periodisations of modernism and postmodernism which claim fundamental ruptures have occurred between such times and our own. For Rancière a more coherent set of shared possibilities structure the art of a more broadly conceived modernity, uniting our experience with that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such has also been my own argument in this dissertation, though my explication, revolving as it does around the problems of capitalism and the

2 Émile Zola, *The Fat and the Thin* [*Ventre de Paris*], ed., trans. Alfred Vizetelly, 22 August 2002, Project Gutenberg, Available: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/ftthn10.txt>>, 20 March 2006. Chapter 4.

3 Rancière, "Politics and Aesthetics," 206-7.

sublime, has been somewhat different from Rancière's.

In the context of my argument, what is striking is not the general correspondence between Zola's description and current practices of installation art, but the specific echoes between Lantier's "perfect work of art" and Damien Hirst's sculptures. Installation art commonly offers a multi-sensory, intimate and absorptive experience, whilst what Hirst shares with Lantier is an art set behind glass, where vision is the privileged sense of apprehension. What is important in Rancière's passage is identifying an "art of display" – which is, of course, an art of commerce, too.⁴

Rancière's exposition of the "aesthetic regime of art" tends to downplay the relation between modern art's and commerce's forms of representation, which I have made central in my account here.⁵ For Rancière, instead it is the problem of what form of "life" we live together against which such a regime of art is read, placing the political imagination at the heart of the equation.⁶ Marking this orientation of Rancière's account to the political, one of the key attributes of the aesthetic regime of art that Rancière identifies is its liquidation of the hierarchies of representation of Classicist art, which had in turn supported the forms of social difference of the *ancien régime*. In the aesthetic regime of art, in contrast, all subject matter, however low, is taken as of equal significance. But, as Stewart Martin has argued, this "aesthetic revolution," with its aesthetic indifference, is paralleled in the indifference lodged in the commodity form, where all objects are made interchangeable.⁷ And if aesthetic

4 Hirst's work self-consciously finds its logic in the theatre of commercial, shop-window display. Several times in interview, Hirst has discussed a key formative epiphany in his career, whilst still a student and employed at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery. He was given the task of laying out and lighting a Carl Andre sculpture for a customer who was coming to see a series of works, a task which he carried out with such glee and thoroughness that he managed to transform the presence of the work, which was duly the piece which sold: "I knew – I still know – that he would not have bought the Andre if I hadn't lit it. [...] It's not a great Andre, but he bought it. He bought my one." (Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 62.) At this point, Hirst became aware of the power of display as an artistic procedure – and its power to compel a viewer. Such theatrical procedures became integral to his own working method. See also Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 77.

5 For Rancière's exposition of the "aesthetic regime of art" – and the representational regimes that it breaks away from (the "ethical regime of images" and the "representational regime of the arts") – see Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution," 133-55.

6 In "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," Rancière, for example, associates the aesthetic regime with Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, and their project for a freely playful art which, in its very freedom, teaches us a free form of life, and Rancière discusses Schiller's essays as a response to the French Revolution. Such an association makes the project of modern art a fundamentally political one.

7 This inattention to the relation between the aesthetic regime and the (cultural) logic of capitalism, at least, is Stewart Martin's criticism of Rancière. Stuart Martin, "Culs-De-Sac: Rancière's the Politics of Aesthetics, and Badiou's Handbook of Inaesthetics," *Radical Philosophy* 131 (2005): 41-2.

indifference forms the “aesthetic unconscious”⁸ of an actual social equalisation in which bodies, their visibility, their right to language and to representation are put into circulation in new ways in modernity, we should not – *pace* Rancière – ignore the role that capitalist forms of exchange played in dissolving medieval hierarchies, changing who could produce and consume culture and how, and creating new forms of social agency and subjectivity.⁹ We need only look to Cibber, and to eighteenth-century anxieties about the corrosive effects on social order of commodity consumption by those outside the elite, to be reminded of this, and of the extent to which aesthetic and economic practices and subjectivities are bound together. With this in mind, the aesthetic revolution seems less purely a matter of those politics of the radical left around which the avant-garde has consistently gravitated, and more a matter of the “revolution” of the rise of capitalism itself, and the new forms of representation that it brought with it, and on which it is itself based.

But Rancière’s example of Zola’s butcher’s window – with its intimation of art’s entanglement with a commercial art of display – allows us to think further the intimacy of art with commerce and its aesthetic forms. Lantier’s procedures are akin to those I have already described in Hirst, and which he shares with other commercially-oriented artists (Colley Cibber and the plagiarists, hacks and fops), procedures of bricolage turned to theatrical display.¹⁰ This is the logic of *étalage* which Adrian Rifkin discovers already at work in art a generation and more before Zola. Rifkin remarks on a comment in Ingres’s notebooks on Rubens, which finds “something of a butcher’s display in Rubens” – discovering “fresh flesh in his thinking” and “something of the butcher’s counter in his *mise en scène*.”¹¹ If Rancière finds it startling that the

8 Rancière, *L’inconscient Esthétique*.

9 Rancière denies the relation between the different forms of equalisation in the aesthetic and the commodity form in Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*. Cited in Martin, “Culs-De-Sac,” 41-2.

10 The term “theatrical,” of course was Cibber’s favourite, but we are also dealing with an art which is theatrical in the sense in which Michael Fried famously decried the minimalists. It is self-conscious as a form of display or appearance – caught, that is, like the commodity in a world of pure show and phenomenality – rather than the art of “absorption,” which seeks to turn inwards on itself for a truthfulness which eschews appearance, and also allows its viewer to exit the scene of visibility and its treacherously phantasmagorical logic. See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980). In the terms of my argument in this dissertation, it is theatricality and bricolage which are the primary similarities between Hirst and Lantier, however the similarities do not stop here. Hirst and Lantier both rely on a certain shock effect, and a desire to compel the viewer through spectacle. This results in a fascinated, captivated audience crowding around Lantier’s display window, a mode of spectation not lacking similarity to that which Hirst evinces. In Lantier, there is, furthermore, an ironic distance from his procedures and materials (he calls his work “sarcastic”) which should be familiar from my discussion of Hirst and Cibber. We can add to this a realism which has been pushed to the point of the literal, and where representation collapses into presentation.

11 This is Rifkin’s translation. In the original French: “chez Rubens il-y-a du boucher; il y a avant

contemporary “art of display” finds its “visibility” in Zola, then the image that Ingres uses, already accords a visibility to the trope of “the butcher’s window as art” (and with it Hirst’s artistic procedure).

Ingres’s comment, of course, is intended to highlight the pollution of Rubens’s work by the commercial, and what he understands as the ensuing appeal to the “basest” senses, the most fleshly and animal nature of the human, rather than the intellectual heights of ideal form.¹² He is attempting a Popean satire of bathos, bringing the nobility of art into collision with the sordid nature of commercial reality. It is in this negative light, and within the context of the transgression of the hierarchies of Neoclassical art (or, in Rancière’s terms, of the “representational regime of the arts”) that the confluence of art and the butcher’s window – an art of display – starts to take on visibility. Zola, on the side of the “aesthetic regime of art” and the dismantling of such hierarchies, merely reverses the negative judgment implied. In Zola the butcher’s shop is chosen precisely because of its spectacular upending of the hierarchies of subject matter, and its deliberate sinking into what had been the most basely material element, meat.

Meat, in modernity, however, is not simply a matter of the low but, in Deleuze’s phrase, a “zone of indiscernability”¹³ in which the animal and the human, life and death, the sublime and the abject become indeterminate. It doesn’t sit simply at one end of the spectrum of value, but marks a point of ambiguity around which its polarities collapse. Meat, as such a “zone of indiscernability,” serves as an analogue of the procedures of indifferenciation of aesthetic art, which orients aesthetic production to sensation without hierarchy. (In Lantier’s discourse on his sculpture, the objects are, for example, emptied out of their specificities as foods or parts of animals, becoming mere carriers of hues, tones, saturations and textures. Hirst, discussing his work, has described a similar working method.)¹⁴ It is also an analogue to the indifferenciation

tout de la chair fraîche dans sa pensée et de l’étal dans sa mise en scène.” As cited in Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres Then, and Now*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.

12 The comparison between Hirst and Rubens, perhaps the first international superstar celebrity of the world of art, whose factory-like workshop churned out a luxury product that made Rubens an unimaginable fortune and brought kings and nobles paying court to him, is not entirely new. See for example Joe La Placa, “Damien Agonistes,” *artnet.com* 22 december 2004, <<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/laplaca/laplaca12-22-04.asp>> accessed 28/12/04; Jonathan Jones, “Do Rich Artists Make Bad Art?,” *Guardian* 27 April 2006, <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1762256,00.html>> visited 25 June 2008.

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 25.

14 See, for example, Hirst’s discussion of *A Thousand Years* (1990) in Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 70. He discusses imagining the flies in the piece as “like points in space, moving around.” In spite of the heavily loaded and symbolically charged nature of the flies, Hirst reduces them to a formal problem – “I wanted it to be like a Naum Gabo, or something, points in space.” Hirst has elsewhere discussed his “collage” approach to artistic production

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Fig. 59: Joachim Beuckelaer, *Four Elements: Water*. Oil on canvas. 158.5 x 215 cm. National Gallery, London. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Beuckelaer%2C_Four_Elements_Water.jpg>

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Fig. 60: Pieter Aertsen, *Butcher's Stall with the Flight into Egypt*, 1551. Oil on wood panel. 123.3 x 150 cm. University Art Collections, Uppsala, Sweden. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Pieter_Aertsen_005.jpg>

of the commodity form. Like the commodity form and the form of capitalist relations, meat carries a certain paradoxical dualism. If meat is at once the seat of a sensibility which marks the vital itself, it is also the point at which life collapses into an inert materiality, just as the commodity is at once a particular use-value, but also an abstract exchange value, and just as labour is at once the actual labour of a body, but also the abstract power and time of labour which is exchanged. It is in meat that we are faced, above all, with that metaphysical paradox of capitalism, which has obsessed modern ontologies of the duality of the ideal or spirit and the material – and which, as the interface between subjectivity and the world of objects, forms the basis, in Michel Foucault's wonderful phrase, of the "strange empirico-transcendental doublet [...] which was called *man*."¹⁵ With such a special relation of meat to the conditions of modern capitalist experience, and to the structure of the aesthetic, Zola's vision of the butcher's shop as the scene of art is hardly accidental, but is a figure which, reiterated again and again – with its roots going back as far as the market scenes of Pieter Aertsen or Joachim Beuckelaer and reaching into the present in Eli Lotar, Soutine, Bacon¹⁶ and Hirst – cannot but haunt the histories of modern art, and marks the insistence of the capitalist basis of modern art and experience, however much art may disavow this.¹⁷

in terms of the arrangement of colour, and describes its evolution from a student practice of the arrangement of coloured pieces of paper or objects. (See, for example, Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 119-26.) There is something disingenuous about Hirst's and Lantier's (and Zola's) stress on literal materiality, since this disavows somewhat the extent to which their work also – and excessively so – relies on metaphor, allegory, and symbolism. To take up something as loaded, within our culture, as meat as a material, and to then claim that one is merely responding to formal and sensory imperatives is somewhat in bad conscience.

15 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 318-9. Foucault's emphasis.

16 Deleuze cites Bacon as saying that he is only religious in butcher's shops. Bacon in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1962-79*, new and enlarged ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 23, 46. Cited in Deleuze, *Bacon*, 24.

17 This continued struggle of Western thought with the mind-body and idea-matter dualism continues in recent discourses around digital technology, and the repeated cyber-fantasies about downloading consciousness into the machine as a final escape from embodied existence and what cyberpunk author William Gibson calls, exactly, "the meat." Mark Dery, whose *Escape Velocity* explores this theme in science-fiction literature, has also, in his book *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, written a fascinating essay on the way that Hirst might fit into this contemporary context of the experience of the mind and body in relation to digital technology and the dematerialisation of the economy, discussing the way that Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) played in New York to the background of anxieties about Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, disease and the body. (See Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* [New York: Grove Press, 1996]; *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink* [New York: Grove Press, 1999], 125-38.) These Sci-fi fantasies about technology and the transcendence of the body are, of course, also central in what Lyotard sets up (with the essay "Can Thought Go on without a Body?") and attempts to negotiate at the start of *The Inhuman*. The Lyotardian sublime itself, as "event" bubbling up from nature and the body and causing the vital action of thought, serves within the parameters of the negotiation of such a dualism. My argument here, of course, is generally that such a discourse in the present is simply yet another reshuffling of the deck of a longer and more structural problematic in modern Western

Rifkin argues that Ingres's judgment on Rubens itself involves a form of defensive projection outwards of the characteristics of his own art, which also function according to the aesthetic logic of the shop windows which were gaining dominance in the visual culture of the Paris streets at the time of Ingres's own growth as an artist, and which marked the eclipse of aristocratic modes of consumption and culture by new bourgeois ones.¹⁸ His analysis of the way that Ingres's paintings belong to this new world of the arcades brings to the fore the logic which Ingres shares with the other artists caught within the logic of theatrical *étalage*. For Rifkin, Ingres, a painter immersed in the market for art every bit as much as Rubens – or Hirst, Pope, or Cibber, for that matter – also conforms to the logic of the shop window display. His virtuosic portrayal of different surfaces and textures, and his laying out on the surface of the picture his mastery of different glazes and mark-making techniques amount to a spread of goods for sale, his painterly wares.¹⁹ In fact, it turns out that Ingres's primary method, like Hirst, Lantier, *et al.*, is a matter of the arrangement of components. In his hands and under the imperatives of an art of commercial display, Classicism's selection and combination of ideal features, rarely found together in a single example of a phenomenal body, becomes a matter of a certain Frankensteinian "butchery" as the human figure is decomposed into constituent units and reassembled. For Rifkin, this is the source of Ingres's reiterations and recomposition of the same painting, and of the migration of the same bodies from context to context in different paintings, each having become an element to recombine and recompose.

*

Ranciere's musings on Zola's book, and Rifkin's arguments about Ingres, also help us begin to recognise the extent to which it is the markets and shops of Les Halles themselves, as they are being transformed by the modernising processes of capital in Second Empire Paris,²⁰ which are the true aesthetic

thought, and neither the materialist or idealist attempts to escape its terms succeed, each in fact only serving to conjure the supplementary and haunting *revenant* of the other. The economy of such a problematic, I am arguing here, is essential to capital itself, and, of course, I am arguing that "meat" remains a key locus where the tension between the material and the ideal plays itself out. This is an important context for the fascination of Hirst's works to contemporary audiences.

18 Rifkin notes that "When Ingres came to Paris to study in David's studio in 1797, the very first of the great Parisian Arcades, the Passage du Caire, was under construction. The bourgeois shop-window was just beginning to match and then succeed aristocratic modes of provision and spectation." (Rifkin, *Ingres*, 45.)

19 Such an artistic window-dressing is betrayed, argues Rifkin, in the "fussiness" of the work, and his constant mania for re-doing and re-arranging.

20 The book is set during the redevelopment of Les Halles, in 1857-60.

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Fig. 61: Rembrandt, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655. Oil on wood. 94 x 69 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Rembrandt_Harmensz._van_Rijn_053.jpg>

product of capitalist modernity, rather than any artwork which merely represents them.²¹ If Lantier, in *Ventre de Paris* as in *L'Oeuvre*, is a “stuck” artist, facing a dilemma of artistic production every bit as knotty and impossible as Hirst and Cibber, then this is because such an art must be adequate to the capitalist modernity which it represents (and which it is also Zola’s impossible task to map).²² If Lantier’s paintings – an autonomous art which attempts to stand aside from the imperatives of capital and represent its world dispassionately – are unable to bear this burden, and if Lantier destroys them as failures at the end of each day, then the butcher’s shop window offers him another solution: rather than representing the sublimity of capitalist modernity, instead he partakes in it, presents it without representation, undergoing the mimesis of an adaptation of self, rather than taking up mimesis as pictorial duplication.²³

The central task of *Ventre de Paris* is in fact the description of this new urban landscape of the markets of Les Halles and the social forces which produce it and which it fosters. Lantier’s role in the book is as a conduit through which we as readers can view the market as a work of art. When we first meet him, he takes the protagonist of the novel, Florent, on a tour of the markets, falling into ecstatic rapture in front of them.²⁴ His tour sets up a pattern of description and representation which Zola then carries on throughout

21 Rancière, for example, calls the book “a great hymn to poetry and to great modern poetry in particular,” and continues, “Now what is this great modern poetry? And what is the great monument of the nineteenth century? Les Halles in Paris.” (Rancière, “Politics and Aesthetics,” 206.)

22 We see Lantier in *Ventre de Paris*, for example, gloomily pacing the streets of Les Halles furious at himself and contemplating giving up painting due to his “inability to execute the lasting, living works which he dreamed of [...]. Each of his days was a long effort ending in disappointment.” (Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 2.) His struggle – and failure – to produce such works is the central theme of *L'Oeuvre*. (See especially D’Souza, “Cézanne.”; Zamparnelli, “Zola,” 143-58.) Such a struggle to produce an authentic and original art of modernity, as depicted by Zola, entails a deeply Longinian – even Lyotardian – confrontation with the absolute, and with the aporia of escaping the rules and norms, theories and techniques of cultural production, ejecting the known and knowable orders of discourse in favour of an impossible leap into a state of interminable doubt and uncertainty. Such an aesthetics and poetics of the authenticity of uncertainty, is carefully contrasted by Zola in *L'Oeuvre* with the rule-based and inauthentic art of careerist academicians such as the cynical Chambouverd, who simply know the formula for success and pursue it in sterile manner.

23 For such a conception of mimesis, see for example, Lambert Zuidervaart, Introduction, Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: M.I.T. Press, 1997), 7-9.

24 Claude Lantier has come to the market “expecting a fine sunrise effect upon all these heaps of cabbages.” Leading Florent through the market, he stops in front of a pile of cauliflowers – transformed metaphorically into cannonballs, and then into “huge roses” comprising a “colossal” bridal bouquet – “venting cries of admiration.” Later, in front of a “barricade” of pumpkins, “Claude clapped his hands at the sight. He declared that those ‘blackguard vegetables’ were wild, mad, sublime! [...] ‘What a fine sight it is!’ exclaimed Claude in an ecstasy of enthusiasm.” (Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 1.)

the book. The market for Lantier is a vast and overwhelming aesthetic spectacle, a gargantuan still life become sublime. He drinks in its formal and sensual properties, and in front of him the vegetables dissolve into a shifting phantasmagoria of wild metaphors. They appear in the guise of military technology (cannonballs), bridal bouquets, the barricades of revolutionary uprisings, deluges, torrents and oceans, mountains, conflagrations, and arctic landscapes. They form an “infernal circle,” and, as the living dead, rise to say farewell, and indulge in one last dance.

The familiar motifs of the sublime are here rearing their heads insistently in Zola’s metaphors. Though the realist art and literature of the late nineteenth century had ostensibly deliberately turned its back on the loftiness and transcendence of sublimity in favour of the here and now of dirt, meat, the material and the everyday, nonetheless the aesthetic of the late nineteenth century remains oriented to the familiar ground of the Romantic.²⁵ Zola is a writer of the absolute every bit as much as Wordsworth, and not least in the encyclopaedic ambitions of the Rougon-Macquart series, with their aim of mapping an unrepresentable capitalism which, I have been arguing here throughout, is at the core of the affects and subjectivities of the sublime.²⁶

It is capital, then, that lies at the heart of the sublime vision which the markets present in *Le Ventre de Paris*. It is finally the cluster of metaphors of tides, waves, rivers and floods – of the flow of the oceanic sublime – which dominates his description of the piles of meat, fish, flowers, fruit and vegetables.²⁷ These are objects animated, set in motion by the forces of commerce; and it is the liquid dynamism of commerce which also sets in motion the phantasmagorical and (as with Lantier’s window) often ghastly effects of shifting and unstable appearance exhibited in Zola’s metaphors.

The market, set in motion by the unthinkable force of capital, is thus a

25 Though his argument is generally to attempt to find a role for the sublime in the general conditions of literature and of the psyche, Neil Hertz’s book on the sublime is notable in its attempt to trace the lineaments of the sublime in realist nineteenth-century fiction and art (in the guise of Flaubert, George Eliot and Courbet). Hertz, *The End of the Line*, esp. 61-96, 217-39. The sublime is also traced into the post-Romantic era in L. Y. Jolly, “The Pursuit of the Sublime in Post-Romantic France,” Ph.D., Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, 2001.

26 For Zola and the absolute, see See Zamparnelli, “Zola,” 143-58. For Zola as a chronicler and cartographer of capitalism, see William Gallois, *Zola: The History of Capitalism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 32-5.

27 To cite just one passage: “Claude, however, had enthusiastically sprung on to the bench, and stood upon it. He compelled his companion to admire the effect of the dawn rising over the vegetables. There was a perfect sea of these extending between the two clusters of pavilions from Saint Eustache to the Rue des Halles. And in the two open spaces at either end the flood of greenery rose to even greater height, and quite submerged the pavements. The dawn appeared slowly, softly grey in hue, and spreading a light water-colour tint over everything. These surging piles akin to hurrying waves, this river of verdure rushing along the roadway like an autumn torrent, assumed delicate shadowy tints.” Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 1.

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Fig. 62: Eli Lotar, *La Villette Abbatoir*, 1929. Silver gelatin print. Image from *Eli Lotar* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994), 79

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Fig. 63: Eli Lotar, *La Villette Abattoir*, 1929. Silver gelatin prints. Images from *Eli Lotar*, 81-2.

place of vast hidden forces, dynamic, restive energies, and dizzying motion. Zola begins the book with his protagonist Florent, an exile, being washed, like a piece of flotsam, back into the heart of empire on the tide of foodstuffs. The title of the book (*Le Ventre de Paris*) models such flows after organic forms of circulation, but Zola – mixing his metaphors – also describes the new market as an engine, an infernal industrial machine driving the flow of goods, as if they are caught within some hydraulic piece of engineering.²⁸ (Capitalism as a machine is a metaphor which echoes throughout his works.) The body politic has been mechanised, and such a mechanised “circulation” is less circular than its organic counterpart. The engine sucks goods from the provinces into the centre where they are consumed, and here their movement seems to end. Like Bruegel’s Tower of Babel, this engine dominates and enslaves the surrounding landscapes, on which it perpetrates a continual murder, serving as a destructive vortex into which all is drawn. For Lantier the vegetables of the market, “not yet dead, but gathered in the previous evening, [were waiting] for the morning sun to bid him good-bye from the flag-stones of the market. He could observe their vitality, he declared, see their leaves stir and open, as though their roots were yet firmly and warmly embedded in well-manured soil. And here, in the markets, he added, he heard the death-rattle of all the kitchen gardens of the environs of Paris.”²⁹ These zombie vegetables, at once killed and resurrected by the market, are subject, that is, to the same uncanny blurring of life and death that we see with the landscapes and architectures of the Gothic novel. The indiscernability of animate/inanimate matter under capitalism is also, as I have been discussing above, what “meat” represents. This uncanny animation also seems to be the root of the startling effect of Lantier’s window display, which breathes a kind of aesthetic second life or second death into the bodies which become his artistic materials.

*

28 “Florent gazed at the vast markets now gradually emerging from the gloom, from the dreamland in which he had beheld them [...]. Greenish-grey in hue, they looked more solid now, and even more colossal with their prodigious masting of columns upholding an endless expanse of roofs. They rose up in geometrically shaped masses; [...] they seemed typical of some gigantic modern machine, some engine, some caldron for the supply of a whole people, some colossal belly, bolted and riveted, built up of wood and glass and iron, and endowed with all the elegance and power of some mechanical motive appliance working there with flaring furnaces, and wild, bewildering revolutions of wheels.” Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 1.

29 Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 1. In *Ventre de Paris*, it is also not just the local landscape which the markets subject to such domination. In Chapter 3, for example, with Florent at the fish market, Zola’s description of the produce is as much a geography as it is a biology lesson, on the reach of the market into the rivers and oceans of Europe. But this lesson, once more, is tinged with the deathliness of capitalism: it is as if the rivers and seas have come here for a lingering death on the pavements of the market.

As part of the representational regime of capital, which is already aesthetic, the transformation of commerce into art has happened even before Lantier arranges his butcher's window. This is made clear in Zola's initial description of the butcher's shop, which is clearly, from the outset of the book, a work of artistic production. Zola describes its having been remodelled as a place of spectacular display and visual pleasure, of light, hygiene, and style: "commerce in its latest development needed elegant surroundings." With glass, mirrors, lights and marble the shop is turned into a vitrine. The beautiful Lisa becomes a waxwork in its exhibition, and the shop even, as a microcosm of itself, includes an aquarium in its window.³⁰ What could be more Hirstean? It is Lisa, as much as it is Lantier, in whom we find a premonition of Hirst.

Indeed, Zola himself hardly invents the conceit by which Lantier's shop window becomes his masterpiece. Balzac had already written that "The great poem of display chants its stanzas of colour from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis."³¹ Before that, Napoleon is reported to have said that "the markets of Paris are the Louvre of the people."³² Indeed, as Walter Benjamin notes, in modernity "art enters the service of the businessman."³³ Benjamin quotes the *Grand Dictionnaire* of Larousse, which notes that "A great number of sales clerks have been educated in the classics ...; one even finds among them painters and architects [...], who use a great deal of their knowledge ... of these two branches of art in constructing displays, in determining the design of new items, in directing the creation of fashions."³⁴ If Lantier discovers (and if we rediscover) art in shop-keeping, this is because shop-keeping has already discovered art.

With regard to the relation between art and commerce, the opposite

³⁰ Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 3.

³¹ Balzac, *Le Diable à Paris* (Paris, 1846), 2.91, cited in Benjamin, *Arcades*, [A1,4], 32.

³² Quoted by Ernest Alfred Zizetelly, introduction to Zola, *Ventre de Paris*.

³³ Benjamin is thinking in particular of the "dramatic signage of the *magasins de nouveautés*" which took off, he thinks, during the "years of reckless speculation under Louis XVIII." (Benjamin, *Arcades*, [A1a, 9], 34.) But of course, first is not a word for historians, and we can already see the registration of complaints about the degree of investment in the aestheticisation of shop windows in London in the early eighteenth century. See for example Defoe's comments on the "painting and gilding, fine shelves, shutters, boxes, glass-doors, sashes, and the like, in which, they tell us now, it is a small matter to lay out two or three hundred pounds, nay, five hundred pounds, to fit up a pastry-cook's, or a toy-shop." (Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, [first pub. London, 1726] Edinburgh, 1839 ed., Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/4/4/4/14444/>> 24 december 2004, visited 17 december 2007, Chapter 19.) Defoe notes the "fine show of shelves and glass-windows" that is now essential to a tradesman, to the extent of it becoming a crippling burden on the businessman to compete in the escalation of appearances. He itemises the £300 spent in one pastry shop in 1710, on gilding, silverwork, lights, painting and glass. Defoe thinks this a primarily "French" phenomenon, but remarks that the English seem always to outdo the French whenever they mimic them.

³⁴ Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du 19^e siècle*, (Paris, 1867), 3.150 (article on "Calicot"), cited in Benjamin, *Arcades*, [A9,1], 53.

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Fig. 64: *The Pursuit of Oblivion*, 2004. Acrylic and steel vitrine, water, sides of beef, cow's head, butcher's rack and meat hooks, skull, broken mirror, sausages, knives, dustbin, crash helmet, umbrella, stainless steel bucket, wine bottles, glass of water, pills, frying pan, anatomical model brain, hourglass and live fish. 436 x 280 x 170 cm. Image from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 243.

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Fig. 65: Francis Bacon, *Painting*, 1946. Oil on canvas. 198 x 132 cm. Museum of Modern Art New York. Image from Webmuseum, Paris. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bacon/>>

number of Claude Lantier in Zola's work – as an alternative Hirstean figure – is Octave Mouret, the department-store pioneer of *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Mouret, the ultimate master of the commodity aesthetics of *étalage*, desires an art of the sublime just like Hirst, Lantier and Cibber, which, ignoring rules of decorum or measure, will transport and compel his audience. (Just as in accounts of the sublime such as John Dennis's this compulsion is figured, throughout the book, as a highly gendered form of sexual domination.) Almost the first time we meet Mouret in the novel he is engaged in a disagreement with Hutin, his employee, over the aesthetics of commercial display which is clearly one between Neoclassical beauty and a Romantic sublime. Whilst Hutin "belonged to the classic school of symmetry and melodious effect," Mouret is "a revolutionary window-dresser [...] who had founded the school of the brutal and the gigantic in the art of display. He wanted avalanches, seemingly fallen at random from disembowelled shelves, and he wanted them blazing with the most flamboyant colours." The display he casually makes – a blinding "conflagration" of cloth with wild, formless tirades and disharmonious contrasts of colour – leaves the book's heroine, Denise, "rooted to the spot, breathless," a subject of Longinian rapture.³⁵ It is the culmination of the aesthetic which in an earlier chapter we have seen Joan De Jean trace back to the periodicals of late seventeenth-century France, and which I have been arguing here has been central in the development of the "sublime" of commodity culture.

The culmination of the book is a description of the grand opening of a sale at Mouret's newly-expanded Bonheur des Dames, marking its final victory over the old neighbourhood, and its ways of business. The store, in Zola's description, is transformed into vast arctic landscapes of white cloth. Like Lisa's shop, it is a spectacle of marble, mirrors, paint and light, and like Hirst's work, "everything else was of plate glass in a framework of metal." Now, however, the shop or the vitrine has become "a colossus, going to infinity."³⁶ It holds its audience captivated in aesthetic awe:

It was the stupendous height of the exhibition of household linen which was holding up the ladies [...] [with its] dazzling whiteness like a polar vista, a whole snowy region unfolding with the endlessness of steppes draped with ermine, a mass of glaciers lit up by the sun. [...] [I]t was heightened and on a colossal scale, burning from one end of the nave to the other with the white blaze of a conflagration at its height.³⁷

Mouret is described as a "genius" and his display as a fugue, "which carries

³⁵ Émile Zola, *Ladies' Delight*, [*Au Bonheur des Dames*], trans. April Fitzlyon (London: Bestseller Library, 1960), 54.

³⁶ Zola, *Ladies' Delight*, 404.

³⁷ Zola, *Ladies' Delight*, 412.

the soul away in an ever-widening flight." Like Lantier's window – and for very similar reasons – it is sublime, the "perfect work of art"; and Mouret is the perfect Hirstian artist.³⁸

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Before moving on from this archive of meat and markets, Hirst must be placed more firmly within it, emphasising that indeed the market is central in his Natural History sculptures as a "scene" of artistic production, just as it is in Lantier's shop window. To conclude, then, I shall look a little further at why we should seek the market and the butcher's window in Hirst, and what the figure of the market carries into his work; and also mark some of the historical relations and disjunctions between the location of the imaginary Lantier in nineteenth-century Paris and the real Hirst at the end of the twentieth century in London.

Zola was writing at a moment when the markets of Les Halles were the site of intensive modernisation, and it is this transformation of the ancient markets which *Le Ventre de Paris* documents. At the time of Hirst's early work, these nineteenth-century markets had already slipped into the realm of the quaint and old-fashioned; they no longer struck a beholder with the rush of the new, the exciting and the disconcerting. But Hirst, too, was starting to make work at a renewed moment of urban transformation, as cities such as London and Paris were forced to "globalise."³⁹ There is a certain irony in the fact that if Hirst, an artist of the market, chimes with Lantier so strongly, this is nonetheless at just the moment in which the now-obsolete modernity which Zola describes was being dismantled, with the long demolition of Les Halles and its replacement during the 1980s with an underground shopping mall.⁴⁰

³⁸ Mouret is also a figure who ties commercial display into the Lyotardian sublime, as I discussed it in Chapters 2 and 3. Mouret, as William Gallois notes, is not just an aesthetic master, but also an aesthetic entrepreneur. He is a taker and a manager of risk. He also stands in for the new techniques of psychology and mass control which were being developed to control these risks, a psychology which "in a rational fashion calculates the potential maximalisation of income through an understanding of irrational desires created and enhanced in a consumerised society." (Gallois, *Zola*, 95-6.) Such a technical mastery of the consumer is, once again, the dream of Longinian rhetoric as it is taken into commercial culture.

³⁹ See for example, in particular, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Jon Bird and et. al., eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Sarah Chaplin and Eric Holding, "Addressing the Post-Urban," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 40 (1997): 122-34.

⁴⁰ See Adrian Rifkin, "Total Ellipsis: Zola, Benjamin and the Dialectics of Kitsch," *Parallax* 1.2 (1995): 108-112. Archived on Adrian Rifkin's website <<http://www.gai-savoir.com/parallax.pdf>> visited 15 June 2005. In his description of the redevelopment of the Les Halles area and the transformation of shopping under globalised consumer capitalism, Rifkin mentions that, at the time of his writing, Agnes B.'s Les Halles shop took the space of what was once a butcher's shop.

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Fig. 66: Interior designer Setsumasa Kobayashi's Win a Cow Free Store, Tokyo. Images from Nigel Coates, *Collidoscope: New Interior Design* (London: Laurence King, 2004), 78-81. Kobayashi, drawing on Hirst, has produced a "concept store" where high fashion is displayed in Hirsean vitrines, alongside sides of beef, and cartons of milk. *Couture* is taken back to the spectacle of the street market and the butcher's shop window.

Lisa's shop and others like it were being replaced by concept-stores selling high fashion by Christain Dior, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Agnes B, whose spaces ever-more closely imitate those of the museum or the gallery.⁴¹ If there are echoes of Lantier in Hirst, it is not without a certain nostalgia, and also not without a certain transformation of the modes of display which are registered in Hirst's vitrines.

And yet, in spite of all this historical change, Hirst is nonetheless distinctly an "artist of the market." The "scene" from which Hirst's work emerges is really not a million miles from old Les Halles. The yBas orbited around London's disappearing produce markets – Billingsgate, Smithfield and Spitalfields – as these, like Les Halles or La Villette, their counterparts in Paris, disappeared, dwindled or were invaded and surrounded by the new spaces of electronic exchange of Thatcher's "Big Bang," under the pressures of globalisation.⁴² In our day just as in Zola's, such environs, on the front line of processes of "redevelopment," are the temporary zones of urban flux inhabited by bohemians. The yBas' drinking haunts, studios and exhibitions were close to the markets which then took a place within their artistic imaginary as part of a disappearing urban modernity of emptied docks, warehouses and industrial spaces.⁴³

Hirst's first formaldehyde work, *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purposes of Understanding* (1991), takes the market very literally as its scene of production. For this sculpture, in a wall-mounted cabinet, a panoply of fish, every one a different species, sit each in their own small, cubic preservation jar, pickled in formaldehyde. Most obviously the work can be taken as a parodic image of modern systems of scientific and medical classification, and of the forms of visual display through which the work of the

41 For a cinematic rendition of this changing landscape, where the meat markets of Paris are still in the process of being replaced by new forms of postmodern consumption and display, see Leos Carax's film *Mauvais sang* (1986), in which the main location is an ex-butcher's shop in a neighbourhood abandoned by capital, becoming an appropriately bohemian location for the narrative of a thriller.

42 These transformations in London – the restructuring of the city, and the redevelopment of Spitalfields in particular – are discussed in Jane Jacobs, *The Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

43 The Cock in Smithfields was a regular haunt for the yBas because it opened in the early hours of the morning to serve the meat-packers, and thus was a place to "come down" after a night's clubbing. The Golden Hart, opposite Spitalfields on Commercial Road was another regular (and to a lesser extent the Ten Bells, further down the street, where Jack the Ripper also picked up one of his victims). For documentation of the yBas' nightlife, see Johnnie Shand Kydd, *Spit Fire: Photographs from the Art World, London 1996/97* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997). Emin and Lucas ran their shop in Brick Lane, another of London's important markets, and just a stone's throw from Spitalfields. Freeze, and the Building One shows, of course, were in Docklands, not far from Billingsgate.

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Fig. 67: *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding*, 1991. M.D.F., melamine, wood, steel, glass, perspex cases, fish, 5% formaldehyde solution. 183 x 274 x 30.5 cm. Collection of Charles Saatchi. Image from *Sensation: Young British Art from the Saatchi Collection*, 94.

organisation of knowledge is carried out and disseminated as authoritative.⁴⁴ However, the work functions not so much as an analogue of the scientific order of zoological collection and biological study, but rather as an analogue of the market. The fish themselves are purchased from Billingsgate; and they are not ordered according to any recognisable principle of scientific taxonomy – we do not here have a catalogue of “British Seawater Fish” or any such precise category. Rather, the limits of the collection are those of what is on sale. Instead of the rational order hinted at by the arrangement of the fish in the display case, the effect is of a chaotic accumulation of particularity only in part held in check by the gridded system in which they are contained. In Hirst, with these fish bought at market, we have an artwork quite literally built out of an accumulation of commodities. Zola’s description of the fish market in *Ventre de Paris*, disintegrating into a list, the insistent rhythm of which only just holds in check the sheer quantity, sensory excess and variety of the mountains of produce, could serve as a great description of *Isolated Elements*, and echoes, in literary form, the sculptural logic of Hirst’s piece. To quote just a brief section from the passage, which extends across several pages:

[...] There were cod, keeling, whiting, flounders, plaice, dabs, and other sorts of common fish of a dingy grey with whitish splotches; there were conger-eels, huge serpent-like creatures, with small black eyes and muddy, bluish skins, so slimy that they still seemed to be gliding along, yet alive. There were broad flat skate with pale undersides edged with a soft red, and superb backs bumpy with vertebrae, and marbled down to the tautly stretched ribs of their fins with splotches of cinnabar, intersected by streaks of the tint of Florentine bronze – a dark medley of colour suggestive of the hues of a toad or some poisonous flower. Then, too, there were hideous dog-fish, with round heads, widely-gaping mouths like those of Chinese idols, and short fins like bats’ wings [...] ⁴⁵

To mark this confluence is to note that Hirst’s sculpture is also a sculptural equivalent to the ecstatically alliterative lists of which Pope and Wordsworth were both so fond in their evocations of the piling up of commodities in the modern spaces of trade and consumption, and echoes all the complex,

44 The sculpture is reminiscent of the specimens kept at the Worsley medical building in Leeds, where Hirst used to draw as a teenager, and constitutes a Hunterian Museum in miniature. (William and John Hunter were renowned eighteenth-century surgeon-anatomists, who were well known for their adroitness in the making of “preparations” [i.e. preservations of specimens or anatomical fragments for the purposes of study]. John Hunter’s extensive collections of preserved human and animal remains are kept at the Royal Society of Surgeons of England in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London and William’s at the University of Glasgow.)

45 Zola, *Ventre de Paris*, Chapter 3. The description extends over several pages, in an excessive accumulation of detail that leads the reader dizzied and overwhelmed. Zola’s summation could apply equally well as a description of Hirst’s work: “Florent could almost fancy that a whole shoal of fish had got stranded there, still quivering with life, and gleaming with rosy nacre, scarlet coral, and, milky pearl, all the soft, pale, sheeny hues of the ocean.”

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Fig. 68: Shoe-shop window, Murcia, Spain, April 2008. Photo Luke White.

contradictory investments of these authors in the commodity.

Isolated Elements stages a tension at the heart of the commodity form between such systems of rationality and the particular in its anarchic and material profusion, just as capitalism, too, as a social phenomenon depends on an irreducible antagonism between the materiality of living labour and its abstraction into exchange values. The market – like meat a “zone of indiscernability” – has long been the location *par excellence* where these tensions are expressed and the figure through which they are imagined, a zone at once of carnivalesque and popular pleasures, but also of rational commercial exchange; a place of spectacular entertainment but also of the long distance trade in interest-bearing promissory notes; a place of the refusal of authority but also of the imposition of the iron law of economic exploitation.⁴⁶ It is as a zone of such fascinating conflicts and contradictions (the conflicts between the “fat and the thin,” as the title of the English translation emphasises)⁴⁷ that Zola turns to Les Halles in *Ventre de Paris* for a dissection of the social order of Second Empire France; it is on such tensions that Hirst’s sculpture, too, feeds.⁴⁸

The old figure of the market, especially in the context of the globalisation which was restructuring the urban spaces of first-world cities in the eighties and nineties, in its carnivalesque dimension, carries a certain charge – however weak, and however recuperated this may be in Hirst’s work within an ideology of individualism – of antagonism to the forces of order, control and redevelopment. The term “Billingsgate,” after all, does not just refer to the market in east London, but also to the ribald language and behaviour which was named after it; and the obscene bodies of Hirst’s little fish each serves as a metonym for a dirty joke. Hirst himself is known for his “billingsgate” humour, a faint echo, perhaps of an ancient working-class mode of dissent, which centred in the markets and fairs of the middle ages. The market as a

46 See in particular Agnew, *Worlds Apart*. Also, Braudel discusses the history of the market in the early modern world, and the ways in which it was the locus in which the techniques of capitalism were pioneered: in Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 138-230.

47 Though in Zola’s book, the fat are associated with the rich and the thin with the poor underclass, the opposition between these two groups also echoes the carnivalesque imagery of the “battle between carnival and lent,” which pits the excessive carnivalesque body of the underclass against the thinness and penury which authority imposes. It is, of course, the market or the fairground which is the traditional site of the depiction of such a theme.

48 Quite the form of symbolic resolution of this tension which Hirst stages is, of course, another matter. For Hirst’s opponents a work such as this, in its vision of the alienation of modern rational and capitalist life, would merely in the end fall into the celebration of the heroic individual who, like Hirst himself, “escapes” the crushing system – and hence the sculpture in its affirmative, ideological dimension serves to reiterate myths of the capitalist dream, and of an individualism on which both bourgeois society and our own consumer society have both, if for rather different reasons, depended. (See for example the similar argument which Gene Ray makes with regard to the flies in *A Thousand Years* [1990]. Ray, “Little Glass House,” 129.) I will, however, here be primarily presenting the other, more sympathetic, side to what can be read in Hirst’s relation to capital and the commodity.

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Fig. 69: Michael Landy, *Costermonger's Stall*, 1992-7. Wood, gloss paint, tarpaulin, plastic buckets, electric lights, flowers, 182.8 x 213.3 x 213.3 cm. Image from *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 109. Landy produced a massive installation in Building One (the space in which Hirst's Modern Medicine and Gambler shows took place) in 1990, entitled *Market*. For this, Landy filled the space with the plastic crates and fake-grass coverings of market traders, but all without any produce, to create an eerie series of empty stalls, an unused market.

disappearing space, cultural practice and resource is a metonym for a broader disappearance and transformation in what was once the working classes, and marks a point from which Hirst himself emerges.

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What this last analysis starts to show, I hope, is the extent to which the market remains a fantasy scene for the production of Hirst's continuing work with dissected animals. The market vies with the hospital, the office, or the laboratory as a location through which the meaning of the pieces can be constructed by a viewer. Each of the animals in the Natural History series is itself an "isolated element." They are all the more isolated for a lack of surrounding companions, and yet also, implicitly, set within an order not so different from that of the grid within which the fish are arranged. The cuboid geometry of the vitrines is the minimum of the Cartesian space in which the fish of *Isolated Elements* are arranged, and the series itself, as series, implies the same exchangeability of elements. After all, the infamous shark sculpture, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), the next of Hirst's works with formaldehyde after *Isolated Elements*, is fundamentally an enlargement, as if on a three-dimensional photocopier, of one of the parts of the earlier piece. Hirst has also recounted that here, too, he sought the shark first-off in Billingsgate. Here the market becomes a fantasy of the global reach of capital, given local incarnation in a space of the exchange of bodies as commodities.⁴⁹

I went down to Billingsgate and I said to the guy, 'Oh, can you get me a shark?' And he said 'Oh yeh, any size you want.' 'You can get me a twelve-foot shark?' 'Oh yeh.' He told me how much it was per pound.⁵⁰

It is a fantasy, once more, of the power of abstraction. How does one quantify, make abstract, something as prodigious, marvellous and sublime as a shark? How can this be measured out by the pound? More marvellous – and terrifying – than the shark, then, is the power of capital, which through a technology of its conjugation of the abstract and the material, can turn the marvellous body of the shark into bathetic meat.

It is to a more detailed analysis of the shark that I shall now turn.

⁴⁹ It is of course the same fantasy of the instantiation of the global power of capital in the marketplace which Zola presents us in the catalogue of fish, which I discuss above.

⁵⁰ Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 45.

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Fig. 70: Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* whilst being transported. Image from *I Want to Spend...*, 284.

Chapter 6

“Und der Haifisch”:

Hirst’s Shark as an Image of Capital

A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man: when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.

— Shakespeare.¹

You need to find universal triggers. Everyone’s frightened of glass, everyone’s frightened of sharks, everyone loves butterflies.

— Damien Hirst.²

It’s strange how quickly the shark became a kind of logo of the times – such a blank and yet peculiarly charged emblem.

— Gordon Burn.³

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I described my encounter with *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), Damien Hirst’s “shark.”⁴ This has been the encounter, above all others, in which my fascination with Hirst is rooted. It is, furthermore, this sculpture which became the instantly recognisable icon that captivated not only me but also a wider public imagination – at the very least as incorporated in the media – and held it in its specular thrall, shooting Hirst himself to a celebrity and notoriety which reached far beyond the art-world.

I will now return – full circle – to this sculpture for the final two chapters of my dissertation in order to develop an understanding of its peculiar effectiveness in the light of the arguments I have been making thus far, and to extend these arguments. In the present chapter I argue that Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility* is bound into a repeating series of representations of sharks, the history of which is consistently and intimately imbricated with the development

1 William Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” *The Works of William Shakespeare*, eds. William George Clark and John Glover, vol. 1 (Cambridge: 1863), Project Gutenberg Etext, October 2007, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23042/23042-h/23042-h.htm>> visited 17 May 2008, Act 2, Scene 2, p.36.

2 Hirst, *I Want to Spend*, 132.

3 Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 43.

4 See pp.92-97, above.

of the sublime, spectacular consumer culture and imperialist capital. I argue that the shark – a hyperbolic encounter with a terrible nature which is sublime or, after Lyotard, “inhuman” – serves repeatedly as a representational stand-in for capital itself. As capital’s spectral double, a cipher for its violence, the shark haunts capitalism’s discourse, reappearing most insistently in the culture closest to capital’s heart, and returning on its subject with the uncanny force which Hirst’s sculpture exerts on me.

This iconography of the shark provides me a basis on which to make, in Chapter 7, an analysis of the phantasies of consumption, accumulation and production on which the iconography and phenomenology of the piece rest, through which it is produced, and in terms of which it addresses us as viewers. This extends the analysis I developed across Chapters 4 and 5 of the entwinement of the subjectivities of the Hirstean sublime with those of capital. So far, I have focused on tracing prefigurations of Hirst in the synchrony of the Scriblerian moment. What follows will be more diachronic.⁵ I shall, however, continue tracing the re-echoing “figural” of representations within which *Physical Impossibility* takes its place. My exposition will not unfold as a linear narrative, but involves “shuttling” back and forth between such figures.

The approach will also remain “characterological” in the sense I introduce the term in my introduction.⁶ Many of the producers I discuss – James Thomson and John Singleton Copley for example – are caught within the same kinds of imperative as Hirst and Cibber.⁷ However, with Hirst’s shark, thinking about “characters” faces a further complication: the shark as a cultural motif repeatedly produces a specular doubling between subject and object, and between artwork and viewer or creator. The shark is itself a “figure,” caught in a play of reflections and projections between the work and the world; our “characters” can no longer simply be located in either realm. The “figures” I grapple with are no longer just artists like Thomson, Hirst, Copley (or enterprising patrons such as Charles Saatchi or Brook Watson), but also the representations of sharks and sharky characters such as Mac the Knife, doubles of the figures involved in the production and consumption of the works, and for

5 Though again we will find 1727/8 a significant moment. As well as being the moment of Pope’s *Peri Bathous* and the start of the *Dunciad* project, this moment will also feature in what is to come as that of the production of John Gay’s *Threepenny Opera*, and of the first publication of James Thomson’s *Seasons*.

6 See p.63, above.

7 Both Copley and Thomson were, like Hirst, class “outsiders” coming to London from the provinces to make their names: Copley from America, Thomson from Scotland. Like Hirst and Cibber, they each developed – with a high degree of ingenuity – an art practice which balanced the demands of culture as business with the need to keep up the appearance of its “ennobling” nature. In each case the sublime provided a means to combine the two imperatives, producing an art with broad commercial appeal and pretension to cultural seriousness and high purpose.

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Fig. 71: Advertisement for the *Financial Times*, London Bridge, 2008. Photo Luke White.

figures in the world the works describe. This specular doubling – an essential mechanism through which the works address us and bind us to their meanings and affects – will be insistent throughout.⁸

The Shark as Cultural Icon

An investigation of the figure of “the shark” is essential for an analysis of Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility*, since this takes the form of the reduced, super-literal presentation of the signifier “shark,” through its referent, stripped about as close as possible to the degree-zero of narrative or other syntagmatic relation.⁹ Nonetheless, this signifier, even in its stripped-down form, is capable of activating a heavily loaded complex of connotation. Although what finally determines the power of the sculpture is the formal precision of the staging of its materiality and phenomenality – my analysis of the work will increasingly turn to these aspects – it is nonetheless only on the basis of this connotative network that it operates. In line with my interest in the *signifiances* of the work, and in the cultural field in which it takes part, it is with this network that my analysis will begin.¹⁰

8 This mechanism of specular projection and reflection, of course, is hardly unique to representations of sharks. Lacan’s writing on the mirror stage posits it at the heart of our very sense of self-identity (problematic and based on mis-recognition as this identity is) and thus a Lacanian account of art or literature finds such a mechanism to be ubiquitous in the field of human representations as a means through which cultural objects hail us as subjects. However, this said, there is something in the degree to which Hirst’s viewer leans on this mechanism – and more generally a consistency with which depictions of sharks also do – that makes it worth foregrounding it in this particular case. The shark – if I may get a little ahead of myself – is a phantasmagorical object par excellence, and in its “monstrous” mode of visibility (the derivation of the word *monster* lying precisely in notions of visibility) is so deeply tied in with a specular logic that an analysis that proceeds without taking this into account will not penetrate very far into the matter at hand.

9 The vitrine as an isolating device in Hirst has its obvious relation to the linear cubes which Bacon drew around the figures in his paintings. Bacon discussed these cubes as helping to sever just such narrative relations between objects, allowing them to be presented as bare “facts” without the complication of relations to other objects, and the implications of “storytelling” that may arise from this. (See Sylvester, *Interviews*, 22-3, 52-6.) The use of the vitrine ensures that it is as a Baconian “fact” that Hirst presents the shark. Bacon’s frames, although presenting their contents as aesthetic rather than scientific facts, draw on a history of scientific and museological display which seeks to isolate objects of study from their context in order to make them into objects of dispassionate knowledge. See Deleuze, *Bacon*, 1-6.

10 For *signifiance*, see Roland Barthes, who writes that we should understand a work “not as a finished, closed product, but as a production in progress, ‘plugged in’ to other texts, other codes, (this is the intertextual), and thereby articulated with society and history in ways that are not determinist but citational [...] producing a mobile structuration of the text (a structuration which is displaced from reader to reader throughout history), staying in the signifying volume of the work, in its ‘signifiance’.” Textual analysis does not try to find out what it is that determines the text [...] but rather how the text explodes and disperses.” Such an approach seeks to “live the plurality of the text, the opening of *signifiance*,” and to bring to the surface “the forms and codes according to which meanings are possible.” Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis of Poe’s ‘Valdemar,’” *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981), 172-3. Such is the method I am pursuing here.

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Fig. 72: Damien Hirst, *Physical Impossibility*, installation view in Saatchi Gallery, 1992.

Sharks have a ubiquitous iconic (and specially emotive)¹¹ presence in our culture – we find them in pulp fiction and Hollywood horror films such as *Jaws*,¹² and in the often hardly less sensationalist wildlife documentaries which tread in the footsteps of Peter Gimbel’s groundbreaking *Blue Water White Death* (1971) and are regularly aired on the National Geographic or Discovery channels (and others like them).¹³ Coffee-table or children’s factual books proliferate. Periodically, scare stories sweep the tabloid media.¹⁴ The sublime

11 For the emotive power of the idea of the shark, see Ron and Valerie Taylor, eds., *Shark!: Truths Stranger Than Fiction and Fiction as Horrifying as Jaws* (Glasgow: Fontana and Collins, 1979), 9. This describes a study conducted in the late 1960s (well before *Jaws*), in which researchers set out to find the words which provoked the greatest emotional response in the widest range of people. Subjects were wired up to measure various indicators of emotional arousal, and the scientists read them “words like rape, death, murder, sex, love, snake, poison. To their surprise, it was the word shark which aroused the public’s emotions more than any of the others.”

12 For other shark-based pulp fiction, see for example Peter Benchley’s own preposterous novel, *White Shark* (London: Huteson, 1999), which features a Nazi-made genetically engineered shark-human hybrid on a serial-killer rampage. Quite aside from the franchise of its sequels, the success of *Jaws* encouraged the growth of an entire sub-genre of monster movies, in which other creatures of the deep substitute for the shark; but the shark remains the paradigmatic creature for this genre. IMDB lists no less than 47 entries under the plot keyword “shark attack.” (<<http://www.imdb.com/keyword/shark-attack>> visited 1 March 2007). A list of these films and their catchlines would include *Red Water* (2003: “Fear strikes where you least expect it”), *Shark Attack 1, 2 and 3* (“You may never want to go in the sea again!” “The killer is back!” “The terror has surfaced”), *12 Days of Terror* (2003: “Based on the true story which inspired *Jaws*”), *Spring Break Shark Attack* (“This year spring break really bites!”), *Terror Storm* (1977: “Surviving the water is only the beginning!”), *Blue Demon* (2004: “Your deepest fears lie below the surface”), *Magalodon* (2005: “Sixty feet of prehistoric terror.”), and *Hammerhead* (2005: “Half man, half shark, total terror”), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999: “Bigger, Faster, Smarter, Meaner”), *Open Water* (2003: “Who will save you?”). I could go on...

13 For example, *Encounters with the Ultimate Predator: Shark Sonics*, National Geographic Television and Film, 2003, distributed free with the *Daily Mirror*. Discovery has run a yearly “Shark Week” since 1988. The 2007 incarnation of this included non-stop programmes on sharks from 9 a.m. to 3 a.m. daily. (See “Shark Week: 20th Anniversary,” *Discovery Channel*, <<http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/sharkweek/sharkweek.html>> visited 20 February 2008.)

14 Most recently (at the time of writing) such an example of media hysteria broke out in the UK in the Summer of 2007, when there was a spate of “great white” sightings off the coast of Devon and Cornwall. The *Sun*, which broke the story in the national press, ran a series of headlines such as “Great White Shark off UK: Experts Shocked” (July 28th), “Jaws 2: Second Sighting of Great White Circling off the Coast of Cornwall” (July 30th), “It’s Got a Mate: Brit Great White’s a Girl... And She’s not Alone” (July 31st), and “Der-Dum Der-Dum: Shark Mania Hits Britain” (August 1st), along with multi-page “picture exclusives.” It organised trips to the beach with camcorder-armed page-3 girls, and offered free DVDs of shark documentaries and mobile-phone ringtones of the theme music for *Jaws*. The only photograph through which the shark could be clearly identified as a great white, rather than one of the less dangerous and more indigenous species (a photo first published in the *Newquay Guardian* and reprinted in the *Sun* on August 1st), turned out to be hoax, and a rather obvious one at that, but several days of front-page national newspaper coverage were nonetheless wrung from the incident. This media event was generally presented in high spirits; a more seriously paranoid burst of news coverage, documented in Peter Benchley, *Shark! True Stories and Lessons from the Deep* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), vii-x, occurred in the United States in the Summer of 2001. “Newspapers, magazines, radio and television news, and talk shows kept count of the supposed carnage taking place off the East Coast of the United States. Experts were empanelled to speculate on the causes and meanings of this sudden, unprecedented assault on humanity” (viii). Benchley notes, however, that there was not in fact any statistically significant rise in shark attacks,

“experience” of diving with sharks is sought out as an extreme encounter, packaged and exploited by a well-developed tourist industry.¹⁵ Evangelical shark enthusiasts build websites dedicated to them.¹⁶ And the image of the shark more generally pervades our visual culture (perhaps even our dream-worlds): a businessman’s ultra-sharp suit is called “shark-skin”; in *West Side Story*, the Sharks fight the Jets; we find sharks in the logo for an energy drink, a key-chain bottle-opener, a child’s toy, a Bond villain’s swimming pool, in cartoons, Disney movies, tattoos, mobile phone start-up screens, playing cards, in the background graphics of a lunchtime television business affairs programme, and even in some of the stranger outpourings of vernacular architecture.¹⁷

The shark, prior to inclusion in Hirst’s sculpture, is thus already an iconic presence haunting our world. Most apparently this seems established by Peter Benchley’s 1974 bestseller *Jaws*, and Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster movie released the following year, (inspiring what the media dubbed

either in that year, or during the late twentieth century as a whole. Antonia Quirke mentions a case from earlier in the century, when “In July 1916, a Great White killed four bathers off the New Jersey shore and drove the Great War from the front pages of newspapers all over the world.” (Antonia Quirke, *Jaws*, B.F.I. Modern Classics, ed. Rob White [London: British Film Institute, 2002], 6.) In such cases, the newspaper coverage amounts to a kind of paranoid – but also delicious – fantasy. To uncover what is at stake here would be beyond the scope of a footnote, but the rest of this chapter and the next will go, I hope, some way to clarifying this. The themes which will be brought up in what is to come – the anxieties and desires of capital and consumption, the brush with nature, the geopolitical spaces of international trade, the relation between the self’s body and that of the other, the Freudian death drive: all this is in the recipe for such stories. More specifically – and somewhat outside of the more general remit of the chapter – it is worth noting that the recent British example occurred within the context of a larger press discourse about the effects of global warming, and this may be one subtext to the image of the deadly tropical shark appearing in our home waters. This was in fact a theory for the appearance of the creature explicitly posited in the *Sun* (July 28th, p.6). Such an image upends the vision of global order which is set out, for example, in James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (which I shall go on to discuss), where the strange, the violent and the disorderly are banished to the margins of empire. A killer shark in British waters would be the return of these excluded contents to its “civilised” centre. Such an image thus relays larger fears and anxieties about the political and economic order and its stability. Such newspaper stories also, of course, occur in the Summer, at the time when people set off on holiday, in particular to swim in the sea. For urbanites to enter into an unfamiliar territory may in any case have attendant anxieties which need to be given a face; but the shark’s scare is also – as in *Jaws* – bound to the yearly Summer holiday as a ritual of mass consumption, a matter which I will go on to discuss at somewhat further length towards the end of Chapter 7.

15 It is such a significant phenomenon that *Wikipedia* even has an entry under “shark tourism.” (“Shark Tourism,” *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shark_tourism> visited 7 March 2007.) Vic Hislop, the fisherman who caught the shark used in *Physical Impossibility*, stages two permanent exhibitions in the Queensland resorts Hervey Bay and Arlie Beach. See “Vic Hislops [sic] Great White Shark Exhibition,” *Oz Magic*, <<http://ozmagic3.homestead.com/VicHislopSharkExpo.html>> visited 7 March 2007.

16 For example, Alex Buttigieg, *Sharkman’s World*, <<http://www.sharkmans-world.org>> visited 7 March 2007.

17 Some of these are documented at Alex Buttigieg, “Land Sharks,” *Sharkman’s World* <<http://www.sharkmans-world.com/landsharks.html>> visited 7 March 2007.

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Fig. 73: Media panic... Spread from *The Sun*, 1 Aug 2007, part of their campaign of schlock-horror shark headlines during Summer 2007.

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Fig. 74: Disney's shark: the villain from *Finding Nemo* (2003). Image from <www.toyzzshop.com/wallpapers.asp>

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Fig. 75: Advertisement for the National Geographic Channel's "shark week" on a bus in the U.S.A. Image from Alex Buttigieg's Sharkman website <<http://www.sharkmans-world.com/>>.

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Fig. 76: John Buckley, *Untitled*, 1986. Fibreglass. 2, New High Street, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AQ. Image <<http://www.headington.org.uk/shark/>> For Buckley, the sculpture, installed to mark the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasski, was an expression of anxiety about nuclear power.

"*Jawsmania*"¹⁸), but the idea of the shark had already for a long time been potent. It reverberates as an emblem of the encounter with death, violence and a malign, counterpurposive nature throughout a long history of modern culture, from sixteenth-century travellers' accounts of colonial journeys, through the eighteenth-century art and literature I shall discuss here, and nineteenth-century representations such as in Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899) or Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), right up to Spielberg and Hirst in the late twentieth century.¹⁹ In her book on *Jaws*, Antonia Quirke attributes the "spectacular success" of Benchley's novel (itself "of no particular merit, even as a page-turner") to this prior mythical presence of the shark: "Here was one of those stories which seems to have been nebulously there, unformed but already comprehended, waiting for someone to fix it, nail it, get it down right." For Quirke, Spielberg's film is the definitive "fixing" of the myth, and this gives it the quality of "seeming discovered rather than created."²⁰ It is a quality shared by Hirst's *Physical Impossibility*.

Spielberg's film itself makes it clear it is drawing on something already mythical: towards the beginning, when the shark is still a mysterious, shadowy presence, there is a scene in which Brody, the narrative's protagonist, flicks through a pile of rather sensationalist picture books about sharks. We see the turning pages reflected in Brody's glasses. On these pages are all the stock tropes of the shark which we will later see in the film. Its iconography, its narrative devices and conceits, and the fears and fantasies on which it draws are already here, in the popular-cultural archive these books embody: a shark attacking a boat, a diver climbing into a cage, close-ups of sharks' jaws and teeth, the fish's unmistakeable profile, a vigil from a high tower over a crowded beach, shark-fishermen's trophies, gruesome wounds and autopsy images – even an image of a shark with, protruding from its mouth, what looks remarkably like the air tank which Brody shoots blowing up the shark in the film's climax. In a moment of reflexivity the flicking pages of the books, flickering like the cinematic image itself, are reflected in – or, better, projected

18 For the massive merchandising machine that grew up around *Jaws*, see Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 255. Ironically, this is life copying art – or perhaps a moment of reflexivity in Spielberg's practice: in the film itself, far from frightening away the tourists, the shark attacks become an attraction to morbidly fascinated, thrill-seeking holiday-makers, spawning a cottage industry of souvenirs to serve their needs.

19 For Burke on terrible animals see his *Enquiry*, Part 2, Sect. 2, p.101. For sharks in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (New York & London: Penguin, 1999), see 104-8. For examples of early modern travellers' accounts of sharks, see Tom Jones, "The *Xoc*, the *Sharke*, and the Sea Dogs: An Historical Encounter," *Fifth Palenque Round Table*, 1983, ed. Virginia M. Fields, *The Palenque Round Table Series*, 7 (San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985), 213-4; J. I. Castro, "On the Origins of the Spanish Word 'Tiburón', and the English Word 'Shark'," *Environmental Biology of Fishes* 65.3 (2002): 250.

20 Quirke, *Jaws*, 6.

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Fig. 77: Brody scans through the shark archive towards the start of Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975)

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Fig 78: Middle and bottom: flickering images from pages of the archive.

onto – Brody’s spectacles, which themselves provide a pertinently ambiguous image of the screen between a subject and his or her cultural milieu, their glass serving both to reflect this body of externally existing images and also provide a window into his internal world. Spielberg knows he “has” us gripped already, before we even set foot in the cinema, because we, like Brody, are already in the clutches of this powerful imaginary and its archive. Benchley’s book itself was seeded in a fragment of it: since 1964 he had carried in his wallet a shock-horror *New York Daily News* article about a Nantucket fisherman who caught a 4,550 lb. Great White shark off Long Island.²¹

Hirst, too, has made it clear he is conscious of the way his sculpture produces its effects by drawing on the potent charge which emerges from this archive and its connotative network:

I had always wanted to work with sharks. I’d always seen the shark as, like... I’ve always looked at pictures and read stories about sharks. They’ve got this really powerful kind of horror.²²

Identifying the “powerful kind of horror” accruing to sharks, Hirst recognises an unusually strong emotive load which the shark carries as a signifier; it is this in which he seems primarily interested. In another interview, Hirst elaborates, explaining his interest in

that kind of mania, or even the general hysteria about sharks. That’s why I chose it as an object, because it contains that kind of fear. [...] I can’t deny it’s influenced by *Jaws*. [...] I’m [...] interested in why people are frightened by *Jaws* and why *Jaws* was such a hit.²³

Of course, Hirst’s sculpture is not really so much concerned with the question of “why”: it is not an analytical or critical work in this way. Rather, Hirst seems more interested in the simple fact that the shark *is* a loaded symbol around which “horror,” “fear,” “mania” and “hysteria” patently coalesce – and in capitalising on this for effect. The same may well be said of Spielberg. As Antonia Quirke notes: “Being effective is the sum total of Spielberg’s vision.”²⁴ Sharing this cultural mode, Hirst and Spielberg both seek in sharks something that will function – to all intents and purposes – as, in Hirst’s phrase, a “universal trigger.”²⁵ The desire for such a trigger marks the imperative of the

21 For further details, see Benchley, *Shark!*, 35.

22 Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 19. Ellipsis Hirst’s.

23 Hirst, “Furball.”

24 Quirke, *Jaws*, 6. Quirke’s understanding of the implication of this observation about Spielberg could also be extended to Hirst. Contrasting Spielberg to the more idiosyncratic cinematic visions of some of his contemporaries, she notes that where Spielberg’s films fail, they are not really “interesting” failures, only less effective. Hirst’s failures, too, are often just bad.

25 See the quote at the head of this chapter.

commodified sublime I have been outlining in this dissertation.²⁶ The means of commanding assent, as the “trigger” metaphor suggests, becomes in Hirst as rhetorically mechanical as the hydraulic shark of Spielberg’s film.²⁷ This mechanical production of sublimity through the bare invocation of its objects reaches back into eighteenth-century art: Hirst’s statement that “you need to find universal triggers” – sharks, butterflies, glass – is reminiscent of the long, proliferating lists from the first half of that century of the objects with which poetry should be packed to elicit sublime effects in its audience.²⁸ It is precisely because Hirst *can* elicit effects through such notional, unelaborated invocation that the figure of the shark itself needs unpacking.

The “universality” of the shark-as-trigger is a favourite trope of pop literature on sharks, which often insists on the archetypal nature of our fear or fascination. Benchley is typical, claiming: “people are, and always have been, simultaneously intrigued and terrified by sharks.”²⁹ Such insistent claims to universality should put us on our guard for the working of ideology, which aims to make the socially contingent seem natural and eternal. Such a universality is, however, already belied by the clearly gendered grounds of contemporary fascinations with sharks.³⁰

26 Hirst and Spielberg both seem in particular to pursue a Burkean technics of terror and horror to pursue this aim. However, such a universal command over assent echoes Longinus’s prescription that the sublime should be sought in that which effects an audience universally. Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, 7.4.

27 William Pechter has written of Spielberg’s oeuvre in similar terms: “*Jaws* is a machine to scare people.” (“Man Bites Shark (and Other Curiosities),” *Commentary* November 1975: 68.) Spielberg’s cinema is a mechanism for the creation of audience affect, “whose sole aim is to reduce one to a quivering mass of ectoplasm” – perhaps an alternative formulation of Longinian *ekstasis* for the pop era. The shark here literally becomes a mechanical means to this end.

28 See for example, Hildebrand Jacob, excerpt from *The Works* in Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime*, 53-4. Also, Dennis’s list, from *Works*, 2.459-60, cited by Monk, *The Sublime*, 54. We will see this eighteenth-century mechanism of affect in particular with Thomson.

29 Benchley, *Shark!*, xi. In their claim for the universality of the fascination with sharks, Steve and Jane Porter appeal to the fact that shark teeth are found in excavations of Mediterranean sites dating back to 4,000 BC. (*The Encyclopedia of Sharks* [London: Quintet Publishing, 1999], 10.) There is often an appeal to cod psychology or psychoanalysis – one website, for example, appealing to theories of an infantile “morbid instinct” at the root of the “delightful shudder of horror” which attracts us to the shark: “Sadomasochistic drives [explains the website, earnestly] still exist in many adults, and whether these drives are active or passive, the subconscious [sic.] still projects onto the shark or its victim.” (“Reasons for Fascination,” *Shark-Info.com*, <<http://www.shark-info.com/shark-history/reasons-for-fascination.htm>> visited 14 November 2006.)

30 Later in the book just cited, Benchley’s claim for the universal fascination with sharks is tellingly tempered in terms of gender: “I believe [...] that every *male* child on earth is, at some period in his life, fascinated – enraptured! enthralled! – by sharks or dinosaurs or both.” (Benchley, *Shark!*, 35, my emphasis. Note also the terminology of Benchley’s description of the effects of shark and dinosaur imagery on the young male: it is clearly a terminology of the sublime...) Sharks are not expected to be so enthralling for (all) girls, it seems, and neither Hirst’s fascination nor my own are gender-neutral facts. I do not have space here to develop a full account of the gendering of the figure of the shark, but feel that its outlines are probably obvious enough. The shark, as an image of predatory aggressivity and violence, is bound

Sharks, Sea Dogs and Modernity

There is also a historical dimension to this contingency, and this is revealed when we consider the distinctly modern origin of the word shark itself, and of the distinctive figure which this word came to name. In Pliny the Elder's description of sharks in his *Natural History*, we meet quite a different creature to that which haunts our modern imagination:

Divers have fierce fights with the *canis marinus*; these attack their loins and heels and all the white parts of the body. The one safety lies in going for them and frightening them by taking the offensive; for the *canis marinus* is as much afraid of a man as a man is of it.³¹

Pliny's "*canis marinus*" is certainly aggressive and dangerous, but there is nothing of the mythical monster – the ravenous, man-eating, implacably hostile, silently efficient killing machine, that apotheosis of the sublimely awful, inhuman "other" – which the word *shark* conjures for us today. In Pliny there is little of the "powerful kind of horror," fascination or hysterical mania which Hirst and Benchley discover (and exploit) in the creature. Pliny's term *canis marinus* ("sea-dog") serves to domesticate the shark, representing it in terms of a relatively homely, familiar land animal. This was the term used throughout the middle ages as the primary designation for sharks in most European

with current constructions of masculinity. The gendering of the image of the shark also has a certain psychoanalytical dimension to it: the biting shark activates (and displaces) Oedipal castration anxieties. Jane E. Caputi, in "*Jaws* as Patriarchal Myth," *Journal of Popular Film* 6.4 (1978): 305-326, reads the story of the film as involving the "ritual retelling of an essential patriarchal myth." She argues that throughout, anxieties about impotence are at stake, and the film is "resolved" in Brody's reclamation of his manhood in going out into the sea and killing the shark. Caputi notes the insistent "vagina denta" imagery of the shark, which genders its terrible otherness. Such a reading would line *Jaws* up within a longer, dominant tradition of the sublime, going right back to Wordsworth, Kant and Burke, who also set out the experience of sublimity through just such Oedipal and patriarchal narratives of the conquest of an often-feminine otherness. For analyses of such a gendering in the dominant discourse of the sublime, see for example, Yaeger, "Toward a Female Sublime."; Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*; Zylinska, *On Spiders*; Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*; Battersby, *The Sublime*. However, in terms of the argument that I develop in the current chapter about the shark as a figure of capital and its subjects, the most important thing is the extent to which the shark – as "apex predator" – serves as a model (amongst others) for "masculine" behaviour under capitalism. (See also my comments later in this chapter about the function of the form of social Darwinism which such representations take on, and its function as capitalist ideology.) In the light of my enquiry, it would make sense to tie these differing strands together: "masculine" forms of modern subjectivity are formed through an imaginary of the sublime, which is closely tied into the "aesthetics" of capitalist ideology. It is this ideology of the free market which is promoted in "sublime" visions of a terrible nature, "red in tooth and claw," which we find the insistent theme of wildlife television, and which is at stake also in the image of the shark which we get in *Jaws*. Howard Caygill has argued that the sublime forms the aesthetic "scene" within which Darwin's theories of evolution themselves were developed. (Howard Caygill, "The Darwinian Sublime," *Thinking the Sublime*, Warwick University, 2004.)

31 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, 3 vols. (London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 3:267. (Translation slightly altered.)

languages,³² and it is such a creature – devoid of mythical horror – we meet in the “see dogge” of the bestiaries of that era.³³

My premise is that the “powerful horror” of the shark is the contingent product of a particularly modern network of metaphorical significances which have accrued around it, and that these draw their power from what they offer as a means to articulate both the anxieties and the desires – and some of the basic forms of the phantastical cosmography through which the subject is mapped into its reality – of the socio-economic conditions of the modern world. It was a larger historical transformation that caused the mutation of the significance and the affective charge of the figure of the *canis marinus* into that of the modern-day shark.³⁴ At the core of this socio-economic transformation is the rise of capitalism. Of course, this modern network of associations does not come from nowhere and certainly draws on older traditions of terrifying

32 “In the Mediterranean, amongst the Greeks and Romans of antiquity, closer contact with sharks had left an impression of vicious dogs of the sea. Thus Pliny’s metaphor of the *canis marinus*. The metaphor of the dog spread to the North to dominate the European image of the shark, from the Italian *pescecane* and French *chien de mer* to the German *Meerhund* and *Hundfisch* and English *sea dog* and *dogfish*.” (Jones, “The Xoc,” 213.) The more familiar words *shark* (in English), *Hai* (in German), *requin* (French) and *tiburón* (Spanish) all appear only from the sixteenth century onwards. See Castro, “Origins,” 249-53.

33 See, for example, Lawrens Andrewe, “The Noble Lyfe & Nature of Man, of Bestes, Serpentyng, Fowles & Fisshes Y Be Moste Knowen,” *An Early English Version of Hortus Sanitatus: A Recent Bibliographical Discovery*, ed. Noel Hudson (London: Wellington Press, 1954). In his prologue, Andrewe tells us that his book is a translation (or actually a summary) of Johannes Doesburgh’s Dutch *Der Dieren Palley*s (1520), which Hudson identifies as in turn a translation of part of the earlier Latin *Hortus Sanitatis* (1491). Andrewe writes of the “see dogge”: “it hath the very small fete to quantitye of his body / he byteth lyke a dog and he is dangerous an enemye to all fishes / for he challenge the fishes in the see as the houndes do the bestes of ye lande [...] he driveth them into a narrow corner of the water and there he byteth them perillously” (131). From the description alone – in particular with its description of the short legs of this creature – it would remain doubtful whether this might refer to a shark at all, and Andrewe’s illustrator, in fact, interprets the description entirely literally: the sea dog is not a fish at all, but rather a dog with fins and scales (which would seem to suggest the extent to which sharks were absent in the general medieval imagination). It is, however, etymologically clear that the sea dog is meant to represent the same thing as the *canis marinus*. As with Pliny, the primary aim appears to be to imagine the fish as having the characteristics of a dog – herding, chasing, biting, worrying – making the order of the sea into a mirror of that of the land, and situating it within a broadly human order of nature. (Many other sea creatures in the bestiary are similarly named and described in terms of their equivalence to more familiar land animals).

34 In claiming this, I don’t want to overstate the notion of a “break” between the “medieval” and the “modern,” as if this was sudden or absolute; the terms themselves are dangerously misleading in the way that they divide history through their opposition, which serves to obscure both complexity and continuity. Following Braudel, my understanding of the change which occurs between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries is that it is slow, incremental, and not necessarily clearly understandable in terms of an orderly and simple linear “progression” from one state to another. As Braudel repeatedly argues, much of what we think of as “modern” (such as market economies and their capitalist exploitation) is visible much earlier in medieval times than we often care to admit, and there remains a certain inertia in modern “material life” which retains a contact with the ancient past. Nonetheless between the fourteenth century (say) and the present there has certainly been momentous – if often non-linear – change in almost all areas of life. See Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*.

sea monsters: the whale-like “cethes,” in particular, although there is hardly a lack of other horrific creatures of the deep, such as the saw-fish, the mer-knight, or any manner of sea serpents, which may in the past have been repositories of something akin to the horror elicited today by the idea of the shark.³⁵ But the modern words *shark* (in English), *Hai* (in German), *requin* (French) and *tuburão* (Portuguese) / *tiburón* (Spanish) all make their first appearances in a relatively brief period of time, during the sixteenth century, rapidly replacing “sea dog” in most European languages. The new vocabulary can only mark a shift in the significance of the fish, its associations, and the network of metaphor within which it is caught³⁶ – it is at exactly this juncture that the familiar image

35 For these beasts, see Andrewe, “Noble Lyfe.” There are also some fascinating descriptions of various whales, sea monsters and serpents in Olaus Magnus, *Description of the Northern Peoples*, Rome, 1555, trans. Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens, ed. Peter Foote, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1998), 3:1081-1139. In proposing such a relation between old and new tropes, we are dealing with what Aby Warburg calls the *Nachleben* (afterlife) of images. As Saul Ostrow writes: “Europe’s past was a matter of fact for Warburg, as was the idea that its artistic traditions constituted an image bank – a supra-personal memory and a language that could be drawn on by successive generations in accord with their expressive needs. Yet, unlike Carl Jung’s collective unconscious, Warburg’s image world does not consist of archetypes, but images whose meanings change, yet continue to resonate with the original texts.” (“Introduction,” Richard Woodfield, ed., *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg’s Projects* [Amsterdam: A&B Arts International, 2001], 2.) A figure endures, but is put to new ends, serving to function or “mean” in new ways. Thus medieval monsters signified originally within a largely theological framework that remains today in vestigial form. Their perseverance drags something of medieval theology into the modern world, even as the image is set to new ends. The whale, like the shark, swallows and drowns men (leads them to be “swallowed by the sea”). Within the framework of the bestiaries, this functions as an allegory of the devil’s dragging or tricking of men into the “jaws of hell.” The shark retains an echo of this – often quite explicitly – in many early modern accounts. (See for example, my discussion below of Copley’s painting *Watson and the Shark*, which, drawing on Rubeus’s depiction of Jonah, has been interpreted as a drama of sin and redemption, with the shark serving as a figure of perdition.) The persistence of this imagery can even be traced in more recent culture: in *Jaws* there are strong resonances with Melville’s *Moby Dick*, especially during the second half of the film, and in particular with the character of Quint, the mad, Ahab-like fisherman, dead set on revenge. In *Jaws*, the shark and the whale are clearly still related figures. For more on the *Jaws*/*Moby Dick* parallels, see for example Donald R. Mott and Cheryl McAllister Saunders, *Seven Spielberg* (London: Columbus Books, 1986), 51; Jameson, *Signatures*, 28. The point is, however, that the shark draws on these traditions in order to articulate new problems; and it does so without the need to function within the framework of a medieval theology.

36 Jones, “The *Xoc*,” 211-22; Castro, “Origins,” 249-53. Jones’s and Castro’s etymologies for the word *shark* attempt to trace the word’s origin. Castro follows Jones in deriving *shark* from the Mayan *Xoc*. Their account places the origin of the word in the context of the exploration and conquest of the New World; their “explanation” for the invention of the word is that it is invented to name the sharks newly encountered in the Caribbean, and that the shark was basically unfamiliar to Europeans before this. However, though there may well be a relation of necessary cause between the new words and the new experiences of the New World, I find their argument unsatisfying on a number of counts, and doubt the “cause” here is sufficient as well as necessary. Their argument becomes contradictory in its attempt to explain the existence of terms such as “sea dog” existing long before the word *shark*. They are forced to note the existence of this earlier term, but also claim that Europeans did not know of the existence of sharks before the sixteenth century! This contradiction is symptomatic of their inability to think why these older words were no longer fit for purpose. What is lacking in Jones’s and Castro’s accounts is a sensitivity to the metaphorical nature of language, and to its connotative rather than merely denotative dimensions. What we have with the new words *shark* or *tiburón* is a

emerges of the terrible fish which such words name, and the particular cluster of repeated tropes that accompany it. Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, recounting his travels in the West Indies, describes the fish in typical, and already familiar terms in a book of 1585:

There is an infinite number of great fishes called *tiburones*, and are in great skuls: they are marveilously affected unto humaine flesh, and wil folow a shippe five hundred leagues, without leaving of it one day. Many times they [the sailors] have taken of the fishes, and do finde in their bellies all such filth as hath beene throwne out of the shippe in many dayes sailing, and whole sheepes heads with hornes and all. If they [the sharks] chance to finde a man in the waters side he wil eat him all; if not, all that he doth fasten on he doth sheare it clean away, be it a legge or an arme, or half his body, as many times it hath beene seene, and they doo it very quickly, for that they hath many rowes of teeth in their heads, which be as sharpe as rasers.³⁷

Here we already have a series of tropes – the rows of terrible, shearing

network of new significances and resonances. The new word did not involve simply a new referent, but rather, a new concept. These new words carry the charge of the strange and exotic realm from which they are drawn. And they belong, as we shall see, to a geography and even to a cosmography which does not just stem from the discovery of the New World, but also the social relations and conditions of world at home which were rapidly changing. We must contextualise the new terms within an understanding of what the “New World” itself meant to Europe, and the place that it took up within its imaginary. The “New World” stood as a screen upon which Europe projected its phantasies and anxieties; a dark mirror of alterity onto which it projected outwards the image of its own social relations, only to receive these back in mythical form. (Conrad was to depict this mechanism powerfully several centuries later in *The Heart of Darkness*, where Kurtz and Marlow set out into Africa expecting the “truth” of a primitive world, only discover the darkness lurking within their own, European, minds.)

37 Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, *The Historie of the great and mightie kingdome of China, and the situation thereof: together with the great riches, huge citties, politike gouernment, and rare inuentions in the same*, translated R. Parke, (London, 1588), 219, cited in Jones, “The Xoc,” 214. The speed of translation is indicative of the popularity of such work, and the appetite for the kind of account given here. That the piece is typical we can see by comparing it to the reiteration of many of the same tropes in a contemporary newsletter of the Fugger financial empire. The correspondent writes: “What called forth still greater surprise on my part were other big fishes that are in the ocean and that eat men alive, whereof I have been myself a witness. For when a man fell from our ship into the sea ... there appeared from below the surface of the sea a large monster, called *Tiburon*; it rushed on the man and tore him to pieces before our very eyes” (Cited in Jones, “The Xoc,” 213. Jones’s ellipsis.) That this is a newsletter produced within one of the great global capitalist concerns of the era is hardly incidental to the arguments I will go on to make about the relation between the figure of the shark and the imaginary of capital. Note that the word used in both cases is still the Spanish one. This word, which according to lexicographer Fernando Ortiz, was drawn from the Carib language, was introduced in the 1520s and rapidly became current in Spain and Portugal. (See Castro, “Origins,” 250.) The first printed use of the term is held to be in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s *Historia de las Indias* (Toledo, 1526), and in the brief definition of the term the outlines of our familiar image of the shark are already starting to become clear. In Richard Eden’s 1555 translation of the book Oviedo’s description is of “a very greate fishe and very quicke and swifte in the water, and a cruel devourer.” (Richard Eden, [1555] *The Decades of the New World or West India*, facs. ed, Readex Microprint, 1966, 201, cited in Jones, “The Xoc,” 213.) It is initially around *tiburón* that the new figure of the shark coalesces, and only in the last decades of the century do other European languages develop their own equivalents. By the end of the century, however, new words have “caught” in these languages.

and dismembering teeth, the eating of men, the uncannily dogged pursuit of the human – which are familiar from our own present-day culture. Mendoza’s description of the shark’s stomach-contents even recalls the scene in *Jaws* where a shark is cut open revealing, amongst other objects, a car number plate – an image of an absolutely prodigious ability to devour.

By this time, though Mendoza’s translator does not seem aware of it, the word *shark* has already entered the English language to signify such a monster. The extent to which Hirst’s sculpture and the furore around it was prefigured in the very first written record of the word is surprising.³⁸ This shark is, like Hirst’s, presented as a prodigious and frighteningly inhuman monster. But it is also already, like Hirst’s shark, a matter of commodified, public, urban, cultural spectacle and consumption where (as Shakespeare will put it) “every holiday fool” will pay “a piece of silver” to see a monstrous fish.³⁹ Furthermore, it is already a “media event,” an object of fascination for the same gutter press which will bring Hirst’s shark, centuries later, so much notoriety, and still periodically reiterates its headlines about shark attacks. It was in such a press context that the word *shark* first appears, in an anonymously-authored broadside, published in June 1569 in Fleet Street.⁴⁰ The broadside tells of a “straunge and marveyulous fyshe” caught in the straights between Calais and Dover, after it had crashed into some fishermen’s nets. It tells of the violent struggle to land the powerful beast, which nearly brought the men to wreck instead. The broadside goes on to give a careful description of fish, detailing the size of its organs with an empiricism that serves to defuse the terror of the monster.⁴¹ The author wonders, with an insistent vocabulary of the “strange” and “marvellous,” at the creature’s scale, at its ferocity and destructive power, and at its prodigious appearance. He tells how the beast was brought to Billingsgate (the very market to which Hirst went first, to try to get hold of his shark), and “ther it was seene and vewid of manie, which marveiled much

38 The source which I shall go on to describe is listed as such by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989, as well as the Castro’s and Jones’s etymologies.

39 Shakespeare, “*Tempest*,” Act 2, Scene 2, p.36. I cite this passage in the banner quote introducing the current chapter.

40 Anon., “The True Discription of This Marveilous Straunge Fishe, Which Was Taken on Thursday Was Sennight, the XVI. Day of June, This Present Month, in the Yeare of Our Lord God, M.D.LXIX [1569],” *A Collection of Seventy-Nine Black Letter Ballads and Broad-sides, Printed in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, between the Years 1559 and 1579*, ed. Joseph Lilly (London, 1867), 145-7.

41 See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Fontana, 1988), 130-45. Schama describes the responses to whales beached in the Dutch Republic in the late sixteenth century. In the whale there remained the same uneasy mix of a superstitious response to the appearance as an omen or prodigy and sober empiricist accounting, between calculating economic exploitation of the landfall, and wonderment.

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Fig. 79: The shark as entertainment: Vic Hislop's Shark exhibitions, Queensland, Australia. <<http://ozmagic3.homestead.com/VicHislopSharkExpo.html>>. Hislop (an "authority on man-eating sharks") is the fisherman who caught the shark for Hirst's *Physical Impossibility*.

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Fig. 80: Shark image from Vic Hislop's website. <<http://ozmagic3.homestead.com/VicHislopSharkExpo.html>>.

at the straungnes of it; for her hath never the lyke of it ben seene." After they had removed the skin, preserving it so that it might be stuffed and exhibited, the meat of the fish was cut up and cooked, sold off "to eat for daintie," transforming the terrible creature into a novelty good (of which the curious customers of the Castle and the King's Head "did bui a great deale.") The article concludes: "Ther is no proper name for it that I knowe, but that sertayne men of Captayne Haukineses doth call it a sharke. And it is to be seene in London, at the Red Lyon on Fletestreete."⁴²

So what *is* the meaning of this figure of the shark, which is so familiar and potent a presence in our culture? What *is* being repeated in the echoes between the display at the Red Lion in the sixteenth century and the Saatchi gallery in the 1990s? I have proposed to read this in terms of what the shark offers for the articulation of desires, fears, experiences and phantasies inherent in the social relations of capitalist modernity. My first stop in this shall be a close examination of Brecht's "Mac the Knife" ballad, from the *Dreigroschenoper*, which opens with the image of a shark. I draw from this an understanding of the image the shark provides of capital, which even throws light on the function of the figure of the shark in Hirst.

Mac the Knife and the Meaning of the Shark

Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne,
Und die trägt er im Gesicht
Und Macheath, der hat ein Messer
Doch das Messer sieht man nicht.

– Bertolt Brecht⁴³

Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper* opens with the famous "Mac The Knife" ballad (*Die Moritat von Mackie Messer*), which in turn presents us in its first line with the very first figure of the play: the shark, wearing its formidable teeth for all to see on its face, an image of spectacular terror, of grinning, implacable, all-devouring death.⁴⁴

⁴² Anon., "Discripcion," 145-7.

⁴³ ("And the shark, he has teeth, / And he wears them in his face / And Macheath, he has a knife / But one doesn't see the knife.") My trans. Bertolt Brecht, "*Die Moritat von Mackie Messer*," *Die Dreigroschenoper*, in Bertolt Brecht, *Die Stücke Von Bertolt Brecht in Einem Band* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 167. Further citations in the original German will be from this volume, and translations into English my own, unless otherwise stated. Unlike the published versions, my translations will stick as close as possible to the literal.

⁴⁴ Though in some versions there is a narrated prologue before the song (e.g. Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. Hugh MacDiarmid [London: Eyre Methuen, 1973], 3.), in the version published in the Suhrkamp *Stücke*, before the song we have only the sage direction: "*Jahrmarkt in Soho. Die Bettler betteln, die Diebe stehlen, die Huren huren. Ein Moritattsänger singt eine Moritat.*" (Market in Soho. The beggars beg, the thieves steal, the whores whore. A Singer of murder ballads sings a murder ballad). Brecht, *Stücke*, 167. However, a number of versions

This highly striking and visual – if sparsely worded – image introduces the play’s anti-heroic protagonist Macheath, a predatory criminal mastermind with a penchant for sex and murder. The song takes the form of a *Moritat* (“murder ballad”), a centuries-old low-cultural form in which infamous crimes were celebrated and became a part of popular memory, sold as cheap broadsheets (a little like the one in which the English word *shark* was first coined), or performed on the streets, just as Brecht and Weil’s play has it being performed

of the play exist, some with fairly large variations, even in the songs themselves. This makes appeal to a “definitive” text Quixotic. Brecht himself said that the script was “little more than the prompt book of a play already given over completely to the theatre.” (Jan Needle and Peter Thomson, *Brecht* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981], 43.) Songs were still being added and cut during the dress rehearsal, and Brecht continued to add verses to the “Mac the Knife” *Moritat* in the 1940s. My own strategy for dealing with this has been to refer fairly eclectically to different versions. I have drawn on these in the way that best helps draw out the image of the shark which Brecht builds, since this is my primary interest. Drawing on the plays eclectically in this way may irk purist Brechtian scholars since it ignores the significant changes which were going on in Brecht’s political and theoretical alignments during and after the writing of this play, a period during which he was moving from a dark and fatalistic nihilism, influenced by Wedekind and Buchner, towards a Marxist theatre. The *Dreigroschenoper* was a transitional piece, mixing elements of the bleaker *Weltanschauung* of Brecht’s earlier works with Marxist social critique. (For the additional Marxist material Brecht added in 1931, some of which I lean on heavily for my reading here, see Ronald Speirs, “A Note on the First Published Version of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and Its Relation to the Standard Text,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 13.1 [1977]: 25-32.) Critical writings frequently respond to the play by attempting to plot its position within this development, and to evaluate it in terms of the extent to which it has attained a properly Marxist form of theatre. Such criticism is tightly bound up with a response to Brecht’s later dramatic theories, which are not the concern of this piece of writing, so I leave them aside. However, my way of discussing the piece does involve a certain implicit position in relation to these discourses on Brecht, which I feel I should make explicit. Within such accounts of the play, it is usually judged as lacking with regard to the criteria of the later epic theatre and the *Lehrstücke*: Jan Needle and Peter Thomson note that it is generally judged “deeply unserious” and state: “That it fails as a play by a Marxist writer has become axiomatic.” (Needle and Thomson, *Brecht*, 40.) Michael Morley, for example, finds it “little more than a pot-boiler.” (Michael Morley, *Brecht: A Study* [London: Heinemann, 1977], 36.) It is often thought formally lacking, due to its struggle to unite disparate elements – Morley finds it “shapeless” (37) – and also lacking in efficacy as a piece of didactic political theatre: it is too prone to naturalising the darkness and violence of the world of the play as if they are part of the human condition rather than the effects of capitalist relations. It is argued the critique of the bourgeoisie is too pat, and could be lapped up by them, as the immediate popular success of the play testified. (See Ronald Speirs, *Bertolt Brecht*, Macmillan Modern Dramatists [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987], 33-4; Morley, *Brecht*, 37; Needle and Thomson, *Brecht*, 43-4.) My experience of the play (and the film and the music), however, is that it is powerful, rich, thought-provoking and of lasting interest. What Brecht’s work may lose in ideological clarity through his incorporation of material from his earlier Wedekindian world-view, it nonetheless gains in emotional intensity and a subjective truth, which Brecht, I feel, holds successfully within the Marxist framework he is moving towards. An important function of culture can be to articulate and start to work through the contradictions with which we are faced, in ways which are often intuitive, “felt” rather than clearly reasoned or theorised, and my feeling is that over and above his development of a didactic theatre, this is what Brecht’s theatre often does, with the *Threepenny Opera* (and its image of a shark) as no exception. (As Brecht himself once said, “*Ein Mann mit einer Theorie ist verloren. Er muss mehrere haben, vier, viele! Er muss sie sich in die Taschen stopfen wie Zeitungen!*” – A man with a theory is lost. He must have several, four, lots! He must cram them in his pockets like newspapers!) Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* will remain a powerful and living work as long as the conditions it grapples with persist, as they still do, largely, today. My position is also in line with a faith that I have – though with a certain amount of reservation – in the “popular,” if not as an achieved reality in art or culture, then at least as a goal and a potentiality.

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Fig. 81: The *Moritat* singer in the opening scene of Pabst's 1931 film version of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, singing the *Moritat von Mackie Messer*.

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Fig 82: Rudolf Forster as Macheath in Pabst's film.

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Fig. 83: The *Moritat* singer's visual props: image of a shark.

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Fig 84: Macheath, blending into the crowd, listens to the *Moritat*.

here by the play's narrator, a beggar busking the story of Macheath.⁴⁵ Aside from locating us squarely within the realm of the popular (which, we have already seen, is the natural habitat of the shark), this shocking, kitschy image tells us that Macheath is like a shark in his inhuman appetite for violence. But it also sets the man and the fish in symbolic opposition: whilst the shark is clearly and visibly what it is and can be taken at "face" value, Macheath's defining feature is invisibility, characterised in the concealment of his weapon.

This contrast between the shark's visible and Mackie's invisible cruelty is central in my reading. If, as the second verse tells us, the shark's deeds are written clearly in the blood staining its fins, Mackie wears gloves, "*drauf man keine Untat ließt.*"⁴⁶ When, in order to explain Mackie's immunity from the law, the ballad concludes that "*Ein Haifisch ist kein Haifisch / Wenn man's nicht beweisen kann,*"⁴⁷ he is (ostensibly) being defined in terms of his lack of phenomenality, in opposition to the shark, which is defined precisely by its evidential presence.⁴⁸

However, even as it is introduced in Brecht's song, the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility is problematised. In spite of the importance of the visual imagination in this figure's impact, the shark hardly gets a detailed painting in words, in part since it is already so familiar an image from the wealth of representations of sharks in popular culture.⁴⁹ Brecht only needs

45 A narrator's preamble (not included in the Suhrkamp edition) is added in the version of the script prepared for a performance directed by Tony Richardson at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, in 1972, and runs: "You are about to listen to an opera for beggars. Since it was prepared with so much splendour as only beggars can imagine, and since it was nevertheless so cheap that beggars can afford it, it is called the Threepenny Opera." (Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*, 3.) In the original production, Brecht had this text projected onto the backdrop of the stage for the audience to read. Gay's original play starts with a very similar preamble. For more on the murder ballad and the broadside, see Claude Simpson, *The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966).

46 "On which one can read no crime"

47 "A shark is not a shark / if one can't prove it so." The lines are part of two verses added by Brecht to the end of the song. Bertolt Brecht, *Anhang to the Dreigroschenoper: "Neue Schlußstrophen Der Moritat Von Mackie Messer, 1948."* *Werke in 20 Bänden, Werkausgabe* ed., (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 2:491.

48 This does, of course, take the lines at face value, and we shall have to return to look at the irony which Brecht seems to intend with the obvious absurdity of the proposition that a shark is only a shark if one can prove it to be so.

49 That the shark should be read here as an image already overdetermined in "popular," commercialised culture would not just be supported by the fact that Brecht and Weil's general artistic procedure involved borrowing motifs and artistic forms from "low" culture in order to communicate better with a mass audience (the song itself takes the musical form of the cabaret of the time, and lyrically its form is that of the murder ballad; the narrative of the play itself is drawn from Gay's long-popular *Beggar's Opera*). More than this, in the play itself, the song is represented as a piece of low, commercial culture: it is being sung – as "murder ballads" would have been for centuries – by a street busker, and the story of Macheath, presented thus, intimates to the audience that they are being plunged into a rich realm of urban rumour and myth. That the song proceeds through a series of highly visual images is reinforced in stagings

telegraph the vision; he only needs to call it by its name with the words “shark” (*Haifisch*), “teeth” (*Zähne*) and “face” (*Gesicht*). Brecht conjures an unrepresentable horror with a refusal to present it: the very trope of the lack of a trope which Longinus proposes in that passage which so fascinated Lyotard.⁵⁰

It is ironic that obscurity is the device here, exactly where what is at stake is the contrast between the explicit and spectacular visibility of the shark and the invisibility of Macheath. Brecht uses this figure of not-representing (merely gesturing towards something that remains unspoken) at precisely the point where it seems he should be supplying us with the explicit, the better to highlight the difference between the obvious and the hidden. His decision suggests he is proposing something more complex in the relation between visibility and invisibility in the phenomenality of violence in modern society than might appear at first sight. Paying close attention to Brecht’s choice of words, the shark’s teeth are not merely visible, they are “worn” on the shark’s face (*sie trägt er im Gesicht*), a turn of speech as bold in German as it is in English. Through this verb, both the teeth and face become more like a mask than parts of the proper body of the shark. In the very spectacularity of the shark’s act of revealing its truth, the shark seems nonetheless bound up in misrepresentation: precisely an act of the deceit that characterises Mackie.

This reading can be further nuanced: *tragen* means both to wear and to carry. From the context of the sentence, it clearly suggests wearing; however, the word also ties the teeth to Mackie’s knife which would be a much more likely candidate for the object of this verb, in its sense of carrying. However, Brecht uses the more neutral verb *haben* (to have) here. *Tragen* thus becomes displaced from one clause of the sentence to the other, paradoxically weaving the two actions, one of wearing something hyper-visibly and the other of carrying a concealed weapon, into a single *Gestalt* of “carrying-wearing as concealing-showing” – precisely what is at stake more generally with Brecht’s

of the play where the busker accompanies his verses showing a series of crude, cartoon-like pictures on an easel. That the song indeed taps into a collective imaginary would be lent credence by its fate as one of the most recognisable songs in twentieth-century culture, in particular through the Marc Blitzstein translation into English (Kurt Weil, *Mac the Knife*, trans. Marc Blitzstein [London: Arcadia Music Publishing, 1954]), which was popularised in hits by Bobby Darin and Louis Armstrong and became one of the staples of the repertoire of “rat pack” crooners. More recently it can be found amongst the recordings of singers as diverse as Sting, the Young Gods, King Kurt, Nick Cave and Robbie Williams.

50 Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 94-5. Edmund Burke would have classed this as one of those rhetorical devices where words are most powerfully affective through obscurity and imprecision. Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 5, Sect. 7 (“How Words Influence the Passions”), 196-9. One might contrast Brecht’s choice to that of his English translators, which almost all attempt to complicate the neutral bareness of Brecht’s description with adjectives. The Blitzstein translation renders the first lines “Oh the shark has pretty teeth dear, / and he shows them pearly white.” (Weil, *Mac the Knife*, 2.) Comparison with the 1976 Ralph Mannheim/John Willett Broadway version, which renders the opening lines: “See the shark with teeth like razors, / You can read his open face,” similarly highlights the spareness of Brecht’s original.

use of the shark image. Both senses of the verb *tragen*, moreover, make the teeth something external and detachable from the shark, a weapon, a tool, a piece of the shark's property, rather than a part of its person. This alienation of the body echoes what happens in the gruesome image of its mask-face. This transformation of the shark's body has the symmetrical effect of making Mackie's knife more a part of his physiology, a prosthesis of self and object compounded in the very integration of the knife into Macheath's nickname (Mackie Messer / Mac the Knife). All this is hardly incidental to what the Marxist Brecht has to say about capitalism and its power to alienate seemingly inalienable parts of the self, and enter into human relationships through fetishised objects.

Brecht's rhetorical devices suggest, then, that the shark is more an equivalent for Mackie than it seems at first reading. Even if the ballad starts with the differences between Mackie and the shark, overall it equates the two, highlighting a series of attributes that Mackie shares with the shark: he is a cold-blooded, unfeeling, deadly and fantastically efficient predator with an unlimited appetite for gory brutality.

The equation is most explicit in the (already cited) closing lines which ostensibly tell us that a shark is not a shark unless we can prove it. Mackie, it says, is not a shark, because he is not visible as such. But of course, this is an absurd proposition, and Brecht is only putting it forward ironically: we know a shark is a shark, whether or not we can prove it; such sophistry would be unlikely to persuade us to enter the water with it. Brecht's point is satire. Mackie *is* a shark, albeit a shark in neat white gloves and dandyish spats, a shark who we merely cannot prove to be such, because *he is a shark who does not appear to be one*.

The irony in these concluding lines is clearer when placed in their context within Brecht's two *Neue Schlußstrophen* (new concluding verses) which he added to the *Moritat*, some years after the play's first performance. These undo the opening distinction between Mackie and the shark, metaphorically equating the two:

Und die Fische, sie verschwinden
 Doch zum Kummer des Gerichts.
 Man zitiert am End den Haifisch
 Doch der Haifisch weiß von nichts.
 Und er kann sich nicht erinnern
 Und man kann nicht an ihn ran
 Denn ein Haifisch ist kein Haifisch
 Wenn man's nicht beweisen kann.⁵¹

⁵¹ Brecht, "Neue Schlußstrophen," 491. A rough translation of this allegory of Mackie's immunity

These verses emphasise that shark and criminal share a paradoxical form of invisibility that is entwined with spectacular display. Each verse of the song, in a repeated *fort/da* movement, stages this alternation between the spectacular, “sensationalist” nature of Mackie’s crimes, and his subsequent disappearance back into the anonymous fabric of city life, disappearing around the corner or into the crowd. Just as a shark, we know, bursts without warning through the sea’s surface for an attack, and then submerges itself, lurking in the depths under the seemingly calm surface of the ocean, something monstrous lurking beneath the appearance of things.

One need only think of *Jaws* to remember the extent to which the shark has been embedded in the popular imagination not just as an image of spectacular gore, but also of lurking, invisible, awaited (even longed-for) horror. This is what makes it such a striking image for Brecht to use to introduce his villain. It is also why it makes sense to introduce the shark in such a spare fashion, so that it remains an implied, hinted-at present-absence under the textual surface of the *Moritat*’s signifiers.

The first half of *Jaws*’s plot revolves around a more literal version of the dilemma Brecht’s concluding verses propose, that a shark is only a shark when proven through the official mechanisms of law and state. Brody faces this problem in a town whose vested interest is for there to be no shark. In spite of the pathologist’s initial findings and Brody’s objections, the town’s aldermen insist the inquest records the death of the shark’s first victim as a boat-propeller accident. But in spite of “lack of proof,” and the declaration of its legal non-existence, there is nonetheless a shark, which continues to eat people.

The concluding section, where Brody, Hooper and Quint take to the ocean to hunt the monster, reiterates the motif of invisibility and evidence in a different register. Even once the shark does appear, after a long section in which no sign of it is seen, its presence is mainly only indicated by the appearance and disappearance of the vividly yellow barrels which have been attached to it with harpoons. Once again the “masking” of the shark beneath the sea’s surface, is transformed into a highly visual display; a play, just as in Brecht’s *Moritat*, of simultaneous over- and under-visibility.⁵²

from justice, would be that the law, alarmed by the “disappearance” of fish stocks, calls a shark to account, but the shark knows nothing, can remember nothing, and nothing can be pinned on it. It is then that the verse sardonically concludes that a shark is not a shark unless you can prove the fact.

52 Although many reviewers of the film have noted that this strong visual device in the Spielberg film – and the general invisibility of the shark – was forced on Spielberg by technical difficulties with the mechanical sharks built for the film, and although it is a more powerful visual than literary trope, in fact the device of the yellow buoys is already to be found in Benchley’s novel. (For a description of these mechanical difficulties, see e.g. McBride, *Spielberg*, 233-5.) Spielberg’s attachment during this period to Hitchcock would also seem to make suspense a likely strategic aim rather than merely a tactical necessity, and hence a significant

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Fig. 85: A shark is not a shark unless there's proof: after the first attack, Brody is cornered by Amity's Town Elders in Spielberg's *Jaws*, and pressure is put on him to keep the beaches open.

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Fig. 86: The yellow barrels: a vivid device through which the shark is at once concealed and also made spectacularly visible.

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Fig. 86: Peekaboo: the shark suddenly rears up out of the water behind Brody – a first clear glimpse of it.

My own experience⁵³ suggests that Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* stages just such a drama of over- and under-visibility, and of elusive presence: phenomenally, it drifts in and out of reach, its "reality" adrift in a sea of representations "elsewhere" in media space or the imagination; we can never quite seize it, or bring it before our mind's eye, in spite of the excessive literality and physical existence of the real shark in front of our own bodies. Just like Brecht's Mackie, or Spielberg's "Bruce,"⁵⁴ it both appears too much, and yet also, behind its excessive appearance, remains unknown. This mode of (non-/over-)appearance is shared by these three sharks (Brecht's, Spielberg's and Hirst's), and adheres insistently to the figure of the shark. But how are we to interpret this?

Brecht: sharks, alienation, modernity and the social relations of capitalism

Brecht's shark finds its place within a familiar thematic of the sociology and literature of the "modern urban condition" of alienation. Brecht would have known this theorised by Marx, Weber and Simmel, and in particular by his friend Walter Benjamin, writers who understood such a condition as the result of the increasing mediation of human relations by money and commodities, and

part of its logic. McBride quotes Spielberg himself as saying, "I thought that what could really be scary was *not* seeing the shark" (McBride, *Spielberg*, 249.) Thus Stephen Heath notes that the "drama of vision" is structural throughout Spielberg's film, which relies on the "play on the unseen and unforeseeable, the hidden shark and the moments of violent irruption – the corpse in the boat-hull, the shark rearing from the water close behind Brody as he shovels chum." (Stephen Heath, "Jaws, Ideology, and Film Theory," *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, [Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1985], 2:514.) It is only when Spielberg stops playing this game and the shark becomes entirely visible that *Jaws* disintegrates into the ridiculous. Of course, the pleasure of the moment of cinematic bathos where the mechanical shark wriggling on the deck of *Orca* in all its absurd, inadequately realistic and overtly mechanical glory cannot be discounted. It is one of the real joys of the film, however ideologically dubious such a pleasure might be. It is a rule in monster movies that the necessary but necessarily inadequate final appearance of the monster which has terrorised us throughout by means of its invisibility stands as a moment of relief and resolution, where the mechanics of the cinematic illusion which has been terrifying us is revealed just as the monster itself becomes a visible presence. This moment of laughter and disappointment, in which the viewer's illusion is shattered, if only to be replaced by an equally illusory sense of mastery and demystification, is one in which the tensions between the contrary investments of desire maintained in the devices of suspense are released. Such moments have to be counted amongst the major pleasures of the horror genre, and might be understood as the very condition – a part of a bargain between film-makers and audience, or between the ideological demands of society [*Kultur*] and the ids of its (discontent / *unbehagen*) subjects – which allows the anxieties of horror/suspense to be mobilised. Despite its pleasure, then, this bathos is in no way liberating. The sense of mastery with which the audience leaves the cinema is highly dubious. For me it remains the airing of ambivalences and anxieties which remains the true import of the horror genre, rather than the final resolution at the end which serves as the alibi for this, and which inevitably attempts to tie us back into the safety of the (ideological) order out of which these anxieties emerge.

53 See pp.92-97, above.

54 Bruce was the nickname given on the set of *Jaws* to the mechanical shark used for the film's special effects.

of an ensuing rationalisation and instrumentalisation.⁵⁵

Brecht himself would soon come back in his essay “*Der Dreigroschenprozeß. Ein soziologisches Experiment*” to articulate, in a theoretical register influenced by this sociology, his understanding of the increasing obfuscation of modern social relations:

Die Lage wird [...] so kompliziert, daß weniger denn je eine einfache ‘Wiedergabe der Realität’ etwas über die Realität aussagt. Eine Fotografie der Kruppwerke oder der AEG ergibt beinahe nichts über diese Institute. Die eigentliche Realität ist in die Funktionale gerutscht. Die Verdinglichung der menschlichen Beziehung, also etwa die Fabrik, gibt die letzteren nicht mehr heraus. [...] [W]er von der Realität nur das von ihr Erlebbar gibt, gibt sie selbst nicht wieder. Sie ist längst nicht mehr im Totalen erlebbar. Wer die dunkeln Assoziationen, die anonymen Gefühle gibt, die sie erzeugt, gibt sie selbst nicht wieder.⁵⁶

This theme of disappearing social reality is also found in a literary tradition at least as old as Dickens, where the legibility of the city has dissolved into a series of hidden networks of money, power and information. The city has become a mystery to be solved, rather than a transparent surface whose truth can be plainly read; an opacity out of which the hidden mechanisms of the city’s secret networks can deliver misfortune or death without warning. The hidden forces which motivate this opaque modern universe have classically taken on the flesh of the criminal gang, the serial killer, the spy ring, the detective and the secret policeman – onto which one can focus the “*dunkeln Assoziationen*” and “*anonymen Gefühle*” caused by a world “*längst nicht mehr im Totalen erlebbar.*”⁵⁷ With Macheath, Brecht combines the urban paranoid fantasies of

55 See for example, Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 1; Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, [Leipzig, 1845] (London: Panther, 1969), Marx and Engels Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/index.htm>> 11 March 2008; Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” [1902-3], *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 130-5; Weber, *Protestant Ethic*; Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 152-97.

56 Bertolt Brecht, “*Der Dreigroschenprozeß. Ein soziologisches Experiment*” [1931] in *Brecht Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* 30 vols, 1988-99, 21: 469, cited in Steve Giles, “Marxist Aesthetics and Cultural Modernity in *Der Dreigroschenprozeß*,” in *Bertolt Brecht: Centenary Essays* ed. Steve Giles and Rodney Livingstone, German Monitor 41 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998): 51-2. My translation: “The situation has become so complicated that less than ever does a simple ‘report of reality’ express something about reality. A photograph of the Krupp factory or that of AEG reveals next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, as in the factory, means that they are no longer explicit. [...] They who receive only that part of reality which their lived experience gives, do not get reality itself. Reality has long been impossible to experience in its totality. Whoever has the dark associations, the anonymous feelings, which this creates, still does not get reality itself.”

57 For a fuller review of such a sociology and literature of the threateningly opaque modern city, see “Fog Everywhere” in James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 1-27. Donald starts with the passage at the start of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, where the image

the criminal mastermind, the serial killer and the rapist. If Macheath, as such a criminal figure, embodies anxieties about the submersion of human relations in the modern metropolis, Brecht's shark further gives a form to the "*dunkeln Assoziationen*" and "*anonymen Gefühle*" of capitalist modernity: the shark's literal play between the observable "surface" and unknown "depths" of the sea – and its ability to deliver unexpected and sudden violence from beneath the murk – mirrors anxieties about the impenetrable "surface" and obscure "depths" of modern society. The shark is not just a metaphor, but serves to set a whole metaphoric of surface and depth into play. It should thus not be a surprise that in Benchley's *Jaws*, too, gathered as equivalents to the shark which plagues its beaches, the same figures of the rapist and of organised crime stalk the town of Amity.⁵⁸

of a London fog figures the impenetrability and unmappability of the modern city. What is intimated next in Dickens's novel is a series of networks (geographical, legal, financial, social, and so on) which remain as much obscured as the city streets in the pea-souper that cloaks the physical infrastructure of the city. Donald interprets the rest of the book as carrying out the work of uncovering or mapping these hidden networks, at least in fictional form, performing for the modern reader, him- or herself immersed in such a generalised obscurity of social relations, the cathartic task of finally envisioning a hidden order, albeit one that substitutes a fictional resolution of anxiety for the more difficult task of the real mapping of modern life. In regard to this image of fog, it's worth noting that Pabst's 1931 film of the *Dreigroschenoper* starts with images of misty docksides, labyrinthine side-streets and impenetrable crowds that could be pulled straight out of Dickens.

58 In order to focus the drama, Spielberg and his writers (Carl Gottlieb and Howard Sackler worked on the script, alongside Benchley and Spielberg himself) cut the book's "backstories," in which Benchley develops a depiction of the social tensions in Amity, a holiday resort with a class divide between the wealthy "Summer people" with second homes on the coast and the people who live all year in the town and scrape a living from the influx of tourist dollars. Ensuing racial tensions, too, are rife in the town. The shark is repeatedly equated with the menace of a "black rapist"; it stalks the town's waters like a rapist might stalk the streets. The parallel is made explicit when the town's newspaper editor claims that a shark attack and a rapist on the loose would have similar effects on tourism. Brody's wife – one of the rich "Summer people" – at one point recounts a sexual fantasy of being raped by a working class man. (This peppering of the spectre of sexual violence throughout the book as an equivalent to the shark is motivated, perhaps, by the same nasty misogyny which stands behind the sexualisation of Benchley's description of the opening shark attack, which is itself a kind of a displaced fantasy of rape and murder, and further serves to equate the two.) In the book, Brody and his wife are natives of Amity who have married across the class divide. It is largely through the tensions this creates in their marriage that Benchley develops his account of the class divide in Amity. Spielberg removes these class tensions from their marriage. Instead of natives of the town, Brody and his wife have moved there from New York. However, Spielberg's film nonetheless retains its contact with the theme of the shark as a figure of the social conditions of modernity. Such a theme, though backgrounded in Spielberg's treatment, nonetheless has its place. Brody has moved from the city to take his family away from the crime, violence and danger of the city, with Amity (and it is not insignificant that the town's name – however ironically – means "friendship") representing a dream of the escape from the conditions of "the big city" back into a timeless, sleepy small-town America, uncorrupted by "modernity," where everybody knows everybody else. The shark represents a substitute threat to the safety that they seek in their refuge from the modern world – especially, as we shall see, in its association with the corruption of that world by forces of capital, consumerism and commerce. Just like the *Threepenny Opera*, secret networks of organised crime also make their appearance in the book. The town's mayor is being blackmailed by the mafia, and their pressure on him contributes to his insistence on keeping the beaches open, in spite of the shark.

The shark metaphor is used, then – in Brecht as elsewhere – to evoke the paranoid affect of the oft-reported split between appearance and reality under conditions of modernity. As a Marxist, Brecht is asking us to read the city's indecipherability and unrelenting violence in terms of capitalism: it is, above all, within the logic of the commodity form and its social relations that we should understand the significance of the figure of the shark in modern culture.

Rogue Literature: Sharky Villains and the Anxieties of Early Modernity

This experience of modernity, and of the commodification of human relations, however, goes back further than the Victorian metropolis. I shall turn now to look at the entanglement of the history of the figure of the shark – and the word that names it – as it emerges in early modernity with these conditions. I have already discussed Jean-Christophe Agnew's work on the history of literary attempts, from the sixteenth century on, to grapple with the rising dominance of market exchange and the social transformation this entailed.⁵⁹ Agnew is concerned with the rising obscurity of social relations which I have already been discussing. Agnew documents the "seemingly inexorable commodification of land and labour," the multiplication of "occasions for exploitation," and consequent "unrelenting inflation" and social instability of early modern England. At the root of these phenomena he discovers the unprecedented "expansion and differentiation" of market and commodity exchange. The results included the erosion of the certitudes in economic and social relations offered by the hierarchies of the Feudal order with their "customary entitlements and natural rights." Not only were power and economic relations between groups constantly shifting, but new groups were appearing within society. As increasingly fluid market relations and social forms undermined the balance which older institutions once maintained, conflicts grew up between classes who no longer had recourse to clear grounds on which to mediate their claims. Agnew poignantly describes the period's swelling archive of complaints and petitions by those who felt that they had lost their customary rights and entitlements, an archive which, according to Agnew, does not just speak of particular conflicts within society, but also of a more general "pattern of bewilderment," and a "shared distress" which was structural to the new forms of society and economy.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Agnew, *Worlds Apart*. I discuss this work in my introduction, (p.52), where I discuss the long history of what I term imperialism, noting the incredible liquidity of capital in early modernity compared to capitalism's "classic" industrial phase; and also in my discussion of Pope (p.198), where I discuss the way Agnew traces literary figures of the Protean formlessness or de-forming force of capitalist and commodity relations, and their role in the creation of the seemingly phantasmagorical, monstrous universe of Pope's poetry.

⁶⁰ Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 8-9.

Central in literature's attempt to grapple with these new conditions was the question of how to lay hold of their new form (or, precisely, their seeming formlessness), as social reality became increasingly obscured by market mediation. Over and above the experience of exploitation had come the disappearance from plain sight of the nature of that exploitation as it was submerged behind the appearances of market relations. No longer a matter of goods extracted face-to-face as feudal levy, systematic social violence went "underground."⁶¹

As experience is increasingly shorn of the guarantees of the relation between appearance and reality provided by older forms of social authority, relatively benign medieval popular market tricksters such as Robin Goodfellow become replaced with the altogether more dangerous vagabond "rogue," around whom a whole literature of anxiety and containment grew up. This "cony catcher" preys on others (just like Macheath) by disguising himself as what he is not. From the "Literature of Estates" of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which set out descriptions of the various established classes and social groups, emerged a genre of "rogue literature" or "cony-catching pamphlets" which classified and instructed its readers in identifying the different kinds of swindlers and crooks who they might come across, listing "some twenty-four orders of rogues" and fantasising a sinister "freemasonry of crime whose arts and mysteries the pamphlets purported to lay bare."⁶² (Brecht's character Peachum creates just such a systematised criminal freemasonry, running a carefully managed begging industry, with the beggars licensed, divided into categories, disguised in costumes which simulate a series of categories of misfortune, finely calculated to tug at the guilt of the middle classes.)⁶³

So powerful was the anxiety expressed in this literature, suggests Agnew, and so potent a figure this fantasised rogue, that the poor laws and vagrancy acts of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were written to combat the kinds of trickery described in the pamphlets. But the power of this figure, Agnew claims, did not stem from real evidence of rogues' fraternities or

61 Or, as we have seen Brecht put it, "*Die Lage wird [...] so kompliziert, daß weniger denn je eine einfache 'Wiedergabe der Realität' etwas über die Realität aussagt. [...] Die eigentliche Realität ist in die Funktionale gerutscht*"...

62 For the "literature of estates," see Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 61. The quotes on rogue literature are from pp.64-5. In addition to the "cony-catching" pamphlets, the sixteenth century saw the publication of a series of "rogues' dictionaries" setting out to familiarise the unsuspecting with the secret slang of these vagabond classes, which speaks once more of a fear about secret intentions held behind an opaque exterior, and the need to read and decipher that exterior for clues about what lies beneath it. (See Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 66.)

63 See *Dreigroschenoper*, Act 1, Scene 1, in Brecht, *Stücke*, 168-71.

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Fig. 88: The feared vagabond rogue. Hieronymous Bosch, *The Prodigal Son* aka. *The Vagabond* c. 1490-1505. 71 × 70.6 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Image from Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 505.

practices.⁶⁴ Rather, the power of the motif lay in its articulation of anxieties about the power of market relations themselves to make social reality opaque, throwing up spectral images in its stead. Without that “deep” knowledge of the people one deals with, which came from a more intimate mode of economic life, one was forced as never before to rely on appearance, precisely at a moment when the nature of appearances was ever more uncertain. The rogue was a powerful figure because it expressed anxieties about the nature of action, representation, subjectivity and identity within the money-and-commodity society.

It is just at this moment – the late sixteenth century – that the word “shark” also enters the English language. This seems less a matter of coincidence if we understand the shark as a figure of the same anxieties about the mode of appearance which inheres to the capitalist relations to which the “rogue” also puts a face. What is striking, furthermore, is how rapidly, insistently and closely the shark and the rogue – just as in “Mac the Knife” – became intertwined.

This close relation is, in fact, enshrined in the English language itself (the very language of the play from which Brecht adapted the *Threepenny Opera*, and of the country in which it remains set). The word *shark* is (as already noted) generally derived from the Mayan word *xoc*, brought back by the sailors of Captain Hawkins’s ill-fated third slaving expedition to the Americas in the late sixteenth century.⁶⁵ However, the significance it comes to hold is also closely entwined with the Germanic word *Shurke*, which entered English at roughly the same time.⁶⁶ This designated a villainous type: a cut-throat, a cheat, a swindler, a socially predatory sponger who lives off others and by his wits, and by doing morally dubious and disreputable work – precisely, that is, the rogue of the Rogue Books; precisely, also, Brecht’s Macheath.⁶⁷ From *Shurke* we get the phrases “card-sharp” and “loan shark,” still in use today.

64 Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 69. Agnew does note, of course, that there certainly were large groups of people uprooted from their previous means of support and reduced to vagabondage at this time, and this growing body of dispossessed, disaffected people with no stake in society and little legal means of subsistence must have been a powerful factor in the fear around the figure of the rogue. Braudel also describes the dismal growth over this period of the population of vagrants below the poverty line. (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 506-12.) But it is at least interesting that a transformation occurs where such anarchic and potentially violent mobs of beggars become refigured in the imagination of the time as market cheats and villains.

65 See Castro, “Origins.”; Jones, “The *Xoc*.”

66 It is certainly (like the word for the fish) in common usage by the end of the sixteenth century, though probably not long before this.

67 In the entry for “shark,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd. ed., 1989 gives the example of a character from a Ben Jonson play of 1599, *Every Man out of His Humour*, named Shift, who the play describes as “A Thredbare Sharke. One that was never a soldior yet lives upon lendings. His profession is skeldring and odling, his Banke Poules, and his Ware-house Pict-hatch.”

Xoc and *shurke* came incredibly rapidly to be bound together, through whatever similarities of semantic and phonetic material they shared: the resonances of the violent acts implied in the root *scheran* (implying shearing, tearing or cutting) as well as the malignancy of a villain must have seemed highly appropriate for the fish's behaviour;⁶⁸ inversely, the monstrous predatory fish rising from the depths must have been a powerful figure for the anxiety about the rogue we fear will emerge from the anonymity of the early modern marketplace and rob us blind (or worse). Within just a few decades it seems to have become impossible to tell which was properly the metaphor for the other.⁶⁹ This mutual enrichment of the semantic charges of the two terms can be interpreted as the reason that they both "stick" as terms: the very conjunction of the two allows each to carry a vivid and powerful connotative network of meanings; the common function of the terms (and the figures they name) to vent the same anxieties about capitalist life underpins this.⁷⁰

But Agnew's account only goes a certain distance to explaining these anxieties. Agnew halts his analysis at the obscurity of social relations under

68 If Hawkins's crew did bring the word home, I can imagine that perhaps even the echoes of such words, whether they directly knew the word *shurke*, or just those other words in English which derive from *scheran*, were in their minds when they heard the Mayan word *Xoc*, and made it a highly suitable sounding word to name this horrible and voracious creature with which they were faced on their nightmare voyage.

69 A 1596 play by an anonymous author, employing the fish metaphor for human relations, has its protagonist proclaim against a world in which "other ruffians and, as their fancies wrought, ... Woold shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes Woold feed on one another." (Cited in Jones, "The *Xoc*," 212. Jones's ellipsis. Jones does not give the title of the play, but it is *Sir Thomas More*, a play sometimes apocryphally attributed to Shakespeare, and in which he may have had some hand. It is available as an e-text from Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/1ws4710.txt>> visited 7 April 2007.) The playwright seems here to assume that the primary meaning of shark is to designate the fish, and that he is extending its use metaphorically to refer to human behaviour. But it is as often assumed that the shark is named after the villain: in his *Voyage to East India*, published in 1655, For example, Edward Terry, some half a century later, writes that "The Shark hath not his name for nothing, for he will make a morsell of any thing he can catch, master and devour," clearly assuming that the fish is named after its cut-throat, opportunist behaviour. (Edward Terry, *Voyage to East India* (London, 1655), cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) In fact – and in contradiction to modern etymologies – this explanation seems to have been generally favoured in the etymological accounts of seventeenth-century dictionaries. (See Jones, "The *Xoc*," 211.) Even if it does not tell us about the "origin" of the word, this tells us how it was experienced by its early modern users, and provides a certain amount of evidence about the reasons why the term caught on.

70 What is surprising, however, is that in both French and Italian, the words for sharks (*requin*, *squalo*), though etymologically entirely separate from *shark/shurke* both in fact take on very similar ranges of metaphorical meanings to the modern English *shark*, serving to name cheats, robbers, cut-throats, and the socially predatory. I can only surmise that the figurative power of what I have described here in the image of the shark, as a cipher of a concealed violence that erupts suddenly to the surface, which seems to fit so strongly with the paranoid motifs of criminality through which modern life is imagined, itself has made this a powerful enough metaphor even without the etymological relations to words for villain, etc. See *Le Grand Robert de la langue Française: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue Française de Paul Robert*. 2nd. ed., (Paris: Dictionnaires Robert, 1985), 8:293; Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande Dizzionario della Lingua Italiana*, (Torino: Unione Tipografico Editore Torinese, 1998), 19:1090.

market conditions. But it is not just the opacity of relations which is the source of anxiety, but also the particular form of violence lying underneath this. Agnew can't tell us about this because he doesn't distinguish what Fernand Braudel, in contradistinction to the "market," terms "capitalism" proper. This depends on the market form – it thrives on its mediations, mystifications and forms of phantasmagorical representation – but has an identity over and above it. "Capitalism" in Braudel's sense names the big businesses who extract giant profits due to the oligopolistic grip they have over networks of trade and information, the increased mobility of investment that the scale of their wealth gives them, and the power to control the very rules of the game of so-called "free-market" competition – a power compounded by the distance they establish between producers and customers.⁷¹ Braudel associates this capitalism with what Lenin called imperialism, but suggests that its history is much longer than Lenin has it.⁷²

Brecht, writing at the height of the stage of capitalism Lenin diagnosed as "imperialism,"⁷³ makes it (sometimes laboriously) clear in the *Dreigroschenoper* that the real but hidden violence at the heart of "modern" anxieties about social relations, to which his figures of the criminal and the shark give a spectacular face, should be understood as that of "imperialist" capitalism itself. Macheath is shown running his criminal empire as a calculating businessman. He has ledger books, and chastises his henchmen for their violence, claiming bloodshed makes him sick – not for sentimental reasons, but because it is unprofitable. He tells Polly he wishes to go into banking instead of crime, since it is a more efficient way of making money.⁷⁴ Towards the end of the play, Macheath, facing the scaffold, makes an extended self-justification in terms of the equivalence of crime and business: it is stocks, shares, banks and employment which are the true weapons of violence within modern society.⁷⁵ Mackie's criminal activities

71 Braudel defines capitalism as "the zone of the anti-market, where the great predators roam and the law of the jungle operates." *Wheels of Commerce*, 229-30.

72 See Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 229-30, 231, 381, 433, 577.

73 Lenin, "Imperialism." Brecht is writing just ten years after Lenin's pamphlet.

74 "Meine Direktive lautete: Blutvergießen ist zu vermeiden. Mir wird wieder ganz schlecht, wenn ich daran denke. Ihr werdet nie Geschäftsleute werden! Kannibalen, aber nie Geschäftsleute!" (My directive goes: spilling of blood is to be avoided. I feel quite sick when I think of it. You'll never become businessmen! Cannibals, but not businessmen!) Brecht, *Stücke*, 172. "Unter uns gesagt: es ist eine Frage von Wochen, daß ich ganz in das Bankfach übergehe. Es ist sowohl sicherer als auch einträglicher" (Between us: it's a matter of weeks until I'll be going entirely into the banking business. It's as much safer as it is more profitable.) Brecht, *Stücke*, 183.

75 "Meine Damen und Herren. Sie sehen den untergehenden Vertreter eines untergehenden Standes. Wir kleinen bürgerlichen Handwerker, die wir mit dem biedereren Brecheisen an den Nikkelkassen der kleinen Ladenbesitzer arbeiten, werden von den Großunternehmen verschlungen, hinten denen die Banken stehen. Was ist ein Dietrich gegen eine Aktie? Was ist ein Einbruch in eine Bank gegen die Gründung einer Bank? Was ist die Ermordung eines Mannes gegen die Anstellung eines Mannes?" (Ladies and Gentlemen. You see before you the decline of the representative of a declining

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Fig. 89: Capitalism itself as shark-like. Website of an investment firm.

are revealed as merely an amateurish imitation of the brutality unleashed by big business and the machinery of financial speculation which stands behind it. His company is merely an outmoded, cottage-industry version of the violence which legitimate business carries out efficiently and systematically within the scope of the law, a viciousness which, in its legality, does not appear as vicious, but as bourgeois respectability.⁷⁶

John Gay: The Scriblerian Roots of the Dreigroschenoper

Brecht's play is an adaptation of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Gay's play itself does not include any sharks – though as we shall see, Brecht's shark strikes a consonance with a certain imagery which runs through *The Beggar's Opera* – but it is nonetheless useful to return to it to further trace the vision of a the rogue as a figure of the growth of rapacious social relations in early modernity's commodifying economy, from which Brecht will derive the character of MacHeath. Its vision of eighteenth-century capitalism also links us to the milieu I have been exploring in Chapters 4 and 5. Gay was a close

class. Us petty bourgeois artisans, who work with honest crowbars on the cashboxes of small shopkeepers are being edged out of the market by the large concerns, behind whom stand the banks. What's a pick-lock compared to portfolio of shares? What's the burglary of a bank compared to the founding of a bank? What's the murder of a man compared to the employment of a man?) Brecht, *Stücke*, 201. In Pabst's film, and in the Macdiarmid translation, Polly in fact carries out Mackie's intention to found a bank and go respectable, and it is in fact she that makes this speech. In this version, Polly is distancing herself from the "old" ways, and noting that the bank is a better business all round. But, she goes on to note (in line with what I have been discussing here about visibility and invisibility, cloaking and violence), appearances are important, and in order to garner stockholder confidence, they will need to throw up an appearance of respectability around themselves. Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*, 49-50.

76 Thus it is that in his notes for actors playing the part, Brecht would describe his character of Macheath as "*bürgerliche Erscheinung*" – bourgeois phenomenon (Bertolt Brecht, "*Anmerkungen zur Dreigroschenoper*," *Gesammelte Werke*, [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967], 17:994-5.) Brecht was to emphasise this point, which we still find in somewhat nascent form in the play, in his reworking of the character of Mackie in the *Dreigroschenroman*, written eight years after the original production of the play. (Bertolt Brecht, *Threepenny Novel*, trans. D.I. Vesy and Christopher Isherwood, Modern Classics [London: Penguin, 1972].) Here we meet Mackie as an older man, who has fulfilled his promise in the play to "go straight," but who runs his now outwardly respectable business with every ounce of the callousness of the murderous Mac the Knife of the ballad. He runs a chain of furniture stores, which he franchises out, and which sell furniture his criminal contacts have stolen. The plot revolves around the suicide by drowning of one of his franchisees, a vulnerable woman upon whom he has economically leant with extortionate force. (The motif of drowning, in the Thames, itself echoes the Mac the Knife ballad, and returns us to the watery realm of the shark). The police investigate the death, suspecting it to be murder, but as Walter Benjamin notes in his review of the book, the satire of the book is that "a society that looks for the murderer of a woman who has committed suicide can never find him in Macheath, who has merely exercised his contractual rights." (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 77.) At this point, Macheath is no longer, as a murderer, just an *analogue* of the rapaciousness of business, he is literally become, as a businessman, an exemplar of the *murderousness of business itself*. In becoming this he even more closely fits the description of him at the end of the ballad; he truly becomes (as in fact he never is in the play) the mastermind on whom nothing can be pinned, the shark who will not appear to the legal system to be a shark at all. His crime has at this point reached the apotheosis of its invisibility.

collaborator with Pope.⁷⁷ The play was first performed in 1728, the very year Pope published both *Peri Bathous* and the first edition of the *Dunciad*. It thus belongs firmly within the Scriblerian project of satire on the early-eighteenth-century Whig “financial revolution” and the rapidly transforming social, economic and cultural conditions which precipitated around this.⁷⁸ It was thus written at (and about) a moment of the ascendancy of the highly liquid form of mercantile capital I here understand as, in a broad sense, “imperialist.”⁷⁹ As such it is connected to our own (and Hirst’s) moment, as well as the more narrowly defined imperialism of Brecht’s day. Looking at the *Beggar’s Opera* contextualises Brecht’s Macheath as a repeating character within a longer history of the literature of modern rogues and villains, which in turn makes its sense within the longer history of the resurgences of the dominance of finance capital, and the forms of social instability and violence that this fosters.

Given the dazzling, surface-like qualities of Gay’s work, its multiple levels of irony and “nihilistic” ambiguity, there is always a problem with interpretation, especially reading it for political content. Such readings fail to do justice to the complex mode of irony which is its defining feature, and which is itself of the utmost significance as a response to the world of the commodity and its phantasmagorical logic.⁸⁰ However, I shall embark (tentatively) on such

77 The play was in fact clearly a product of the collaborative nature of the Scriblerus club. The origins of the play itself lie in a letter from Swift to Pope (30 August 1716) asking, “What think you, of a Newgate pastoral among the thieves and whores there?” Pope passed the suggestion on to Gay, who made it into *The Beggar’s Opera*.

78 I shall not reiterate these conditions in detail, but I discuss these in Chapter 4. As I discuss them there, they centrally involve the growth and transformation of the national debt, and the explosion in joint stocks (which led most spectacularly to the South Sea Bubble which has burst just three years before Gay’s play, and which forms an insistent axis of reference to its satire). It also involved the more general normalisation of forms of credit throughout English society, the growth of a “proto-industrial” form of manufacture, with its increasingly commodified labour relations, and the importance of the glut of (largely cultural) commodities within the social and cultural life of the rising “middling sorts” who were gaining prestige and wealth for their role within the ascendant “moneyed interests.”

79 I discuss this highly liquid form of capital, and my designation of this as imperialist, in particular in my introduction (pp.51-52). Under such a conception I bring together recurrent qualities of capital, which unite present-day Neoliberalism, twentieth-century Imperialism as Lenin identifies it, and older, early modern forms of capitalism.

80 Dealing with Gay’s play itself is rather tricky. It is fantastically polysemous, and the objects of its satire are notoriously hard to pin down. Critics have been unable to decide on whether or not it is meant as a satire of the Walpole administration, of the operatic tastes of the day, the corruption of the aristocracy, the rising “middling” classes – and even in fact whether the work is properly satirical at all, or whether its romance and pathos are meant to be felt as genuine. (For examples for and against all of these arguments, see the collections of essays on the *Beggar’s Opera*, in Yvonne Noble, ed., *The Twentieth Century’s Interpretations of The Beggar’s Opera* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973]; Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood, eds., *John Gay and the Scriblerians* [London: Vision Press, 1988].) Attempts to read it seriously often run aground in the perilous shallowness of its waters; Robert Hume puts it nicely when he calls the *Beggar’s Opera* “frivolously nihilistic.” (Robert D. Hume, “The Beggar’s Opera,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy 2008, Oxford University Press, Available: <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>, 15 March

a reading, guided by and throwing light on what Brecht draws from Gay.

There are a number of reasons why Brecht may have been drawn to the play.⁸¹ Above all, however, what became increasingly taken up by Brecht

2008.) – and writers from Samuel Johnson to Calhoun Winton have concurred, discovering in the play nothing more than entertainment: it is just too much *fun* to function as a critique of anything. Gay's Macheath (unlike Brecht's) is just too glamorous to symbolise the iniquity of the corrupt leaders of Hanoverian England. In carnivalesque tradition its upturning of the proper order of society often does more to elevate the base, than to undermine the high-and-mighty with bathos. Johnson writes: "The play, like many others, was plainly written only to divert, without any moral purpose, and is therefore not likely to do good; nor can it be conceived, without more speculation than life requires or admits, to be productive of much evil." ("Lives of the Poets: Gay, Thomson, Young, Etc.," [1781], Project Gutenberg, 26 Feb 2002, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/lvgay10.txt>>, 10 April 2007.) Calhoun Winton echoes this verdict, arguing at length for the essentially non-political and entertainment nature of the piece in *John Gay and the London Theatre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 87-127. And yet, as so many other critics have noted, there is certainly also serious social material at stake here, and in spite of frivolity and nihilism the play resounds as a melancholic protest against the growing conditions of capitalist modernity, as if frivolity and nihilism themselves could be forms of rebellion (or perhaps at least of evasion). See for example a number of the other essays in Noble's collection: Maynard Mack, "The Augustans," 41-3; John Loftis, "From Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding," 47-50; Bertrand Harris Bronson, "The Beggar's Opera," 80-7; Martin Price, "To the Palace of Wisdom," 44-6. We are faced with an apparently inexhaustible maze of double-meaning produced to negotiate the complex of contradictory ideological investments inhabited by an Augustan intellectual on the cusp of the dominance of capitalist modernity (and the "perverse" desires these spawn). In this much it is an exemplary Scriblerian text. If anything, Gay's drama outdoes Pope and Swift in the complexity, duplicity and irony of his Scriblerian ambivalence. Swift's and Pope's satires, in comparison, appear relatively direct, unambiguous, specific – vitriolic even. Gay's works remain more playful, and more clearly fascinated with the glittering spectacle of London life than those of his collaborators. If Pope and Swift can be characterised as opponents of the growth of mercantile society who nonetheless were drawn to it, the balance is quite the other way around with Gay. This difference is also reflected (for what biography is worth in such matters) in the difference between Gay's life and professional strategy. Whilst Swift retreated to Ireland, and Pope to Twickenham, to spit fire at the new Whig order of society from a distance, Gay continued to spend much of his career in the circles of the court, seeking an advancement and patronage which he never achieved. It's not too far-fetched to read the beggar-narrator's speech at the end of the *Beggar's Opera* as representing Gay's understanding of his own situation. He tells the audience that he had intended to see Macheath and the rest of the cast hanged for their crimes, as poetic justice would require, but that the sentimental taste of the town would not support such a thing, and so he provides a happy ending instead. (John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, [1728] [London, 1765], Project Gutenberg etexts, December 2000 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/bgopr10.txt>> visited 5 March 2007, Act 3, Scene 14.) Is this Gay satirising himself, denied a pension by the Walpole government, and forced, in writing for the commercial stage, to find an economic basis for his work which relied on the debased, modern "taste of the town" rather than addressing the taste of the great and good, as his Classicist ideals, as an "Ancient" would require? In his *Trivia: The Art of Walking the Streets of London*, it is hard to tell the point where critique of the chaos of the modern metropolis crosses into a sort of paean to its energy and richness. (John Gay, "Trivia: Or the Art of Walking the Streets of London," [1716], *Walking the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London: John Gay's Trivia*, eds. Clare Brant and Susan E. Whyman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 169-205.) Irony, double-meaning, and what Ian Donaldson characterises as "counterfeiting" become the only way to deal with the captating spell of fashion and the commodity, which can allow the subject both the required distance and proximity. Gay's mobilisation of irony as a means to register both the seduction and the alienated unease of life under capital, maintaining a critical distance but also a fascinated proximity to the play of the commodity, is enlightening in thinking about why Hirst, too, is forced into an ironic mode.

81 The "pre-Marxist" Brecht, for example, must have enjoyed the glee with which Gay's

throughout (and after) the production of the *Dreigroschenoper* were Gay's scathing attacks on the growth of a commercial ethos. Brecht's Macheath – to be played according to Brecht as a “bürgerliche Erscheinung”⁸² – is one of the clearest areas of this debt. However, it is not from Gay's Macheath – a swashbuckling, glamorous, romantic highwayman, with more than a dash of aristocratic *sang-froid* and liberality⁸³ – that Brecht draws his characterisation. This sort of glamour is exactly what Brecht strove (unsuccessfully) to eliminate.⁸⁴ Brecht's Macheath is, in fact, closely drawn from Gay's Peachum, the villain of *The Beggar's Opera*.

Peachum is an entirely ruthless, avaricious criminal mastermind, the nature of whose criminal activities and empire are based almost entirely without exaggeration (surprisingly enough considering his seemingly fantastical malignancy) on the real criminal Jonathan Wild.⁸⁵ Peachum has divided London into sectors each worked by a particular gang he licenses and takes levies from. He runs this set-up as an efficient, unromantic business with account books and all. He not only “fences” the goods they steal, but also, when their take is down, turns his employees in to the authorities for the reward.⁸⁶

characters do each other in, and the bleak nihilism that lurks beneath the “lightness” of Gay's style; he may have found a useful tool through which to burlesque the society of his own day in Gay's fundamental satirical conceit, where the elites of his day were lampooned through a series of hierarchical reversals (highwaymen and thieves depicted as fine gentlemen, with the implication that in turn, high society's fine gentlemen are no more than highwaymen); even the intense ambiguity of Gay's drama would have chimed with the Brecht who still thought that a single theory is not enough, but that we should cram our pockets with them.

82 “bourgeois appearance” (or “bourgeois phenomenon”).

83 Peter Lewis finds him “a romantic hero of sorts in his anti-romantic, anti-heroic world.” Peter Lewis, “The Beggar's Rags to Rich's [Sic!] and Other Dramatic Transformations,” *John Gay and the Scriblerians*, eds. Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood (London: Vision Press, 1988), 145. For Bertrand Harris Bronson, “his sang-froid, dash, and prodigality of purse and person make him the favourite with both sexes.” (Bronson, “Beggar's Opera,” 81), and Hazlitt found him: “one of God Almighty's gentlemen,” seeing his “gallantry” arising “from impulse, not from rule; not from the trammels of education but from a soul generous, courageous, good-natured, aspiring, amorous.” (from *On the English Stage*, July 27, 1816, cited in Bronson, “Beggar's Opera,” 81.).

84 In his *Anmerkungen*, Brecht, emphasising Macheath's bourgeois appearance and character, notes the “Die Vorliebe des Bürgertums für Räuber erklärt sich als Irrtum: ein Räuber sei kein Bürger. Dieser Irrtum hat als Vater einen anderen Irrtum: ein Bürger sei kein Räuber.” (The love of the bourgeoisie for robbers is explained as a mistaken belief: that a robber is not bourgeois. This mistaken belief has another error for its father: that a bourgeois is not a robber.) Brecht, “Anmerkungen,” 994.

85 For more on Jonathan Wild, see Daniel Defoe's contemporary journalistic account, in *Defoe on Sheppard and Wild*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 69-117. For a more recent and scholarly account, see Gerald Howson, *It Takes a Thief: The Life and Times of Jonathan Wild*, Cresset Library (London: Century Hutchinson, 1987). As addition to Defoe's biography, *The Beggar's Opera*, and a whole host of broadsheets and ballads, Wild was also immortalised in Henry Fielding, *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*, [1734], Hesperus Classics (London: Hesperus, 2004). For Peachum being based on – and transparently a representation of – Wild, see Noble's introduction to her *Twentieth Century's Interpretations*, 6-7.

86 The name “Peachum” is a homonym of “impeach them” - “turn them in.”

Wild, a human shark if ever there was one, did all these things, and more. As well as dividing his empire into licensed gangs, and disposing ruthlessly of those who dared work independently, he took the respectable title of “Thief-taker General of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,” and according to his own reckoning turned in and had hanged over eighty criminals, largely members of his own gangs.⁸⁷ He owned warehouses where stolen goods were stored, and a ship to export them, employing, as well as thieves and pickpockets, a staff of “artificers” who removed distinguishing marks from stolen items. Since handling stolen goods (in addition to theft) had become illegal, Wild set up a lucrative business arranging the return of the goods his gangs had stolen to their rightful owners.⁸⁸ For the purpose of this last business and to cement his appearance of respectability, Wild took offices in London near the courts, and – just as Peachum does in the opening scene of Gay’s ballad opera – compared his “professional” services to those of a lawyer: every inch the *bürgerliche Erscheinung* which Brecht imagines for Macheath.⁸⁹ Wild, with the same lack of moral compunction as Peachum, ran his empire as an efficient business, in whose account books could be found such entries as: “One man, hanged, £40.”⁹⁰

Wild was already for some time before Gay’s *Opera* a notorious figure. The revelation of the nature and extent of his criminal empire during his trial and execution in 1725 had thrust him into the forefront of public consciousness, spawning a raft of broadsides and ballads (precursors to Brecht’s *Moritat*) – the lurid details of his life chiming so consonantly with the themes of “rogue literature.” But beyond this, he became a representative figure of Walpole’s rule. At the time of Wild’s execution, Walpole’s Lord Chancellor was on trial for embezzling £100,000 of public money, and parallels were rapidly drawn between the two.⁹¹ In the aftermath of this event, it rapidly became

87 Proud of the fact, he produced a list of these for the jury at his trial, believing that his “good” deeds would be taken to balance out his crimes. The list is reproduced in Howson, *It Takes a Thief*, 306-11.

88 This was ostensibly done for free as a “public service,” though it was “usual” for such “clients” to make a “voluntary” donation. Skipping such a donation, of course, would make such clients likely targets for further theft (or worse), so generally people submitted to the extortion. Defoe describes the practice in detail. Defoe, “Life of Wild,” 84-9, 101-7.

89 See Peachum’s first speech of the play: “A Lawyer is an honest Employment, so is mine. Like me too he acts in a double Capacity, both against Rogues and for ‘em; for ‘tis but fitting that we should protect and encourage Cheats, since we live by them.” Gay, *Beggar’s Opera*, Act 1, Scene 1.

90 Quoted by Noble in Noble, ed., *Twentieth Century’s Interpretations*, 7.

91 See H.T. Dickinson, *Walpole and the Whig Supremacy* (London: English Universities Press, 1973), 145. But whilst Wild was executed, The Lord Chancellor (Thomas Parker, Earl of Macclesfield) was merely fined £30,000, a sum which in fact the King assisted him to pay, prompting the oft-repeated (and already stock) response that whilst little villains are punished, those with wealth and power carry out their legal robberies quite immune to the law – precisely the point, of course, of the final lines which Brecht added to the *Dreigroschenoper*, contrasting the

a commonplace of opposition propaganda to compare Walpole to Wild, highlighting a series of shared characteristics.⁹² Yvonne Noble lists some of these:

their success in attaining and retaining command over their societies; their brazenness; their duplicity; their bland materialism ('All these men have their price,' we remember Walpole saying; Wild notes in his accounts, 'One man, hanged, £40'); and, alas, their manipulation and corruption of a willing public.⁹³

Walpole had become the *de facto* "prime minister"⁹⁴ through his careful development of a monopoly over the system of patronage through which official posts – which could be very lucrative for their holders – were acquired.⁹⁵ Office, in Walpole's government, was bought and sold, and through it political allegiance, too, was for sale. It was a form of politico-economic capital over which Walpole kept a tight control, a control he flaunted with ostentatious displays of the wealth it brought him.⁹⁶ His careful manipulation of this system was attacked by an opposition who saw in it a corruption of the moral fabric of society itself, and of the post-Revolution settlement, replacing the virtues of patriotism and civic duty with exchange-value, packing positions of power with those who could be bought rather than the deserving.⁹⁷ For

fate of those that live in darkness with those who live in light.

92 Where Walpole (holding the official position of the Paymaster General, amongst others) was dubbed "The Great Man," Fielding would satirise this by dubbing Wild (who had dubbed himself "Thief-Taker General") "Wild the Great." There are a number of points in *The Beggar's Opera* where Gay reinforces the fact that he is drawing off this stock satirical equation of Wild and Walpole. Peachum himself, in the very first air of the play compares himself ironically to the political elite in the couplet: "And the Statesman, because he's so great, / Thinks his Trade as honest as mine." Gay, *Beggar's Opera*, Act 1, Scene 1. Amongst the roll-call of thieves later in the Act is one, "Robin of Bagshot, alias Gorgon, alias Bluff Bob, alias Carbuncle, alias Bob Booty," a boozy, womanising robber who cannot but have been recognisable to audiences as Robert Walpole himself. Ian Donaldson goes as far as to read the final scene where the two women fight over Macheath to be a satire on Walpole's wife and mistress. (Ian Donaldson, "'a Double Capacity': The Beggar's Opera," in Noble, ed. *Twentieth Century's Interpretations*, 78.)

93 Noble, in Noble, ed., *Twentieth Century's Interpretations*, 6-7.

94 This was still at this point not an official post, and in fact a term of abuse, suggesting the achievement of an unconstitutional monopoly of control over the political system. See Dickinson, *Walpole*, 66.

95 "Patronage was ubiquitous in eighteenth-century Britain. Patronage networks were a social feature of the age, often controlled by private citizens for socio-economic as well as for political purposes, and not merely the aberrant creation of the Crown and ministers." Jeremy Black, *Robert Walpole and the Nature of Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: MacMillan, 1990), 48.

96 For more on Walpole's political methods see Dickinson, *Walpole*, 66-92.

97 See Dickinson, *Walpole*, 143-4. Describing such responses to Walpole, Black cites a contemporary ballad, *The Knight and the Prelate* (1734) which satirises Walpole for his reduction of politics and human worth to exchange value: "In the Island of Britain, I sing of a Knight, / Much fam'd for dispensing his favour aright, / No Merit could he but what's palpable see, / And he judg'd of Men's Worth by the Weight of their Fee." Black, *Robert Walpole*, 31.

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Fig. 90: Gallows ticket for the hanging of Jonathan Wild. The emblem at the top is Wild's own imprint as "Thief-Taker General," and has him wearing a cloth cap and holding a mace, as symbols of policing. Every bit the "bourgeois appearance..." Image from Wikimedia commons. <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Wild-tick.jpg>>

Tories, Walpole's power reflected the underlying ethos of the rising "moneyed interests" at the root of an increasingly mercantile society: it was through the support of these "moneyed sorts," and the resources of credit which they controlled, that Walpole manipulated (or corrupted) the patronage system. This was tantamount to running the country according to the needs of an elite of – possibly even foreign – financiers who had little interest in national good or civic duty.⁹⁸ It reduced government to the principles of business. Tory critics of the Whig regime saw it as saturated with the economism of the mercantile class.⁹⁹

Thus in the *Beggar's Opera*, where Macheath stands for a gentlemanly ethos of generosity and exceptionality, the character of Peachum in contrast represents the new ethos of the increasingly commercialised society of the early eighteenth century, with its unromantic, materialistic, calculating world-view, which reduces everything (even life and death) to an entry in a ledger. Maynard Mack's is one of the strongest readings of the play in these terms, understanding the play not only as attacking Walpole and his government, but addressing a more general ethos which was becoming normative throughout society.¹⁰⁰ For Mack, Gay's Peachum is a caricature of an eighteenth-century stereotypical shopkeeper with his account books ("the basic symbol of a price-society"). Mack brings to the fore the cluster of words through which Peachum and his milieu express themselves, speaking a "language of business" ("property," "profit," "employment," "customer," "interest," "credit," "banknotes"), a vocabulary which would have been even more striking then than now. He notes the "cant" which dominates the Peachums' self-presentations, a "jargon of piety" which, always mere lip-service to morality, is at the service of the profit-motive, and at the time would have been associated with middle-class Puritanism.¹⁰¹

98 These Tories, seeing the stability of land and title as giving one a position of "disinterest" in contradistinction to the traders with their "interests," took the high ground of a "civic humanism" described, for example in Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 1-26. For the discontent of the landed classes at this Whig pact with the mercantile classes, see for example Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 527. Braudel discusses the anger in particular at the forms of tax – in particular that on land – which served to service the national debt, and which was often seen as a corrupt way of robbing the landed in order to give out big payments to supplement the high living of the Whigs' supporters in the world of finance.

99 Jeremy Black cites the example of the Tory paper, the *Craftsman* (25 May 1728), which put it thus: "what are commonly called great abilities, in this age, will appear, upon enquiry, to be nothing but a little sordid genius for tricks and cunning, which founds all its success on corruption, stockjobbing and other iniquitous arts." (Black, *Robert Walpole*, 30-1.) For more on the Tory criticisms of the Walpole administration as bound into such a mercantile logic, see also Dickinson, *Walpole*, 141-5. (Or just Pope's *Epistle to Bathurst*.)

100 Mack, "Augustans," 41-3.

101 Mack, "Augustans," 42. Pat Rogers has similarly argued that (as well as being based on Wild and hitting at Walpole), Peachum is specifically a satire of "the portrait of an ideal business

For Mack, the *Beggar's Opera* is a "satire of a world where everything is for sale."¹⁰² Mack describes how the play revolves around the encroachment of exchange values on all other forms of social and cultural value. It is in relation to this that Mack understands the play's system of characters. If the Peachums are the apotheosis of the reduction of value to the economic, each of the other characters hold out, momentarily, the possibility of another set of "values" beyond exchange, only to dash such hopes when these values become corrupted by money.¹⁰³ Brecht's play, in contrast, is devoid of nostalgia for the pre-modern forms of non-economic value which are held out to us in *The Beggar's Opera*. Where Gay's play was produced during the rise to ascendancy of the "moneyed interest," by the twentieth century that ascendancy seemed to many complete. In the universe of Brecht's play there appears little alternative for the characters, thoroughly immersed within capitalist conditions as they are. There is no aristocratic Macheath to balance against Peachumite profiteering: Brecht's Macheath is more Jonathan Wild even than Gay's Peachum.¹⁰⁴

But what of a shark in the *Beggar's Opera*? In spite of its saturation

man drawn by Daniel Defoe, a bare year or two before the appearance of Gay's drama" in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725-7), a work which was at the time one of Defoe's "best known books" and which "came to be regarded as a classic statement of the protestant ethic in practice." As such, argues Rogers, the satire is an attack of an entire class and of its system of values rather than just of incidental figures or abuses, and the character of Peachum is a "full-blooded attack on the entire system of society" of commercialising Augustan England. Pat Rogers, "Merchants and Ministers: Peachum, Jonathan Wild and the Complete English Tradesman," *Eighteenth Century Encounters: Studies in Literature and Society in the Age of Walpole* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), 100.

102 Mack, "Augustans," 42.

103 The highwaymen have their pride in the danger of their work and the ideals of "courage, magnanimity and (for a time) loyalty". Polly and Lucy have their irrational passions for Macheath. Macheath himself stands at the very opposite pole from the Peachums, with his devil-may-care aristocratic prodigality in sex and gambling (which elevates expenditure over accumulation), and with his repeatedly misplaced trust that others' behaviour will also not be dominated by the profit motive. In each case, the profit motive triumphs over these other forms of value. The highwaymen turn in their boss; Polly's "passion" turns out to be possessiveness mixed with a corrupt sentimentality fostered through reading too many romances (commodified literature), just as dangerous for Macheath as those who want to do him in; and in the play's dimly cheerful finale the libertine Macheath himself submits to the yoke of marriage and respectability. (Mack, "Augustans," 42.) Ian Donaldson makes much the same argument: "Throughout the play Gay keeps suggesting possible exceptions to the general rule of bourgeois possessiveness and self-interest, possible avenues of romantic freedom and escape, possible evidence of a primitive honesty; only regretfully, ironically to dismiss such possibilities, to shut off the avenues and to reject such evidence as we approach more nearly." (Donaldson, "Double Capacity," 69.) Mack's reading of Macheath's womanising as depicted as a positive attribute within the play is echoed by Martin Price, who reads Macheath's pursuit of sex as a serious theme in the text, where what is at stake is an aristocratic pursuit of freedom for freedom's sake in the face of Walpole's profit-dominated society. Price, "Palace," 46.

104 Brecht's Macheath takes on a number of properties of Wild himself which Gay's Peachum never did. He owns warehouses to store goods stolen on an almost industrial scale, and, just like Wild, is something of a dandyish figure: Macheath is described as carrying a cane, just like Wild's. Macheath's is a sword-stick; Wild's had engraved on its silver handle his title as 'Thief-taker General'.

with low and villainous sharps and shirkers, the play has no sharks (as I acknowledged earlier). Nonetheless, Brecht's shark metaphor develops out of an insistent animal imagery in Gay's play, which focuses on predatory creatures to parallel the violence of his human world. Lockit, for example, tells the audience: "Lions, Wolves, and Vultures don't live together in Herds, Drovers or Flocks. – Of all Animals of Prey, Man is the only sociable one. Every one of us preys upon his Neighbour, and yet we herd together."¹⁰⁵ Directly after this speech, comes Air 12, which turns this image of predation a step towards Brecht's shark: "Like Pikes, lank with Hunger, who miss of their Ends, / They bite their Companions, and prey on their Friends."¹⁰⁶

Nature in Hirst, The Beggar's Opera, and Jaws.

I am reaching the end of this chapter, but before closing, I shall briefly expand on the significance of the vision of nature which emerges through this analysis of *The Beggar's Opera*. It is a vision of nature with which the shark is repeatedly associated – for which it becomes a prime figure – and which itself stands as an ideologisation of the social relations of capitalism which I have been tracing throughout this chapter. This is also a vision of nature which I will be taking up in Chapter 7.

Gay's nature is a violent and cut-throat war of all-against-all, a nature which Tennyson would famously call "red in tooth and claw," and which Hobbes had already made the locus of a life "nasty, brutish and short." It's a nature of which the shark – "ultimate predator" – becomes a hyperbolic figure. This nature is the privileged object of today's wildlife documentaries, in which the shark remains such a ubiquitous presence, and in which "survival of the fittest" is represented in terms of violent predation. Such narratives naturalise capitalist conditions, just as the *Beggar's Opera's* use of animal metaphor does. The similarities with Gay's vision of nature highlights how Hobbesian the social Darwinism of wildlife documentaries is.¹⁰⁷

Within such Hobbesian-social-Darwinian representations of nature,

¹⁰⁵ Gay, *Beggar's Opera*, Act 3, Scene 1.

¹⁰⁶ Gay, *Beggar's Opera*, Act 3, Scene 1.

¹⁰⁷ Evolutionary narratives, after all, do not have to be set out in terms of the aggressive individualism implied in wildlife films – as is evidenced, for example by Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1987). Kropotkin argues that strategies of co-operation have been central in the survival of many species, and forms a very different set of social extrapolations. Kropotkin's work, of course, shares with the "social Darwinism" of the right a problematic attempt to derive what should be from what is, but the difference between the two visions highlights the ideological nature of each. Darwin himself, having originally preferred the more neutral "natural selection," drew the phrase "survival of the fittest" from the economist Herbert Spencer, a formulation proposed in order to compare Darwin's notion of natural selection to his own free-market theories in his *Principles of Biology*, (London, 1864), 1:444. His economic theories are expressed in *Social Statistics* (London, 1851).

ideologically conflating the human and animal realms, the shark is an analogue of the “apex predators” of the social world, making capitalism itself a prehistoric, natural fact. Hence the shark is at once repeatedly depicted (as a perfect and efficient “machine” for killing and eating) as being, like capitalism, ultra-technological.¹⁰⁸ Yet it is also (as a “primeval” predator) a representative of a prehistoric ur-nature unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs.¹⁰⁹ This is the shark as ideological figure; but ideological figures are always more than ideology.¹¹⁰ The associative network of the monster shark also allows the articulation of the experience of living in the monstrous universe of capital. Only at the price of conjuring up such an experience in representation can it then be conjured away through its disavowal. This is the fate of the “capitalist image” (if not all images) which is, like capital, riven by antagonistic forces. Such a figure – necessarily haunted by that which it would preclude – retains an openness to becoming a properly *critical* image, as it begins to do with Brecht.

We should not seek such a fully “critical” form in Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility* or Spielberg’s *Jaws*. Hirst, after all, is court painter to the most rapacious (and shark-like) form of the Neoliberal capitalism that grew up in the Thatcher-Reagan years, and *Physical Impossibility* was created under commission from advertising mogul and Conservative-Party bastion Charles Saatchi, whose protégé Hirst had become – hardly the place to look for a critique of political economy. Similarly, Spielberg’s cinema defines a late-twentieth-century commercial film industry which aims at maintaining what Robert Kolker calls the “ideological dead centre”¹¹¹ of the status quo, reducing any critical angle

108 These metaphors abound in Benchley’s, *Jaws*, (London: Pan Books, 1976). When the shark attacks its first victim, it hits her “like a locomotive” (12). Later, the technological metaphor is intensified, with the shark depicted emphatically as a piece of computerised military hardware, a guided missile: “The fish did not hear the sound, but rather registered the sharp and jerky impulses emitted by the kicks. They were signals, faint but true, and the fish locked on them, homing. It rose, slowly at first, then gaining speed as the signals grew stronger” (53). But Benchley’s shark is also primevally ancient: its brain is “primitive” and its movement “dictated by countless millions of years of instinctive continuity” (9).

109 See also W.J.T. Mitchell’s book on our culture’s fascination with representations of dinosaurs. For Mitchell, these, too, are at once images of the ultimately old and the hyper-new. Though in rather different ways – through their very extinctness – dinosaurs, just as I am arguing here sharks do, serve as mythological images of contemporary capitalist conditions, with the onwads drive of “progress” imagined in terms of species extinction, and the dinosaur, big, powerful, violent, hungry, and just a little ridiculous serving as an image of the character of capital. W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

110 See, for example, Jameson, *Signatures*, 21-6.

111 Kolker, *Cinema of Loneliness*, ix. Later in the book, Kolker writes that “the ideological structures of Spielberg’s films ‘hail’ the spectator into a world of the obvious [...]. The films offer nothing new beyond their spectacle, nothing the viewer does not already want, does not immediately accept. That is their conservative power, and it is spread throughout the cinema of the eighties” (239)

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Fig. 91: Cover of the *Economist*, 17-23 November 2007. The shark providing a figure for capitalism's monstrous and impersonal violence, even in the imaginary of its ideologues.

to the minimum degree.¹¹² Thus it strains things to read *Jaws*, as Fidel Castro did, as “an indictment of greedy capitalists willing to sacrifice people’s lives to protect their investments,”¹¹³ however easy to back this up with material from the film it may be. *Jaws* certainly draws a parallel in its plot between the shark attacks and the exploitativeness of Amity’s economic imperative to make money from tourism, in which man becomes prey to man (this is hammered home relentlessly in the book in particular)¹¹⁴; but the predatory behaviour of the shark goes as far to “naturalise” the depicted social relation as it does to register its rapacity.¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, *Jaws* does address its audience only through articulating (if then displacing) their experience of the greed, materialism and hidden social brutality of late-twentieth-century America through the figure of the shark.

The “message” of Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility* is no less cut through with ambiguities. I noted towards the start of this chapter that Hirst (like Spielberg) sets out with the shark to merely activate – in the most notional manner – a “trigger.” He does so in an image which, in its pared-down presentation, condenses, amongst other things, just these two kinds of violence which the shark has served – in its ideological guise – to conflate: the “natural” violence of the killer shark and the human violence of modern society. This latter is

112 See Quirke, *Jaws*, 6.

113 McBride, *Spielberg*, 255. Interestingly enough Spielberg, who is often imagined as ultra-conservative, when he was told the remark by a journalist, is reported to have found Castro’s analysis a “wonderful” and perspicuous analysis of the film.

114 In the book, class and racial tension, and the poverty of a section of the town are emphasised in the back-plots which Spielberg dispenses with. In the book, Vaughan’s reluctance to close the beach is motivated by his own position, where he is being blackmailed by mobsters – for having been in his youth victim to a “loan shark” – into taking part in a property-speculation scam which will collapse with a bad Summer season. It’s thus the hidden economic forces under the life of the town, as much as the shark hidden under the water, which threaten life in the book. In a sense, the beach marks the thin strip of intersection between these two threatening forces, which each trap the islanders from a different direction.

115 The extent to which this is indeed an ideological figure of recuperation is most strongly revealed in Benchley’s book, in which it is in fact a violence from below which is most feared; and it is the poor of Amity who are described as “parasitically” feeding off the rich holiday-makers. (see Benchley, *Jaws*, esp. 201.) Even the most casually Marxian analysis would reveal that the violence in fact lies in the poverty of one class, in relation to the wealth of another; who are the actual “parasites,” “consuming” as their leisure the labour and life forces of those employed in the tourist industries. At a deeper level, the ideologisation of the equation between the shark and the townsfolk happens in terms of the grammar of the descriptions of their behaviour. In both cases, a certain passivity is foregrounded, with the “necessity” of economic rationality on the one hand and that of blind, prehistoric “instinct” on the other serving as equally constraining forces, which empty free will from both townspeople and shark. It is both a chilling image of the unfreedom of the free market (I am reminded of Marx’s description of the capitalist in negotiation: “the thing that you represent face to face with me has no heart in its breast” (Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 10): an inhuman monster, cold-blooded as a shark). Such a conflation of the human and natural is also a reiteration of the trope from *The Beggar’s Opera*, and also from the clichés of wildlife films, which presents such economic rationality as part of a natural order.

presented here in the form of the scientific, technological, geometric tank. The conflation is reinforced in the form of the sculpture, with the proportions of the tank echoing those of the shark: two bodies, one inside the other, each serving as a substitute for the other; the shark's imagined engorgement of its prey echoed in the engorgement of the shark within the "belly" of its vitrine. The penetrating and dissecting gaze of scientific reason is naturalised as a ravenous animal consumption of the world, but the shark also gives a monstrous "face" to the hidden destructiveness of reason and technology in the service of capital (just as it gives a "face" to Brecht's Macheath, and the society he stands for). Of course, Hirst's sculpture, like Spielberg's films, retains a stubborn muteness in the face of its content. Social violence remains, nonetheless, the content of the work, a key reason for its powerful fascination.¹¹⁶

Such a folding of primeval nature and modern capitalism into a single figure in the shark has its parallels in Lyotard's notion of the "inhuman." This, too, has a double set of references: on the one hand the inhumanity of the all-devouring "monad" of techno-scientific, capitalist reason, and on the other the excluded "inhumanity" of the body, the id, and nature which repeatedly returns on this monad. The shark, we have seen, is the apotheosis of the inhuman in nature – of the counterpurposiveness to the human.¹¹⁷ It makes a much more fascinating predator than lions or tigers precisely because of its resistance to anthropomorphisation. Its "eyes black and abysmal," fascinating tokens of otherness, mark its lack of a soul with which we may find empathy.¹¹⁸ But echoing Lyotard's twin inhumanity, it only emerges as such a figure in its echo of the "second nature" of modern capitalism. The shark as described in literature and pop-science figures both an id-like absolute of appetite, but also an emptying-out of desire, functioning with the logical automatism of a machine or bureaucratic system. Benchley's *Jaws*, for example, empties its shark of "will" or interiority, describing it as a cybernetic mechanism or a computerised weapons system.¹¹⁹

116 This fascination and power of the sculpture is better understood, I hold, as historically contingent and rooted in our experience of the social conditions of capitalism than a result of speciously "existential" confrontation with mortality: the question with this latter seems to me, less a matter of provoking the problem of what kind of a representation of death this is, and more to present us with the problem of what "death" in fact represents in Hirst.

117 See esp. Kant's discussion of the dynamic sublime. Kant, *Kritik Der Urteilskraft*, §28.

118 Benchley, *Jaws*, 254.

119 It is described in terms of "transmission," "communication," "detection," "correction," "vibrations," "signals." through which messages from the environment flow, and trigger automatic responses. (Benchley, *Jaws*, 9-10.) A series of grammatical and semantic forms reinforce this passivity and empty mechanicity of the shark – Benchley uses the passive voice, makes parts of the shark's body, rather than the creature as a whole, the grammatical subject, and discusses the shark in terms of the negation of its knowledge, implied in, for example, the "apparently aimless" course it steers, the "sightlessness" of its eyes, and in phrases such as "It

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Fig. 92: Dan Piraro, *Mother Nature Fights Back*, 2003. Pub. King Features. Again, the shark is associated with capitalism. Here the narrative takes the form of the “revenge” of nature for the violence done to it by the desire for profit. Above the water is the violence of capital, below it, its mirror in the other “inhumanity” of counterpurposive nature...

The history of the vision of inhuman nature for which the shark stands as synecdoche is closely tied into the development of capitalist social relations through the looking glass of which it is constituted. It has its roots as far back as the infernal and hostile visions of nature in *Paradise Lost*, for example.¹²⁰ Milton's terrifying Universe – whose restless, uncreating productivity might throw up a monster as counterpurposive as the shark is in the modern imagination – is both an encounter with the sublimity of the inhuman, and a key locus around which the aesthetic appreciation of sublime nature was developed; an aesthetic which I have been arguing throughout takes as its primary object – however displaced in representations – capital itself.¹²¹

did not see the woman, nor did it smell her." (9-10) Here we have exactly the gathering of the primally natural and the most up-to-date technology of the American capitalism of the 1970s.

120 Milton, as an ideologue, attempted to produce an image of harmoniously self-organising matter, in the image of a republican state and "free market" behaviour. But Milton's attempt to produce a reassuring image of such a nature is repeatedly haunted by a sublimely terrible vision of a "counterpurposively" hostile, vast, formless, chaotic universe, subject to strange and disorienting leaps in perspective and scale, operating on an infernal principle of restless but infertile productivity, breeding and throwing up anarchic, monstrous forms and creatures, of the sort of which the shark would be a prime example – un-natural as much as it is inhuman. It is a universe in which, as Matthew Jordan has noted, the human is decentred. See, for example, Jordan, *Milton and Modernity*, esp. p.16. Jordan argues that *Paradise Lost* is structured around a multiperspectivalism which again serves to conceive social life in terms of "a collection of ultimately independent, rational individuals" (4), and serves as an apologia for such a social and economic order. For more on Milton's theories of matter see John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996). Rogers argues that theories of the composition of matter themselves were highly political in this period. Rogers's proposition in the book is that Milton's poetry is saturated with an understanding of matter as atomistic but animate and self-organising. Rogers argues that this constitutes a form of ideological "protoliberalism" (12), in which human agency can also be understood to be self-organising, and that such a *laissez-faire* understanding of emergent order in social relations is fundamental to the Republican ideal of political life to which the younger Milton had subscribed, but is also based in the justifications of a liberal economy that had started to grow up in the seventeenth century, with, for example, Thomas Mun, Edward Misselden and the Cambridge Platonist John Smith, who proposed such an "emergent" order arising from individual economic action (22-3). He claims that "the economic paradigm of the self-regulating market that had been theorised for the first time in the 1620s to promote a nearly *laissez-faire* program of foreign trade" constitutes "the first and most influential model of decentralised organisation" (22). For more on the ideology of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, see Fredric Jameson, "Religion and Ideology: A Political Reading of *Paradise Lost*," [1986], *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-1984*, eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulm, Margaret Iversen and Diana Loxley (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 34-57. For the shifting spaces and scales in *Paradise Lost*, see Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 6-7. Harbison calls Milton a "magician of scale", and analyses, in particular the disorienting shifts in scale and perspective in his description of Satan with his shield and spear in *Paradise Lost* (1.284-93), a passage which would, of course, later become a key locus of the sublime according to English criticism.

121 Such a chaotic, de-forming un-nature is, of course, the denaturalising effect of money, as described in the passage from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which I have discussed in a chapter above. It is also the perverse universe described in *Macbeth*, whose signs of the end of a reign of order echo those of the reign of money in *Timon*, and whose witches' cauldron does in fact include, as one of its ingredients the "maw and gulf / of the ravin'd salt-sea shark." (*Macbeth*, Act 4, Scene 1). This nature, set in opposition to an Idealist vision of Neoclassical order, is also, of course, the root of Pope's empire of Dulness, and a similar contrast between

The vision of inhuman nature I have been outlining in the last paragraphs is central in the role that the shark plays within the ideological self-articulations of empire which I will be exploring in the next chapter, and through which the subject of capital maps itself into its global circuits or networks of power, desire, social violence, money and commodities. It is from the more iconographic work I have been doing in this chapter to this question of subjectivities – in particular in relation to the commodity – that I shall be turning.

In this chapter I have tracked the figure of the shark as one through which the anxieties of modern experience have been expressed and articulated. What has started to emerge – in particular through my analysis of Brecht – is also a certain phenomenality of capital, containing the pulsing of a violence which is at once cloaked by and yet also returns in distorted, monstrous form within the phantasmagorical appearances of the commodity spectacle. The shark has been one of the key figures through which this violence is embodied in modern culture. In the shark, the exploitativeness of capital comes back to haunt the bright surfaces of its appearances. Brecht's use of the shark serves as a critical gesture which returns us to consider directly this social brutality and the way that it becomes hidden within modern life. Hirst's work, of course, does not pursue this directly critical and engaged project. However, I have suggested already that its concern is nonetheless an experience of this brutality. This experience marks it with the same pulsating phenomenality of appearance and disappearance, absence and presence, violence and seduction which sticks to the shark throughout its cultural career, and which Brecht is concerned with returning to its social grounds. Hirst's sculpture, less directly concerned with these social truths, instead focuses on the mode of appearance of the commodity. Inevitably, this appearance – following a phantasmagorical logic – is haunted by the rapaciousness which produces it, and it is this which I will be tracing in the following chapter. Turning from an iconography to a phenomenology, Chapter 7 will start where this chapter leaves off, examining how the inhuman nature of the shark is used as a figure which maps the modern subject into the geopolitical spaces and flows of capital, and will develop an analysis of Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* as restaging the way that the commodity folds the violent embrace of these circuits back onto the desire of the subject of the commodity.

chaos and order may be behind Gay's own vision of a fallen, un-natural nature of modernity in which man is a wolf to man. In this respect, it's worth noting that many of the descriptions of Dulness themselves derive indirectly from the parody of Miltonian tropes, at the very least as they enter a vernacular of eighteenth-century literature's pretensions to the sublime. Thus Pope's passage ridiculing the destruction of the proprieties of time and place in modern theatre which I quote in my chapter above, in which a whale "sports in the woods," dolphins in the sky, and humanity springs from an egg, draws its imagery, it seems, from Milton's own account of creation.

Chapter 7

Phantasies of Capital in Hirst's *Physical Impossibility*

In Chapter 6, focusing on Brecht's "Mac the Knife" as the locus where this is made critically explicit, I argued that the shark stands as a displaced image for the disavowed violence which haunts capitalism. This returns – at the very heart of the imaginary of capitalist culture – in the guise of an Inhuman nature, kitted out with the rapacious characteristics of the capitalist himself. In this chapter, I expand this analysis, to start to think about the kind of phantasy scene involved in such an imaginary figure, the (mis)identifications it elicits, and the capitalist, consumer subjectivities and desires on which it may depend. My starting point in this chapter is that Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* is both formed and addresses its viewer through a *phantasy*¹ about the subject of capital and its place within planetary flows of information, money, goods and command.

Hirst's Phantasy

Hirst has described how the sculpture grew from his experiences working the phones for a market research company, and from the resulting confidence in his telephone manner, which he used to organise Freeze. A phantasy emerged from this of the productive reach of global communications – the power to set vast mechanisms in motion from one's armchair. The shark entails a phantasy of the power of (Saatchi's) money to set in motion the labour of fishermen on the other side of the planet, to have them catch something as vast, exotic and dangerous as a shark, to surmount the technical obstacles of freezing and shipping, to set a team to work preserving it, and to set technicians building the vitrine. It is a phantasy of a whole mode of production, and of what it is to command this:

[Y]ou can get anything over the phone. I actually wondered if there was no limit to it. I wanted to do a shark and thought, No, that's [...] impossible; you can't do that. [...] I thought, Shit, you can get it over the phone. [...] With the phone you become totally international. You can go beyond continents. You can go anywhere in the world with a phone.²

1 The notion of "phantasy" will be a key one in this chapter. I use the *ph-* spelling in line with conventions in psychoanalytic writing, in order to distinguish unconscious phantasy from more conscious or day-dream fantasies.

2 Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 45. Here Hirst follows closely the two moments of the Kantian sublime: First that of damming-up (*Hemmung*) in which the vial forces are checked ("that's [...] impossible"), and then their ecstatic outpouring (*Ergießung*) into a vision of the unbounded (*Unbegrenzt*) – "you can go beyond continents." See Kant, *Kritik Der Urteilskraft*, §23.

Here global capital and its electronic networks are clearly the “sublime object” which Fredric Jameson describes as a horizon of representation for the subject of global capitalism, and which he analyses as the object of a contemporary culture keyed to the breakdown in cognitive power such an object elicits, and to the resultant affects of exhilarated wonder and terror.³ Jameson makes much sense of the fascinated wonder and perplexity which Hirst’s sculpture often draws from an audience who always-already know the price tag of the work, and can only fantasise about the production of this pristinely technological vitrine. But Jameson is wrong in understanding this aesthetic of cognitive breakdown in front of global capital as an entirely new phenomenon, and wrong in his assumptions that the Burkean and Kantian sublimates are not already oriented towards this same horizon. Discussing the uncanny prefiguration of Hirst’s quasi-industrial system in Pope’s *Peri Bathous*, I have already noted that something of the same sublime phantasy we are discussing here is also found in Adam Smith’s list of the workers which each consumer commands with his purchasing power, making the consumer, for Smith, more powerful than a primitive despot.⁴ Hirst’s shark addresses us in a pastiche of the form in which the commodity in general does. Its vitrine – borrowed after all from Jeff Koons’s explorations of the promises of consumer display – is as much a matter of the shop-window, or of the commodity’s cellophane packaging, as it is of museum cabinets. But as an image of consumption it retains an enigmatic and troubling counter-presence in the moribund body of the shark, suspended and inert in the tank, living death itself held captive. It is a counterpresence which echoes an enigmatic residue which always remains in the commodity form, which has contained within it not just the promise of a power which reaches across the world in spending, but also always the experience of the commodification and exchange of one’s own labour and life force. Hirst’s phantasy itself, we should not forget, stems from an experience of such alienated labour – the all-too-common experience of sitting in a cubicle, talking on the phone all day at the behest of a computer which pre-dials the number and displays on a screen the predetermined script which one has to speak.⁵ Does *Physical Impossibility* register an experience not just of command over the system, but of being subjected to it, reduced to an object of its technological, bureaucratic and informational manipulation? Within the sculpture, the shark, fluctuating between being an object of fear and one of pathos, stands not just for the actively devouring power of capitalist production

3 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34-8. I also discuss Jameson briefly in my introduction, p.44.

4 See my mention of Smith in my discussion of Hirst’s neo-proto-industrial form of production above, p.187.

5 Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 44.

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Fig. 93: *The Acquired Inability to Escape, Inverted and Divided*, 1993. Glass and Steel vitrine, M.D.F., silicone, table, chair, lighter, ashtray and cigarettes 214 x 214 x 305 cm.

and consumption, but also for the return of its “inhuman” remainder: the powerless body, exploited nature, the repressed id.

In two of the most striking literary and artistic representations of the shark from the eighteenth century – James Thomson’s poem *The Seasons* (1726-44) and John Singleton Copley’s *Watson and the Shark* (1778) – sharks also serve as figures for an “inhuman” nature, constructed in the image of capital, and of that which “returns” on capital. These works already prefigure Hirst’s grapple with the experience of the subject, nature and the body caught within networks of a globalising empire of capitalist exploitation. An exploration of these will lead us to further understand the nature of the phantastical situation of the self as object of capital in Hirst’s phantasy. As this argument unfolds, I will be attempting to unpick the logic of the folding whereby the exploitation of capital is mapped back into the desire embedded in the commodity, and the forms of specular *méconnaissance* of the self as commodity which are involved in this. Such an account will also place Hirst within a longer history of the use of the sublime as an aesthetic mode through which the subject is mapped into this space of imperial capital.

James Thomson

Thomson, a contemporary of Pope, set out to develop a “descriptive” poetry which radically displaced human presences from the landscape. Thomson worked under the influence of Milton, the paintings of Rosa and Poussin, and the theories of the role of nature in poetry in the works of John Dennis and Joseph Addison.⁶ Given what I have already said about the relationship between sublimity and the inhuman, it should not be surprising that the sublime was at the core of his displacement of the human from the centre of nature. It was primarily in *The Seasons* (1726-44) that Thomson developed this project.⁷ In a preface to *Winter* he set out the manifesto of this project, rejecting the contemporary fashion for satire, and setting out a plan for a poetry which deals instead with “sublime” and “lofty” themes, approached through attention to nature.⁸ The poem, though rarely read today, was one of

⁶ Monk, *The Sublime*, 89. For more on the influence on Thomson of Dennis’s theories of the sublime see Fulford, *Landscape*, 18-28.

⁷ The poem – begun in 1726, published book by book, and then in a series of revised editions, Thomson’s last emendations coming in 1744 – was written almost exactly synchronously with the development of Pope’s *Dunciad*. Given my arguments that what Pope attacks in this poem is a growing literature of the sublime, this dating is hardly incidental.

⁸ Published in London, June 1727. Thomson’s programme, and the role of sublime and terrible nature within it, is further expounded in a letter, written the previous year to his friend and ally in this project, David Mallet. (Thomson to Mallet, 26 Aug 1726 in Allan D. McKillop, *James Thomson (1700-1748): Letters and Documents* [Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1958], 40-50.) Mallet had sent him a draft of his *Excursion*, which Thomson praises with

the most popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has an undeniably significant role in the dissemination of theories of the sublime into artistic and poetic practice, and into a landscape sensibility.⁹

The Seasons ranges widely both spatially and emotionally. Thomson mixes pastoral and georgic passages alongside his newer vision of rapturously terrible nature, encapsulating both of what would become understood as the poles of the “sublime” and “beautiful.”¹⁰ Through this spectrum of poetic modes,

hyperbole in his letter. Of one passage in Mallet’s poem, Thomson exclaims approvingly, in terms which serve to define the affective aim of the poetic project he is espousing: “This is Poetry! this is arousing Fancy! Enthusiasm! Rapturous Terror!” (50). Note the strongly Dennisian terms in which this exclamation sets the poetic project up. It was Dennis above all other critics who theorised poetry as constituting the invocation of “enthusiastic passions,” emphasising “rapturous terror” as productive of such enthusiasm. Dennis paraphrased Longinus in English terms of “ravishment” and “transport.” Thomson recommends to Mallet (though the recommendation is in the imperative): “Sublimity must be the character of your Peice [sic.]” and goes on to prescribe that to this end Mallet pack his poem with the conventional motifs of the natural sublime: “You ought to leave no great Scene unvisited: Eruptions, Earthquakes, the Sea wrought into a horrible Tempest, the Alps [...]. Here if you could insert a Sketch of the Deluge, what more affecting, and noble?” (40). Like with Hirst’s and Spielberg’s interest in the shark as a motif, Thomson’s programme for a sublime art, as laid out here, takes the form of a mechanically induced rapture, to be achieved through the evocation of the appropriate “universal trigger.” It’s just the kind of poetic practice of which Pope was so critical. Indeed, Thomson rapidly himself came in for criticism for his “false sublime” in a series of articles printed in the *British Journal*, starting on 20 August 1726. Their author – in just the terms of Pope’s attack on Dennis and Blackmore in the noise competition of the *Dunciad* – ironically praises the “Inventors of a style, which, without fettering Words with Sense or Meaning, makes a sonorous rumbling noise” and proposes Thomson for post of the “Secretary to the Brotherhood” of these “Sublime Penners”. (See Sambrook, *Thomson*, 49.) Thomson himself – an ambitious outsider who came to London to make a living and beyond that a fortune from poetic endeavour – can be understood to have followed the same trajectory towards the technique of the commercial sublime as Hirst and Cibber.

9 It was in fact, for a sustained period, amongst the most reprinted poems in the English language. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* “Over four hundred editions of this poem, including translations, were published before the flood of reprints began to slacken in the 1870s.” (James Sambrook, “James Thomson (1700-48),” *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 54:522.) Haydn’s oratorio *Die Jahreszeiten* is based on a German translation of the poem, and it was a favourite sourcebook for Turner, amongst other artists. (See T. S. R. Boase, “Shipwrecks in English Romantic Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22.3/4 [1959]: 332-46.) Wordsworth was enthusiastic, as was Coleridge. (Sambrook, “James Thomson,” 522.) Johnson includes a short but highly complimentary biography of Thomson in his *Lives*, and concludes with an affirmation of Lord Lyttleton’s praise that *The Seasons* contained “No line which, dying, he could wish to blot.” (Johnson, “Lives.”) Perhaps even more clear evidence of the importance Johnson attributed to him is the fact that the *Dictionary* contains no less than 614 quotations from his poetry, “virtually all of them” from *The Seasons*. (Thomas Gilmore, “Implicit Criticism of Thomson’s ‘Seasons’ in Johnson’s ‘Dictionary’,” *Modern Philology* 86.3 [1989]: 265.) Hazlitt, though somewhat more ambivalent, also heaps praise on Thomson’s poetic vision in his *Lectures*. (William Hazlitt, “On Thomson and Cowper,” *Lectures on the English Poets Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, eds. Alfred Rayney Waller and Ernest Rhys, 2nd. ed. [London: Surrey Institution, 1819], July 5, 2005 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16209/16209.txt>> visited 8 April 2007.) For further material on the importance of Thomson in the promotion of the taste for the sublime, and the influence of this on Burke, see also Monk, *The Sublime*, 88-90, 181, 201.

10 For the georgic and the picturesque in this poem (and their ideological conjugation, within the context of the contradictory interests of the landed classes in an industrialising agricultural system), and for an account of the way that Thomson worked grammar and syntax to produce a

Thomson articulates a geopolitical space spanning Europe and its empires. The mild and orderly agricultural “nature” of the British Isles is contrasted with descriptions of exotic regions which allow Thomson to cram into his poem all the sublimities that he recommended to his colleague Mallet as sources of the “rapture” proper to poetic effect:¹¹ Nordic winter storms and tropical summer tempests, deluges, deserts and plagues, volcanoes erupting and wolves digging up the dead, tigers and hyenas, alps and Arctic ice-floes – and of course a shark. This contrast between sublime and georgic visions of nature highlights the harmonious, divinely sanctioned order of British society, justifying a colonial expansion imagined in terms of the spread of a civilised and gentle humanising order – at once social and natural – into the wild extremities of inhuman nature. It has thus been argued that Thomson’s poem served as propaganda for the “Patriot Whig” opposition group, for whom commerce was to be pursued belligerently.¹² They felt Walpole’s policies of appeasement with European competitors were a danger to British power and wealth.¹³ Thus as Thomson’s poem was repeatedly rewritten, both the jingoistic political content of the poem and its propensity to ever-more wild and violent “sublimities” became increasingly central.¹⁴ It is as such an incident of the geopolitically sublime, an image concerned with Britain’s mercantile empire, that Thomson was to add his shark in the final rewrite of *Summer*, in 1744. This “terror-evoking description of the shark” would become such a stock example of the sublime that Monk, in his still-seminal survey, proposes it to be “too well known for quotation.”¹⁵

Claudian effect, see John Barrell, “Being Is Perceiving: James Thomson and John Clare,” *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 100-135.

11 See note 8, above.

12 As Sambrook puts it in his biography of Thomson, “Commerce was always an important constituent in Thomson’s patriotism.” Sambrook, *Thomson*, 45. Thomson’s jingoistic concern for a sea-born economic empire, protected by military might, is most famously registered in his words for “Rule Britannia”.

13 The Patriot Whigs, grouped around the Prince of Wales, offered an alternative opposition to Walpole to that of the Tories. Whilst maintaining a distinctly Whig vision of Britain, in which foreign trade was of utmost importance, they vehemently attacked the Walpole administration for its corruption at home, and for weakness in foreign policy in its appeasements of France and Spain. See Glynis Ridley, “The Seasons and the Politics of Opposition,” *James Thomson: Essays for the Tercentenary*, ed. Richard Terry (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 93-6. The vision of Britain in the poem is one which envisages an accord between the interests of the landed gentry at home (expressed in its vision of a harmonious and industrious pastoro-georgic British landscape) and those of Britain as a (or the) major imperial and trading power abroad, with London as the proper hub of British empire and the world’s trade. For analyses of the poem’s Whig landscape at home, see Fulford, *Landscape*, 18-37; Barrell, “Being Is Perceiving,” 100-135.

14 The “completed” poem with all four seasons in a single edition was first published in 1730, by which time *Winter* had already gone through several editions; his last published revision was 1744; Thomson died in 1748. The dates and broad nature of each of the revisions are detailed in Sambrook, *Thomson*.

15 Monk, *The Sublime*, 89.

Thomson's shark serves to express the ambivalence of a globalising colonial capitalism, in particular with respect to its disavowed registration of exploitation and slavery within the ideological self-imagination of Whig imperialism. It is located at the culmination of a longer passage telling of a tempest and the wreck of a slave-trading ship. Thomson begins the passage by introducing the oncoming typhoon, telling us already that it will send the vessel to the "bosom of the black abyss,"¹⁶ setting disaster as the overall pitch of the passage.¹⁷ But then Thomson digresses, setting forth a paean to the growth of international trade and exploration, placing the wreck of this ship explicitly within a narrative of daring colonial adventure and accumulation. He recounts the achievements of Vasco de Gama (who himself fought such storms rounding the Cape) and Henry the Navigator, whose "bold ambition,"¹⁸ for Thomson, awakened European enterprise from the unchanging poverty of the middle ages into a muscularly active modernity of universal (though Eurocentric) progress, achieved through entrepreneurial trade.¹⁹ Thomson emphasises the benevolent cosmopolitanism of the global trade initiated by "heav'n inspir'd" Henry, describing it as having "in unbounded commerce mixed the world" – an image of the "unbounded" expansion of capital, voiced in the language of a sublimely infinite Newtonian space.²⁰

But a minor chord in the poem's language rings underneath its bombastic major key: alongside the "bold ambition" is a "bolder thirst / Of gold."²¹ And

16 James Thomson, "Summer," *The Seasons*, Oxford English Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 980-1000.

17 Glynis Ridley argues convincingly for a more explicit political meaning of the shipwreck passage within the context of the position of the Whig Patriots with whom Thomson aligned himself. (Ridley, "Politics of Opposition," 93-116.) Ridley argues that, in the context of references to the defeat of the heroic admiral Vernon, to the defeat of naval forces by plague, and to the South Sea Bubble, Thomson tells a story of British naval disasters, which implicitly blames Walpole's policy of international appeasement and administrative corruption for a decline in British naval power. However, my own interest is in rather more general matters.

18 Thomson, "Summer," 1004.

19 "For then from ancient gloom emerged / The rising world of trade: the genius then / Of navigation, that in hopeless sloth / Had slumbered on the vast Atlantic deep / For idle ages." Thomson, "Summer," 1005-9.

20 Thomson, "Summer," 1010-12. For more on the importance of images of flow and expansion in eighteenth century British poetry, with trade imagined in a watery imagery of oceans and rivers see also Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 53-92. Brown notes the way that these figures became ambivalent: on the one hand imaging British international power and wealth, and the flow of this power across oceans to the remotest corners of the globe, but also returning in figures of flood and disaster, with the ocean becoming an excessive force which threatens the dissolution of boundaries and of order. For more on Newton's space and sublimity see Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*.

21 Thomson, "Summer," 1004-5. Thirst, of course is an inappropriate feeling to have towards a metal. There is also a movement here from "bold" to "bolder," which suggests a lack of balance or measure; the notion of "ambition" itself is loaded with both the positively valenced "love of useful glory" (1011) and the more negative implications of greed.

if Gama fights “mad seas,” then the contagious implication of the adjective, belonging more appropriately to man than weather, is that he too is insane.²² The vision of trade as unambiguously progressive is further undermined when Thomson ends this paean to commerce and returns to the more fundamental tone and task of the passage: an image of disaster, and of a violent nature which resists any project of human improvement. Thomson turns immediately from the rapturous image of triumphal commerce to the horror of the shark:

Increasing still the sorrows of those storms,
His jaws horrific arm'd with three-fold fate,
Here dwells the direful shark. Lured by the scent
Of steaming crowds, of rank disease, and death,
Behold! He, rushing, cuts the briny flood,
Swift as the gale can bear the ship along;
And from the partners of that cruel trade,
Which spoils unhappy Guinea of her sons,
Demands his share of prey—demands themselves!
The stormy fates descend: one death involves
Tyrants and slaves; when straight their mangled limbs
Crashing at once, he dyes the purple seas
With gore, and riots in the vengeful meal.²³

This shark, as elsewhere, is an ideologised figure of capital, and here more particularly of its early-modern imperial phase. The image of the shark devouring “tyrants” and “slaves” alike, disavows the cruelty of the system of commerce which sends them to their deaths, and of the social difference which is operated, in its most blatant and extreme form, in slavery.²⁴ This disavowal of difference mirrors that involved in universalising claims about the progress and wealth global trade will bring “humanity.” The shark and the storm serve as

²² Thomson, “Summer,” 1001.

²³ Thomson, “Summer,” 1013-25.

²⁴ Ridley reads the ambivalence in the figures of trade and slavery differently here. She suggests that this can fall into a long-established pattern in understanding colonisation through the difference between “good” colonies, imagined in terms of the beneficent and honest planter, escaping the fallen modernity of Europe and returning to a paradisiacal harmony with nature, through which one’s own colonies could be imagined, and the image of a “bad,” “modern,” “infernal” plundering colonisation of exploitation and proto-industrial despoliation, through which one could imagine the practices of foreign powers. Slavery – in its association with “Spanish” practices – could thus be “othered,” and the slave trade became an ambivalent object, at once the source of British wealth, but also a source of contagion of British order and identity by the “foreign.” See Ridley, “Politics of Opposition,” 99. For further material on the history of these ways of representing the colonies, stretching back to Milton, see J. Martin Evans, *Milton’s Imperial Epic: Paradise Lost and the Discourse of Colonialism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 4-6; J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26. See also Milton’s description of the fallen angels’ colonisation of hell in *Paradise Lost*, 2.636-43. These arguments do not so much contradict my own; they pose a particular way in which we might see how the ambivalence towards and disavowal of the nature of slavery and colonial trade were worked out. There are parallels between the projection of the “bad object” of such practices onto foreign neighbours, and their projection onto nature itself, as I describe in my own account.

tokens of a terrible nature against which heroic human enterprise, valorised by the colonial sublime, must struggle in order to liberate itself from poverty and want.²⁵

However, the image fails to fully displace the anxieties about capitalism which it raises. An ambivalence towards capitalist forms of trade and slavery becomes clear, highlighting an “inhumanity” at the heart of venture capital just as terrible as the shark. For the inhumanity of the shark, in Thomson’s verse, is only figured in terms of capitalism itself. A striking metaphor describes the shark as a *shareholder* in slaving, who “from the partners of that cruel trade [...] Demands his share of prey.” The purpose of trade appears now to be not profit but death. The attempt to make the shark, as a figure of violent and counter-purposive nature, into an alibi for exploitation folds back onto itself. The ambivalence has not entirely been contained by the strategy of “othering.” The image of the other, itself a projection, starts to form a mirror in which can be glimpsed the reflection of the “heart of darkness” which the same – if it is not careful – might recognise as its own.

Thomson’s choice of a slave ship to fall victim to the storm is thus not incidental; indeed the figure of the shark seems consistently to have “stuck” to representations of slaves, and to the figure of the “black,” right from the very first coinage of the word *shark*, which itself originated in the argot of slave-trading sailors, brought back from the Americas²⁶: Hawkins, the captain mentioned in the broadside in which the word was coined, was a pioneer of the slaving profession, mounting three expeditions – each on an increasingly industrial scale – carrying slaves from Africa to the Southern and Central

25 This can be also understood through what Tim Fulford has to say about the sublime in Thomson’s work more generally. (Fulford, *Landscape*, 24.) Fulford suggests that at the heart of Thomson’s images of terrible nature is an aesthetic distancing which allows the reader alignment with an overwhelming, divine force. Fulford highlights the fact that Thomson’s very interest in and conception of the sublime is drawn primarily from John Dennis, finding this significant because emotional distance from actual terror was as important in Dennis as it would later be in Burke’s and Kant’s sublimines. For him it is what elevates the merely base passion of fear into an “enthusiastic” and thus elevating passion. In Thomson it is also the mechanism through which an ideological capture is carried out. This distancing turns a social violence which is properly that of the industrialising Whig social order into an aesthetic spectacle of natural violence – whether this be levelled at the dispossessed peasant at home or the colonial subject abroad. The victim of the violence is now available for the gentleman-reader’s pity, free of guilt, and allows a sense of disinterested virtue in the reader. Furthermore, in Dennis’s primarily religious sublime, the experience of enthusiastic terror also allows its subject an alignment with the unopposable power of an almighty patriarchal God, as evidenced in the powers of nature. This patriarchal power is also the form of the paternalism of the Whigs. The religious image serves as a camouflage for this paternalism, which pretends to a beneficence that guards for all the order of “free” commerce – an order which in fact serves the interests of the merchant elite who capitalise from the situation at the expense of the poor and dispossessed, who return in its narratives only as the victims of a wild and elemental nature.

26 See my discussion of the first appearance of the term, in a sixteenth-century broadside, in Chapter 6, pp.314-317.

American colonies.²⁷

The slave trade soon served as the most brazenly cruel and exploitative form of capitalism – and one of the most profitable. Britain’s growing imperial power had early on given it a virtual monopoly over the trade, with its possessions in Africa providing a stranglehold over the necessary supply of bodies. This *de facto* monopoly became *de jure* in the treaty of Utrecht, and was a substantial part of the British sea trade which Thomson is hymning in his poem.²⁸ Within a logic of the displacement of such violence onto hostile nature, the sons of “unhappy Guinea” would soon take a stock role as victims in marine paintings. As Albert Boime has shown, the career of the shark in art has stuck to these victims of the Black Atlantic and their descendants, right up to Winslow Homer’s painting *The Gulf Stream* at the end of the nineteenth century, and beyond.²⁹

Paul Gilroy has argued that modern slavery should not be understood as a “throwback” to older modes of production, but as the epitome of the experience of a modernity in which human life is reduced to exchange-value.³⁰

27 Thanks to his services to the nation in this capacity, he later became Admiral and finally Sir John Hawkins. Early in his career, Hawkins had heard, on a trip to the Canary Isles, of the great need for slaves to work the mines and plantations of the Caribbean, in order to replace the rapidly dwindling native populations. Seeing an opportunity for profit, Hawkins arranged a series of three (fantastically profitable) expeditions through the 1560s, each attracting a larger syndicate of backers, and each constituting a larger fleet, capturing and carrying slaves from Africa to the Americas. The third of these expeditions, in 1568, however, went terribly wrong: Hawkins’s fleet was caught by surprise and attacked by the Spanish fleet off the coast of Mexico, and only two ships got away (though these included Hawkins and his stash of gold from the 470 slaves that he had already sold). Of the two hundred crew left, one hundred preferred to be castaways rather than brave the hazards of the trip home, with such little provisions as they had left on board; of the hundred who set off, only fifteen reached England alive (including, again, Hawkins and his gold). It was these men, having become celebrities on their return, who the broadside reports as naming the great fish pulled out of the English Channel a “shark.” An account of Hawkins’s last voyage is given by Castro, “Origins,” 251.

28 Not to mention, of course, Thomson’s other patriotic works, such as “Rule Britannia” or the play *Liberty*.

29 For more on the insistence of this trope in marine paintings, see Boase, “Shipwrecks,” 337; Albert Boime, “Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters: Visual Encodings of Racism in Copley and Homer,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3.1 (1989): 18-47. Boime points out the extent to which these images of slavery permeated the imagination of the shark, culminating with the entry into English of phrases such as being “thrown to the sharks” and becoming “shark-bait” deriving from the more gruesome practices of the Middle Passage (34). For the continuation of the trope into more recent times, see for example the film *Deep Blue Sea* [1999], a tale of genetically-enhanced killer sharks, which deliberately plays with this expectation, casting rapper L.L. Cool J., against racial type, as one of the few survivors of the sharks, which escape, sink the underwater research station in which they are housed and run amok killing almost everyone in it. At one point, with postmodern ironic genre reflexivity – and a certain amount of accuracy in terms of the history of Western cultural representations of black men – the script has L.L. Cool J.’s character exclaim, “I’m done for! Brothers never make it out of situations like this! Not ever!”

30 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). It’s also worth remembering that though the Black Atlantic is thankfully behind us, slavery itself, despite the triumphal celebrations of the bicentenary of its abolition in Britain in 2007, is not

The life of the slave is reduced to their ability to produce profit for the slave owner. The rate at which they are worked to death is plotted on a Peachumite ledger, tallied against the cost of purchase, a matter of an asset's depreciation of value. Modern slavery, though very different from wage labour, in Gilroy's argument contains the seeds of its form. For Gilroy, the trauma of this particular experience of modernity by those trafficked across the Atlantic constitutes a "slave sublime," and remains the unrepresentable but foundational event haunting black literature and consciousness. But this history, Gilroy makes clear, has a more general relevance for understanding capitalist modernity, and we should not be surprised to find such an aesthetic also at the traumatised heart of the art of capitalism itself.

In the light of Gilroy's argument about the Black Atlantic as an exemplum for modern social relations, Thomson's figure of the violence done to the human body by the shark – first the crushing and severing of "mangled limbs", and then the utter decomposition of human form into homogeneous liquid "gore" – appears not just an exacerbation of the erasure of social difference between master and slave, but also a powerful image of the abstraction of the human body into component matter paralleled by the sheer brutality of the power of capital to turn the biological reserves of men and women into an abstract "labour power" and extract this from them.

Nearly a century later, Turner was to use this passage from *Summer* as a source for *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On* (1840).³¹ It is primarily this image of the human body liquidated by the drive for profit which Turner draws from Thomson's poem, and for which he

a thing of the past even today. According to The International Labour Organisation, as cited by Anti-Slavery International, there are at least 12 million people in forced labour around the world (<<http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/antislavery/faq.htm#howmany>>). Today's global capital retains slavery within its mode of production, and there has been no simple replacement of this with wage relations.

31 The actual subject of the painting was an incident which took place in 1783, during Turner's youth, but which Turner probably read about in the new edition of Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, which had been published in 1839. After an outbreak of disease, the captain of the slave ship Zong threw overboard over a hundred sick slaves at the approach of a storm, since on his insurance policy he could be recompensed for a loss of cargo at sea, but not for death from illness. The incident made the press when the insurance company sued him for a fraudulent claim. Though the Admiralty and the Government were informed, no further criminal case for the deaths was ever pursued. (See Eric Shanes, *Turner* [London: Studio Editions, 1990], 122.) However, Thomson's *Seasons*, as Boime notes, was one of Turner's "favourite" sourcebooks, and Turner combined the real events of the Zong, as recollected in Clarkson's book, with Thomson's more poetic vision of marine disaster from *Summer*, melting "poem and police report into one glowing whole." (Boase, "Shipwrecks," 341-2.) For more thought on the painting and its representation of the Black Atlantic, see in particular David Dabydeen's brilliant poetry in David Dabydeen, *Turner: New and Selected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 1994). For secondary material on Dabydeen's post-colonial re-envisioning of the experience of slavery through Turner's painting, see Tobias Döring, "Turning the Colonial Gaze: Revisions of Terror in Dabydeen's Turner," *Third Text* 38 (1997): 3-14.

finds such a striking visual equivalent.³² The floundering ship recedes into the background of Turner's image, whilst the dying slaves are thrust forward by the painting's foreshortened space, almost spilling out of the picture's frame. But the bodies, as in the poem, are grotesquely fragmented and distorted in a writhing mass of paint where surfacing limbs become indistinguishable from the churning sea and from the weird and frenzied Brueghelesque fish that are tearing them apart. The blood "dyeing" the sea becomes indistinguishable from the fiery light effects of the sun as it sets in the oncoming storm. Turner enacts the violent reduction of human form to homogeneous substance as sea, light, fish, and fragments of manacles and body parts merge into one substance in the picture's paint surface, an uncomfortable mixture of choppy, opaque gestural opacity and insubstantial translucence which lends the scene a ghastly spectrality.

One might well (mis-)appropriate Giorgio Agamben's phrase "bare life" to name the homogenised abstraction to which Thomson and Turner envision the human body reduced in its encounter with capital.³³ Such an appropriation of Agamben's term is at the very least apposite in the extent to which the term is evocative of the degree to which slaves (and wage labourers) are stripped of anything but a bare existence or humanity, denied any particularity beyond the measurability of their power to work. Though such a Marxian appropriation dispenses with much of the nuance of Agamben's term, Agamben's own recognition that the state's biopolitical management of the resource of its citizens' bare life is drawn exactly from the calculability of labour power, as it emerges in liberal forms of economics, gives it a certain validity.³⁴

32 The ensuing image is so ghastly that though Ruskin, the painting's first owner, thought it was Turner's greatest work, he had nonetheless to sell it because he found he could not live with its horror. Boase, "Shipwrecks," 141; Shanes, *Turner*, 122.

33 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

34 My attempts to bring together Agamben's insights, which focus on the (bio-)political, with an argument about the economic nature of capitalism, though a little crude, are less an attempt to come to a "correct" reading than to find the outline of a direction in which Agamben might help me argue. For Agamben, at its most extreme the logic of the modern engrossment of "bare life" by State power is embodied in the "camp," and he elucidates this through an examination of the development of the death and concentration camps from Nazi eugenics programmes that set out to manage the "body" of Germany's population. Agamben notes, however, the importance in the formation of this complex of early-twentieth-century debates about eugenics of the notion of a "*lebensunwerten Leben*" (a "life not worthy of living"). This involved a judgement over the "*Wert*," the "value" of (another's) life. Such worth or value is, of course, fundamentally in modern discourse, an economic as well as a political judgment, and Agamben goes on to discuss a book published by the Nazis in France, *État et Santé* (1942), to justify their policies. In this, Hans Reiter, a key figure responsible for the "medical politics of the Reich," expounds the way that the Nazi management of the population developed from liberal economics. He notes that there had grown in such discourses an attempt to calculate the assets of the state not just in terms of territory or property, but in terms of the productive powers of a population to produce value and wealth. This, for the Nazi state, above and beyond territory and property, was what

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Fig. 94: J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On*, 1840. Oil on canvas 90.8 x 122.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Image from Shanes, *Turner*, 123.

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Fig. 95: Details of *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying*.

John Singleton Copley

Many of the elements of Thomson's verse description are reiterated later in the eighteenth century in Anglo-American painter John Singleton Copley's debut piece for the Royal Academy in London, *Watson and the Shark* (1778), which comes down to us as surely the most striking (if also absurd) visual image of a shark from the period.³⁵ Like Thomson's poem, this work belongs to the genre of imperialist *mirabilia*,³⁶ mapping the viewer into a very similar geographical phantasy scene of empire as Thomson describes in *Summer*. Its shark, just as Hirst's would in the Sensation exhibition, brings something of the wild, exotic margins of empire into the hallowed halls of the academy, allowing its audience to imagine themselves at the heart of the transcontinental economic enterprise on which they relied. Watson – both the figure attacked by the shark in the painting, and the patron who went on to buy it – can be taken as typical of Copley's ideal audience: a merchant who had made his fortune through trade with the Americas, and was rising up the ranks of London's merchant class, soon to become Lord Mayor, and later a Baronet.³⁷ The picture, as an ideological

needed to be defended and fostered; Agamben thus marks the "politicisation (or political value) of biological life" (144) as central to Nazi ideology. But this passage also makes clear a continuity (if not an exact equivalence) between this and the economic valuation of productive powers on which (liberal and colonial) capitalism are also based, and links up the state politics of the twentieth century with the needs of capital. Given this, the thing that seems strange to me in Agamben's book is that slavery gets passed over, in favour of his image of the "camp." Although the camp and its "state of exception" has so many resonances today, in Guantanamo and Darfur for example, the bare life of the slave is also something which we have far from left behind in our own moment of twenty-first-century globalised capital.

35 Copley was a highly successful portrait-painter, operating in Boston in the mid century. He submitted work to Society of Arts shows in the 1760s, which won him the encouragement of his compatriot Benjamin West, and of Joshua Reynolds. With the developing conflict in Boston between loyalists and patriots in the run-up to the War of Independence, Copley decided to leave the troubled political climate of America and come to London, where his mentors reassured him there was a living to be made for a man of talent. He toured Italy in 1774-5, and then settled in London. For a summary of Copley's biography up to the point of *Watson and the Shark*, see Louis P. Masur, "Reading *Watson and the Shark*," *New England Quarterly* 67.3 (1994): 432-4. The comprehensive catalogue of Copley's work, which places it in detailed biographical context, and to which all later critics refer, is Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966). *Watson and the Shark* – shown originally under the title *A Boy Attacked by a Shark, and Rescued by Some Seamen in a Boat, Founded on a Fact which Happened in the Harbour of Havanna* – was one of three paintings entered for the Summer show of 1778, all of which were warmly received. The other two paintings were fairly conventional portraits, but *Watson and the Shark*, a novel, visually striking, narratively dramatic, and distinctly full-size history painting, was the work that, according to Jules Prown, captured the public's and reviewers' imaginations, and – as "the picture that brought him his first popular triumph," and which "caused a minor sensation" – went some way to establishing Copley as a painter at the forefront of London's art scene. (Prown, *Copley*, 2:264, 267, 271-2.)

36 For Copley's painting as belonging to the genre of *mirabilia*, see Edgar Wind, "The Revolution of History Painting," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2.2 (1938): 119-22.

37 The interpretation of Copley's painting and its "politics" has been something of a controversial matter in modern scholarship. A certain contingent have attempted to read the painting as pro-American and Republican. However, in London, Copley's expatriate

image of empire, depicts a group of men diverse in both race and class united in the common purpose of the rescue of Watson – a common purpose, that is, which, like that of the British merchant empire, is identified with the interests of the elite.³⁸

associations were primarily with the Loyalist community. Furthermore, the painting was produced for exhibition at the Royal Academy (whose very name registers a certain attitude to Republicanism!) where the London audience, if the many newspaper reviews of the picture are anything to go by, found no controversial separatism in the picture. For other readings of the painting as pro-independence, however, see Ann Uhry Abrams's "Politics, Prints, and John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *Art Bulletin* 61.2 (1979): 265-76, which reads the painting in relation to formal affinities with a series of pro-American political prints of the day, to which she believes it to be making reference. Irma Jaffe reads the struggle of the crew against the shark as an allegory of the courageous struggle for freedom of the New World, pitted against the monstrous power of the Old – see Jaffe, "John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *American Art Journal* 9.1 (1975): 25. Again, there is no real evidence for anyone at the time reading the painting in these ways. All of these authors attempt to read "content" directly against political context without careful thought about the specifics of Copley's life in London, or the relations within which the exhibition and sale of the painting occurred. For evidence of Copley's clientele and contacts in England, see Boime, "Blacks," 25. Where politics does more clearly enter Copley's work, it seems to do so in the service of a British nationalistic politics. His next grand history painting was to be the death of Pitt (the Elder), heroising the historic moment when the statesman, who had done so much to make America British, died on the floor of Parliament, about to make a rejoinder to a speech in favour of American independence. Copley's other great modern history paintings, the *Death of Major Peirson* (1784) and *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1783-91) celebrate moments of British military heroism. These subjects chime rather awkwardly with an interpretation of *Watson* as pro-independence. Furthermore, Brook Watson, who almost certainly commissioned the picture, though brought up in America, was a rising pillar of the city of London whose business interests were thoroughly tied up with London's control of America. Watson certainly would not have been keen to have read a Republican politics in it: he was a vehement opponent of Independence, and all of his commercial and political interests were in the continuation of British rule: in fact, one of the three cargoes dumped into the sea in the Boston Tea Party was Watson's; he makes an unlikely candidate for a hero of American independence. (See Boime, "Blacks," 22-6.)

38 In this image of Empire, we can modify the interpretation of one of the critics who has read the painting as pro-Independence. Roger Stein has described it as an expression of American identity, claiming it articulates a vision that "American identity was somehow linked to the sublime sea, and that what bound Americans together was their joint adventure in risk-taking ventures against the minions of the deep. [...] the great central motif of the boat and its occupants offers us pictorially a powerful image of the New World community." Roger Stein, "Copley's *Watson and the Shark* and Aesthetics in the 1770s," *Discoveries and Considerations*, ed. Calvin Israel (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1976), 119-20. If his reading of the politics of the painting is deeply counterfactual, nonetheless its image of the valorisation of global trade is useful. The characteristics which Stein picks out for the American identity he imagines the painting expressing are also apposite for the merchant class of the City of London, with their ideology of vigorous entrepreneurship and global trade. One need only substitute the word "America" for "Britain" and "New World" with "colonial" and Stein's claim articulates perfectly the position of the Patriot Whigs. Copley can be understood to have pandered particularly to the institutions of the city: one unidentified "rival" is quoted by Ellen Miles as saying of the two famous American painters in London in the 1780s that "Mr. West paints for the Court, and Mr. Copley paints for the City." (Ellen G. Miles, "Watson and the Shark," *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century: The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 66.) Amongst Copley's major works the giant *Siege of Gibraltar* was commissioned by the Corporation of London, and hangs still in the Guildhall Museum. Aside from links to such a city figure as Watson, Copley also went into business with the print dealer Boydell, who was a city Alderman. See Emily Neff, "The History Theatre," in Emily Ballew Neff, ed., *John Singleton Copley in England* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1995), 67-70.

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Fig. 96: John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark* (first exhibited as *A Boy Attacked by a Shark, and Rescued by Some Seamen in a Boat, Founded on a Fact which Happened in the Harbour of Havanna*), 1778. Oil on canvas, 182.1 x 229.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Image from Wikimedia Commons. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Watsonandtheshark-original.jpg>>

In the same movement, then, that it registers class and racial difference – something that Copley increasingly exaggerated during the production of the painting³⁹ – the picture also disavows the antagonisms of these differences (just as Thomson’s poem disavows such antagonism in the figure of the slave and slaver, subject equally to the shark and the storm). In this it is “pastoral” in the Empsonian sense that it ventriloquises the poor with the supposedly universal sentiments of the most powerful classes of society.⁴⁰ Its address to its polite audience is marked by this disavowal, and as a result is peculiarly contradictory. On the one hand it addresses them through a process of identification much like that at work in Joseph Wright’s bourgeois-moral conversation pieces, eliciting fellow-feeling with the figures in the painting, who form a chorus with whose exemplary range of moral and emotional responses the viewer can enter into sympathetic identification.⁴¹ It is such a mechanism of identification, with its pleasures of the “sympathetic sublime” that most of the literature on the painting has focused. However, its audience was also interpellated in terms of its awareness of its superiority and difference from these rough and exotic “honest Tars” (as one contemporary reviewer called them).⁴² Self-contradictory in this way, the painting is not, as some twentieth-century interpreters have claimed, an image of republican equality (except inasmuch as it is precisely the operation of actual inequality under the cover of a formal equality that characterises the politics of modern democracies, just as it does capitalist economic relations) but of imperial hierarchy.

As an ideological image which disavows exploitation, the painting sets itself up as an allegory of redemption, full as it is of intertextual references to a tradition of Christian art.⁴³ But for what sin does Watson need to be rescued

39 This is clear in the process which is revealed in the differences between the final painting and the X-rays and preliminary drawings, reproduced in Miles, “*Watson*,” 54-5, 60-1. As the painting developed, Copley has consistently exaggerated the marks of social difference between the depicted figures. In the place of the black crew-member of the final painting, for example, we find another white man in the first drawings; the first layer of paint shows another young figure in the place which is taken by the elderly crew member in the final painting. Copley also changed the dress of the various figures to make it more varied. In his discussion of these differences, Miles thinks merely in terms of Copley “individualising” the members, but the painting’s tabulation of social difference is more important.

40 See for example Empson, “*Beggar’s Opera*,” 15.

41 For Wright’s mechanisms of interpellation see Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 214-30. The differences between Copley’s and Wright’s mechanisms of interpellation stem from the different economic phantasy scenes which they draw on. Wright’s conversation pieces ask their audiences to find themselves within a polite community of interest which spans the scale of a national economy, asking the London gallery-goers to recognise themselves within images of a polite northern-English industrial bourgeoisie. Copley’s painting, however, places its viewing subjects within an altogether more global scene of endeavour, and in relation to rather differently classed partners in it.

42 *St. James Chronicle*, 25-8 April 1778, cited in Masur, “*Reading Watson*,” 438.

43 For this iconography, see Jaffe, “*John Singleton Copley’s Watson and the Shark*,” 15-25.

from the “Jaws of Death”?⁴⁴ Is it the very power of exploitation which he wields – in common with the class who viewed the picture at the Royal Academy – over the crew who labour to save, and thus implicitly forgive him? This would certainly be an explanation for the presence of the black sailor at the heart of the picture, who, whether literally a slave or not, carries with him into the painting a history of slavery and servitude with which the wealth of the Academy audience in general, and of Watson in particular, was bound up. Watson himself had in his youth been involved in this trade – as a politician, he would go on to defend it to the last – and this would certainly have been the reason for his presence in Havana in the year he was attacked by a shark.⁴⁵

Its ideological contradictions – and the contradictory ways in which it places its viewer in its world – have their effects on the picture’s composition, which is structured around a complex of substitutions of classed and raced bodies. The anchoring point of these substitutions is the figure of the black sailor, who stands, at the apex of its cone of figures, as the compositional, narrative and identificatory lynchpin of the picture, at once the agent at the heart of its action (holding the rope which will haul Watson back into the boat), and also, as one reviewer had it, the finest “index of concern and horror” against whom the audience could measure their own reactions. He is thus within and without the action, an agent and an onlooker, subject and object. At the heart of its contradictions, he is the zenith of the picture’s representations of the socially “other,” and, carrying as he does with him a history of representations of the black as slave and victim in maritime art, the utmost point of the disavowed violence of empire, and yet he is also the figure in whom the audience are most expected to recognise themselves. He is the point of utmost obscurity in the picture, the ideological vanishing point around which it is organised. Copley’s contemporary reviewers could not agree in the slightest on the most basic empirical facts about what he was doing or what his pose expressed, and more recent critics have been no more able to agree as to whether this is a valorising or demeaning image of black subjectivity.⁴⁶ Such

Jaffe identifies Raphael’s and Rubeens’s paintings of the *Miraculous Draught of the Fishes*, an engraving after Rubeens on the subject of Jonah and the Whale (Phillippe-Joseph Tassaert after Rubens, *Jonah Thrown into the Sea*), and Raphael’s *St. George and the Dragon* as compositional sources.

44 The phrase “Jaws of Death” is from the *Public Advertiser* (April 28) review of the painting, as reprinted in Miles, “Watson,” 70-1.

45 For Watson’s history as a slaver, see Boime, “Blacks,” 24.

46 Is he part of the group or separate from it? Is his posture muscular or nerveless? Is he actively saving Watson, or waiting passively for someone else’s action? Is he coming forwards to the rescue, or retreating into the depths of pictorial space? And if retreating, is he doing so to balance the boat, or to flee the shark? Is he grasping the rope, or letting it hang limply in his hands? Does his face express moral concern, or craven terror? Copley’s contemporaries can agree on none of this. For the *St James Chronicle*, (25-8 April 1778), he is an “idle Black, prompted

a vanishing point may once more suggest Agamben's account of the modern state's politics of "bare life," in which the human being, stripped – just as a slave is – of all but his humanity, becomes the very ground of "human rights," rights which are, nonetheless, accorded not to "bare" humanity, but only to the citizen.⁴⁷

The painting's chain of bodily substitutions is most obvious in the set of reversals between this black sailor and Watson. For the black sailor is located at the summit of the composition and the centre of the action – places, in the conventions of eighteenth-century history painting, normally reserved for the painting's most socially elevated being. Instead, Watson (the future Mayor and Baronet) is depicted at the very bottom of the painting's composition, and, as shark-bait, in the narrative position in which we would expect, in eighteenth-century iconography, to find the black sailor.

Watson and the shark, too, form a compositional pair. Albert Boime notes the parallels between them: each with mouth agape, they are positioned symmetrically, with Watson's outstretched arm and the shark's head forming identical scalene triangles.⁴⁸ Each under attack, they are drawn into a pictorial

by the connate fear of his Country for that ravenous Fish," whilst for the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, (25 April 1778) he is a "fine index of concern and horror." Another reviewer in the *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, (27 April 1778) complains that he is depicted in a posture which is too feminine for the deed at hand. For the disagreements amongst modern scholars as to whether the painting valorises him as a black subject, or serves to reiterate the ideology of colonialism, compare, for example, Stein, "Copley's Watson," 122. with Boime, "Blacks," 31-5.

47 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. In Agamben's account, it is on the grounds of a "biological life" (*zoe*) of the human – the mere fact of birth – that civil rights are granted by the modern state; and yet these rights are, nonetheless, granted only through legal fete, and he (or she) who has only his (or her) bare humanity, has no rights, humanity or "political life" (*bios*). Agamben emphasises that the rights here are due on the mere fact of "birth" (just as, we might add, in the American constitution it is "self-evident" that all men are "born equal") but are "preserved" only in the figure of the citizen. Agamben also notes that immediately, however, distinctions are made between "active" citizens, who are accorded full rights and "passive" citizens (women, children, the insane, prisoners – and, we might add, slaves) who do not merit full inclusion in the body of the state as "members of the sovereign" (129). Such is the black sailor – a slave perhaps, and certainly a servant, a commodity, a man excluded utterly from citizenship. Agamben's phrase *homo sacer* fits him nicely, marking not just his marginal, excluded status, but also his status as a fetish figure endowed with the symbolic charge on which the system relies for its constitution. The black sailor – with the echoes of slavery he carries into the painting, and himself certainly at the very least a servant if not a slave – stands for the ultimate form of stripped-down humanity, almost without civil status. He is at the nadir of freedom, dispossessed both economically and politically. As Agamben puts it, in a way which would fit beautifully the place taken by the enigmatic black figure in the symbolic order of Copley's painting: "Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) only to the extent that man is the immediate vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen." (129). For more on Agamben's version of the "sacred" involved in "sacred man," see esp. 75-86; for the critique of the role of bare life in modern notions of citizenship, from Hobbes to Rousseau, which he sees as involving a mystification of the "ban" and the power of the sovereign, under the notion of a social "contract," see 109-111. He returns to the foundations of the "rights of man" on 126-35.

48 Boime, "Blacks," 34-5.

circuit of violence which is only completed by the actual (though in the image disavowed) fact of Watson's socially predatory position in relation to the men who are spearing the shark to rescue him.

These substitutions take us across an imaginary dividing line in the picture, roughly located around the surface of the water. Above this line, we have the crew with their appropriate expressions of sympathetic horror, and their noble action of rescue. Below it, we have the altogether more obscene and violent action of the shark attack (on Watson's rather eroticised body), forming a second compositional triangle echoing that in the upper half. It is striking that the original reviews of the painting and twentieth-century interpretation both focus almost exclusively on the top half of the picture. But this rather conventional aspect to the picture is hardly what marked it out from the other pictures at the Royal Academy with which it competed for attention, and hardly accounts for the "sensation" it caused there.⁴⁹ Rather, what must have made it stand out is its altogether less reputable dimension, which Jules Prown notes was "customarily the province of cheap sensational pictorial journalism rather than of history painting"⁵⁰ – the gruesome, exotic and sadomasochistic scene of bodily mutilation in the painting's foreground. The remarkably scant attention any of this gets from the painting's first critics – drawn to this picture as they seem nonetheless to have been – can be read as itself symptomatic. It is explained if we understand the polite registration of appropriate emotion on the faces of the boat crew as serving the audience as a moral alibi for being here and looking at this scene, which, inasmuch as it constitutes that which is unpresentable within the polite discourse of eighteenth-century newspaper criticism, is a matter of the obscene core always at the heart of the sublime.⁵¹

The polite positions of moral concern and detached observation Copley offers lead viewers into the picture's compositional network, entangling them within positions which can only be more surreptitiously and ambivalently held,

49 "Sensation" is the term used by Jules Prown for the effect that it had. (Prown, *Copley*, 2:273.)

50 Prown, *Copley*, 2:273.

51 Copley has arranged his composition so that these "obscene" elements are at the bottom of the composition, as if there is a hierarchy of mind implicit. Below the line of the bottom of the boat, we are symbolically located "below" the threshold of the painting's "conscious" desires; we are below the surface of the sea, and Copley has painted the water to create a translucent surface, masking as much as it reveals of the "obscene" scene around which it revolves – a translucence, which seduces in its very act of concealment. Such a water line between overt and covert positions is also echoed in Spielberg's *Jaws* where the shark's dark underwater world, a repository of only thinly veiled fantasies of eroticised violence, is contrasted to the bright, above-water world of holidaymakers, and of the family morality of the human characters which is the ostensible ideology of the film itself – an image, perhaps, of the psyche of American consumer culture and what lies beneath it. Spielberg dramatises this contrast between the two realms in the use of shots where water laps the lens, dividing the screen itself between them, a device for which Spielberg and his cinematographers developed innovations in the form of the underwater camera housing itself. (See Quirke, *Jaws*, 24.)

but which are nonetheless ultimately more seductive. The symmetry between Watson and the shark counterposes the hard, armoured, leathery surfaces and aggressively dynamic form of the fish with the soft, fleshy, passive body of the boy. The intuition I have from it is of the vulnerability of the human body caught within the circuits of global capital – echoing Thomson’s equally obscene scene of mutilation, and fore-echoing Hirst’s mortified shark. But in the eroticisation of Watson’s body, the picture opens out to a further paradox: in the fantasy of the body held within the grip of capital’s networks (mimed pictorially by the compositional circuit of substitutions running through the shark, Watson and the black sailor, each mapping a “position” within the circuits of capital itself) Watson’s body is not only given as a figure of anxiety, but also a source for sensual pleasure. This erotic charge is not nearly explained by the mechanisms of displacement and disavowal of colonial and capitalist exploitation I have discussed above; there is also something masochistic⁵² overdetermining the painting’s phantasy scene, focused not around the other but the body of the capitalist himself as “victim” of an externalised image of his own power. We are offered an oscillation between the twin positions of shark and victim. I have described a similar oscillation in the experience of capital in Hirst’s shark sculpture, which also revels at once in the euphoria of a fantasy of technological control, but simultaneously in identification with a controlled, morbid body, an identification no less *jouissant* in the experience of the work than its more rationally attractive counterposition.

Faced with such a desire, we are led into a realm “beyond the pleasure principle,”⁵³ which may well prove inherently impenetrable to the clear analysis of conscious reason, since it follows quite other laws to those of logical operation – a realm which we can only approach through the figural, and which we can thus only approximate in the language of rational analysis.⁵⁴

52 Sigmund Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1953-73), 19:157-70. In *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1986), Leo Bersani develops the argument that though Freud cannot accept that there is a masochism, associated with the death drive, at the heart of human sexuality, this is nonetheless the implication of his work. For Bersani, “Human sexuality is constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self” (60); it involves a violence first aimed at that self, and only turned outwards at the world in a secondary movement. Bersani argues this most directly in the essay “Pleasures of Repetition” (51-79). Discussing the paradoxes of Freud’s attempts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to prove a mechanism not aimed at pleasure, Bersani writes: “It is as if that scandalously vague word [pleasure] could not stop referring to that which is alien to it – in fact to the very concept of destructiveness which will presumable ruin its sovereignty. Thus the text is laboured from the start [...] by an association of pleasure with the ego’s harming, possibly even destroying itself” (59).

53 Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” *Standard Edition*, 18:7-55.

54 Freud himself writes that we can only enter this territory “blindly” – it is “the most obscure and inaccessible region of the mind.” (Freud, “Pleasure Principle,” 7.) Psychoanalysis itself helps us as much because it provides a series of images through which we can approach such a

One sometimes does better describing and registering the presence of such a region than attempting to understand it, and we should, at least, follow Freud's advice to avoid being doctrinaire and opt for "the least rigid hypothesis."⁵⁵ Nonetheless, something more needs to be said about the phantastical structure that the painting offers. To do this, I will draw eclectically from the figures which psychoanalysis provides, of paranoia, narcissism, the oceanic and the death drive, and I will treat them for their descriptive power – in the "least rigid" manner – rather than for a "theoretical" explanation. The formal mirroring between the shark and Watson speaks to me of the splitting of the Kleinian "paranoid position", as the scene here is divided into "good object" and "bad object."⁵⁶ Klein's paranoid position is structured around an aggressivity towards the external world – a death drive⁵⁷ – which folds back upon itself, causing splits, and duplicating itself in a dizzying logic of self replication and division: for Klein, this pre-logical splitting takes on a life of its own, extending to cleave the subject itself as well as its objects, the two being at this level of the psyche inextricably bound together. As imagined in Copley's shark, colonial capital forms a system organised around such aggression, and is prone to unruly splits and displacements. The pair of Watson and the shark, furthermore, images the poles around which the specular phantasies

realm as because it presents us with any provable or fundamentally objective rules which our reason can follow, and through which we can "know" the unconscious. Late in his life, Freud himself talked of the concepts from metapsychology as "our myth".

55 Freud, "Pleasure Principle," 8.

56 The classic case of the "paranoid position," for Klein, would involve the infant and the mother. The absent mother, in her guise as withholding care, is separated out as a different object from the mother apprehended through her care, in order that the hostility felt at the mother's absence does not threaten the presence of the mother in her caring dimension. The infant fantasises the existence of a "good mother" which provides for it, and a "bad mother" who persecutes it, and who wishes to destroy it, just as the infant itself wants to destroy this bad mother. In this sense the foundation of the split is the hostility or aggressivity which the infant experiences towards the object, but which it projects onto that object. Klein's arguments are complex and often seem contradictory and their strength is the impressionistic power they have to convey an impossible universe before language, selfhood, the existence for the infant of objects and even logical operation. For a summary of Klein's argument see Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction to Melanie Klein," *Reading Melanie Klein*, eds. John Phillips and Lyndsey Stonebrige (London: Routledge, 1998), 11-31. Klein's projections and introjections foreshadow Lacan's more developed account of the "specular," mimetic or mirroring relation between subject and object (and out of which subject and object are formed).

57 The death drive here is imagined not, as in Freud's "Civilisation and Its Discontents," as a biological (even metaphysical) force by which the organism pursues its own destruction and return to organic life, but rather more (as Lacan discusses it), as a structuring force within the psyche. See in particular Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991). Imagining the death drive as a psychic rather than a biological force, however, does not mean that we should not seek its effects in the interpersonal as well as intra-psychic. Lyotard's work on the inhuman itself can be understood to envision capitalist society in its articulations of the death drive. Its twin expressions echo in turn the pulsations of the fragmented body, and the formation of an external and alienating, monolithic, totalising monadic ideal object.

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Fig. 97: Hirst's *Physical Impossibility*, front view. Photo taken by "Steve and Sara," at Metropolitan Museum of Art, uploaded to *Flickr*, 24 February 2008. <flickr.com/photos/emry/2290021192/>

of selfhood are constituted in the mirror stage. Such a captation for Lacan is not just the foundation of the ego, but also the representative of the death drive itself. Its poles are on the one hand the *imago* of the “fragmented body” with its “disjointed limbs” (as we have here with Watson), and on the other the petrification of the *imago* of the self into a “fortress” (as we have with the smooth, armoured body of this shark).⁵⁸ If Hirst’s shark, too – double-sealed within its vitrine – is an image of such a fortress-self, then we need only remember the predilection in his work for the cut-up body to see how his oeuvre also revolves around these same poles.

Such deathly masochism seems to play a role within the logic of phantastical self-constitutions which inhere to capitalism, as the shark allows us to imagine this. But it is also significant that the structure of the phantasy here involves a split pair of terms, and the distribution of an erotic charge between the two; identification is never entirely with one term or the other, but a matter of the larger scene which constitutes the structure of a subjectivity. Such a split is also echoed in other pairs of terms we have come across such as Lyotard’s two “inhumans.” Watson and the shark are mutual productions, just as Lyotard’s two inhumans are only thinkable within relation to each other. Copley’s painting, juxtaposing Watson and the shark, mimes out the splitting that this structure entails. The same ambiguity of position is there in Thomson’s poem, its dissolution of the human body serving as the very utmost point of the Lacanian fantasies of bodily fragmentation and destruction, a counterpoint to Thomson’s paean to global trade.

I have also already discussed the fact that such ambivalent splitting of position is at work in Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility*, which offers us both the phantasy of capitalism’s power, and also of being the object of this.⁵⁹ If there is a masochism, a death instinct, and an “oceanic”⁶⁰ urge at the heart of the specular constitution of the (capitalist) subject, then perhaps this is primary in the pleasure of Hirst’s shark. Discussing the nature of this phantasy scene further will lead me into some final comments on the relation between its subjectivity and the form of the commodity, as we see it in terms of consumption rather

58 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977), 4-5. These phrases are drawn from Lacan’s famous essay on the “mirror stage.” See also, however, “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis”, (8-29) in the same volume, where Lacan further discusses the place of the narcissism of the death drive at the heart of the formation of such *imagos*, and the ego’s captation by them.

59 See pp.353-356, above.

60 For the oceanic, see Freud, *Civilization*. Freud draws the notion of the oceanic from his correspondence with Romain Rolland, and enters his work through the Romantic tradition which Freud was becoming increasingly interested in during his later years, in particular the work of Schopenhauer. Freud’s “oceanic” is thus bound up with the history of a key motif of the sublime, the sublime ocean, a history going right back to Longinus.

than production.

Frozen Time in Hirst's shark

Physical Impossibility engages us as viewers through the physical relation between our bodies and the one presented in front of us, an anthropomorphised yet still inhuman body in which we recognise our own embodiment, and which affects us through this fact.⁶¹ In what sort of relation between two animal bodies does it place us? I propose two answers. The first relation is the one we are indulging as we walk around the tank, and suddenly, for a micro-second, seem to see the shark move towards us. The thrill this gives us is more than a mere optical illusion. It involves an investment of desire; we *will* the shark to move and it does – if only in our imaginations, and only for an exciting moment, until reason takes over again. This both involves a phantasy of being devoured by this creature, and also, fundamentally, the fragmented body as described by Lacan. The other relation between the sculpture and the viewer's body involves a specular (mis-)recognition of the self in the body of the shark; but this identification does not place us in the position of predator. For the body of the shark is itself caught within the tank, dead, preserved in formaldehyde, a suspended, mortified body. Such an identification is no less a fantasy of "death" than the fantasy of being eaten.⁶² It is a desiring recognition of our flesh in the

61 The phenomenological relation involved is illuminated by the debates around the minimalism from which Hirst draws the aesthetic of his vitrines; and in particular some of the unease which its opponents had to the scale of Tony Smith's cubes. Smith was criticised by certain of his more "modernist" opponents for producing objects which neither related to the experience of architecture (dwarfing us), nor to the world of our objects (at a scale much smaller than us), but which rather, deliberately perched in between the two, confronted us at a "human" scale, as a substitute body. This was taken by his opponents as a way in which the "pathetic fallacy" might slip back into a world of sculpture presumed previously to have purged itself of this irrationalism. See for example the discussion of this debate in Beider, "Postmodern Sublime," 189-93. Hirst's sculpture, as always, involves a literalisation of a motif in contemporary art, now with a real animal body in the tank.

62 Such an interpretation of the sculpture in terms of a "primal," animal relation of fear towards a larger, more powerful predator which might be activated in the piece, or at the very least a culturally-constructed imaginary relation in which these categories are at play, is not the only interpretation. Another interpretation – which also boils down to the same pair of masochistic structures – understands the piece in terms of experiences more familiar for modern humans, those of the relation of a small child towards adults. In these terms, *Physical Impossibility* involves us in a complex of phantasies involving the confrontation with both the castrating threat of paternal authority, and also with the maternal body, desired, protective, but also threatening and promising the infant the fulfilment of its drive to self-annihilation. A reading of the Oedipal relation to the body of the shark might be supported in the way that the vitrine itself echoes the mythical ferocity of the shark's bite with the severity of the way in which its glass geometry cuts and divides space – note also the shark's phallic shape, its teeth, its mythical predatory nature, the violence of the geometry of the vitrine, and so on. The reading of the piece as involving such a relation with the maternal is reinforced by the way that the tank itself forms a womb-like container for the shark, with formaldehyde as (deadly) amniotic fluid. In psychoanalytic terms, the conflation in an image of both the fears (and desires) figured around maternal and paternal relations, although rationally inconsistent, remains consistent

living death of this suspended monster, in its lethal amniotic tank.

It is this second, mortified, body that I would like to focus on, with its form of suspended time. The shark in Hirst's vitrine, in its pared down presentation, with its reduction of narrative,⁶³ offers a different kind of experience to Natural History museum displays, which almost always re-narrativise the taxidermied creature, posing it in mid-action – hunting, running, jumping, snarling, staring back at us – as if what we were looking at were a slice of time from its life, implying a whole dimension of time from which this moment has been abstracted. Like a photographic still, such taxidermy offers us as viewers the vantage point from which to contemplate it of a time outside the creature's time, the position of a transcendent and atemporal knowledge which controls its object (stops it in time) in order to know it. This (transcendent) time of the gaze of natural history places us at a point immune to the order of death in which the preserved creature has been victim.⁶⁴ Hirst's shark, in contrast, endures, however still it may be, within our own time. It is a stillness *in time*. Its *continuing* stillness, a petrification, happens not elsewhere but to us, in a time in which we are ourselves embroiled, and which even threatens, through our identification, to be our stillness.⁶⁵

within the logic of the unconscious; according to psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipal/castration complex in which the above relationship with the father is to be found is overlaid on the object relations of a prior set of maternal relations. It is only the need for an escape from the terrors of this infantile narcissism which motivates the infant to recast its relations and anxieties in terms of the paternal. Thomas Weiskel in particular has argued that it is this layering of paternal and maternal fantasies which structures the relations in the Romantic sublime between the self and the vast sublime object, finding in the Romantics' descriptions of their sublime objects a mixture of maternal/paternal attributes. This insight has most significantly been taken up by Barbara Freeman to develop an account of the vicissitudes of the gendering of the sublime. See Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*; Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*.

63 See my comments on the sculpture's resistance of narrative towards the start of Chapter 6, above (p.299).

64 One of Hirst's near-contemporaries going through the British art-school system, was photographer Tim MacMillan who developed the technique of "time-slice" photography, now used frequently in wildlife documentaries, in which an arc of cameras capture a simultaneous image of an event. The spatial dimension in which the cameras are arrayed can then be made into a temporal sequence for video playback, giving the impression of a pan around the stilled object. MacMillan showcased his work at the Photographer's Gallery in 1998, showing a repeatedly panning video image of the "decisive moment" in which a horse is "put down" with a shotgun bullet. MacMillan's theme – and the image which ensues of the leaping horse frozen between life and death – seems to owe much to the success of Hirst in the years preceding its production, yet the time involved is very different from that which Hirst's shark offers. MacMillan's video is, in fact, a clear demonstration of the way that museums construct a dimension of time "perpendicular" to that of the objects they display in which they can be contemplated without threat that such time bestows on the subject.

65 The artist who has pulled such a strange stillness from museum displays is Chris Marker, in his *La Jetée*. This occurs in perhaps the film's most memorable scenes, where the traveller from the future accesses the world of the past through the museum. The use of still photographs, within the moving continuum of film here (along with the inclusion of the narrator and the woman from the past who he visits), interferes with the temporal relation between viewing subject and the viewed object which the museum sets up, creating an uncanny effect in which

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Fig. 98: Displays at the Natural History Museum, London, 2007. Photos Luke White.

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Fig. 99: Jeff Koons, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*, 1985. Glass, steel, sodium chloride reagent, distilled water, basketball. 165 x 78 x 34 cm. Image from <<http://neurotypisch.nl/koons/equilibrium.html>>

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Fig. 100: Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers*, 1980-1986, Three Shampoo polishers, plexiglas, fluorescent lights. 142 x 91 x 38 cm. Image from <<http://neurotypisch.nl/koons/thenew.html>>

Hirst has discussed a fantasy he has of “the perfect art piece,” from which just this temporality of suspended animation emerges:

My perfect art piece would be a perfect sphere in the centre of the room. You could come in and walk around it, it would just be there [...] floating [...] without strings or wires.⁶⁶

It’s an image of narcissistic desire⁶⁷ – an oceanic reverie about the impossible object-subject, floating, self-sufficient, sealed in on itself, without relation even to the physical laws of a world outside itself. Hirst draws this image from Jeff Koons’s explorations of consumer desire.⁶⁸ The formal trick – and the entire visual style – of the shark hanging in the tank of formaldehyde is borrowed from Koons’s *Total Equilibrium* tanks. Hirst’s vitrines echo

we are suspended like the exhibits, in the same moment they are given the life which the taxidermists themselves only pretend to give them.

66 Hirst, *I Want to Spend*, 75-9. This (consciously held) fantasy is at the centre of a range of Hirst’s works - not only the suspended animals such as the shark but also, for example, the sculptures which followed on from *I want to Spend the Rest of my Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now* (1991), the ping-pong balls suspended on jets of air. (The title of this work proposes something of the contradictory time that I have proposed for the shark, with its conflation of the now and the forever). In another title of a drawing for one of these sculptures, *Impossible Desires, Sublime Designs* (1995), Hirst seems to posit this fantasy as a root for a “Hirstean Sublime.” The title here, as with *I want to Spend*, in marking the impossibility of its mode of desire – a “physical impossibility” – also marks the point where a “sublime desire” folds into the bathos of the attempt to fulfil it. Many of these works are as ridiculous as they are sublime, and in the abject way they ironically mime out, without being able to take seriously, their phantasy, can only take it up through a kind of a negative presentation.

67 See Freud, *Civilization*.

68 My reading of Koons here, as my reading of Hirst, is perhaps rather too “generous” in spirit. Nonetheless, it seems to me to be worth examining the positive moment within Koons’s highly commodified work, and my feeling is that Koons’s work, indeed, reveals a lot about the nature and the experience of the commodity. Koons has come to be remembered within art discourse as a rather charlatanistic and Machiavellian purveyor of kitsch art. At the time of writing Koons and Hirst battle it out in the auction houses for the title of the most expensive living artist. In particular since the showmanship of the *Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), Koons has given up making any claims for the criticality of his work, making his public personality into a mirror of the anodyne artworks he produces. However, it is interesting to look into Koons’s early career, as Alison Pearlman does in *Unpacking the art of the 1980s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 111-40. She finds him in a rather different context as an up-and-coming artist within a milieu where New York artists were attempting to come to terms with, and seeking critical positions on, the rise upon rise of consumer culture, and the post-seventies “crisis” of socialism. Amongst those he associated with in the early eighties were Allan McCollum, Peter Halley and Haim Steinbach who repeatedly articulated their agendas, and their motivations for flirting in their work with commodity objects, as being critical or oppositional. Before being “picked up” by the artworld, Koons was also in particular involved with the curatorial/theoretical/entrepreneurial pair “C&M” (Collins and Milazzo), whose highly polemical writings and exhibitions grappled with the seeming “failure” of previous Marxist strategies in cultural politics, faced as they were with the constant recuperation of the oppositional by capitalism as something which could be sold. C&M propounded the possibility of the “negative instrumentality” of the commodity itself, and of entering into commerce in order to counter it. For a rather different, and more critical, take on Koons, see Hal Foster, “(Dis)Agreeable Objects,” *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 12-17; “The Future of an Illusion, or the Contemporary Artist as Cargo Cultist,” *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* (Camb. Mass & London, England: MIT Press, 1986), 91-105.

Koons's enshrinement of consumer durables such as vacuum cleaners and floor polishers within Perspex cases in his series *The New*.⁶⁹ This link with Koons emphasises that Hirstean suspension constitutes a temporality of the commodity itself, and of the self's captation by the commodity. Koons's more blatant concerns lie concealed at the heart of Hirst's shark image; in turn, Hirst's work makes explicit the morbidity of the logic of Koons's basketballs.

Jeff Koons

Koons's *Equilibrium* tanks are in fact a more pure realisation of Hirst's fantasy of the miraculously suspended sphere than anything by Hirst.⁷⁰ The press releases, gallery pamphlets, artist's statements and essays around Koons's work frame it in terms of the effect of suspension, foregrounding the enormous amount of energy (supposedly) needed to produce this zero state of activity, and involving us in a techno-scientific fantasy which we must be caught within if we are to experience the full affect of the work.⁷¹ In their first showing the *Total Equilibrium* tanks were further juxtaposed with a series of images and objects which drew out, through their triangulating network of references, a context in which to interpret the tanks: posters depicting American athletes as

69 Hirst saw the Koons work in the 1987 New York Art Now show at his favourite gallery, the Saatchi. Richard Cork has commented on the influence this must have had: "Objects coolly suspended in vitrines dominated Koons' contributions and they must have fascinated the fledgling Damien Hirst." (Richard Cork, "The Essay," *Observer* 20 April 2003, <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/saatchigallery/story/0,,938547,00.html>> visited 25/10/06.) Hirst himself has explicitly acknowledged his debt to Koons – see, for example, Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 60. More recently, a *Guardian* article showing images from Hirst's collection on the occasion of a show of a selection of these at the Serpentine Gallery, includes Hirst's scrawled caption to one of Koons's *The New* pieces, acknowledging the influence of seeing these works, reads: "I was blown away by Jeff Koons [sic] Hoover pieces, I'd wished I had done it when I saw them at the Saatchi Gallery. Sometimes it's so simple it takes your breath away." (*Guardian*, 14 November 2006, G2: 11.)

70 Although the supporting wires are discreet, the shark – and Hirst's *Natural History* series generally – does not hang "miraculously," as is the case with Koons. Furthermore, the basketballs themselves are much closer in form to the sphere of the fantasy than the objects that Hirst himself suspends. It is as if, as Hirst moves away from the purity of the "formalism" of the fantasy itself, he compensates on the level of content with a proliferation of imagery which reiterates the narcissistic themes which the fantasy proposes: hence we are thrown into the phantasies (with a *ph-*) of masochistic fragmentation and self-destruction which the figure of the shark connotes.

71 For such framing/publicity material which foregrounds these technical issues, see for example Eyestorm, "Koons: Equilibrium," <http://www.eyestorm.com/feature/ED2n_article.asp?article_id=13&artist_id=15>, 15 August 2006. We learn that the balls have been filled with a carefully calculated mixture of salts, giving them a very particular density so that they will float in the centre of the tank. Furthermore, it is claimed that in order that the balls can remain absolutely motionless in the centre of the tanks, in their state of perfect suspension, it is required that the tanks be placed on an ultra-hi-tech motion-cancelling pad, so that the ball is isolated from any vibrations in the environment. We are even told that this seemingly simple but miraculous trick of suspension required an enormous investment in technology, and of sheer resources: Koons apparently had a whole team of fifty eminent physicists, including Nobel prize-winning Richard Feynman, working on the piece.

role models of achievement and social aspiration, and a series of bronze casts of various “life-preserving” flotation devices: an aqualung, a rubber dinghy, a life jacket.⁷² Koons claimed that in the master metaphor through which we are expected to read the work, the suspension of the balls equates with a state to which we aspire. This is a state of balance, or calm, an “equilibrium” which the advertisements offer the consumers of the products (sports goods, echoing the basketballs in the tanks) through the figures of the athletes, who, the advertisements claim, have already achieved this.⁷³ This state of psychic equilibrium (into which Hirst also buys with his fantasy of the perfect art piece) is impossible, a fantasy which a society of consumption mobilises, but which we embrace at our peril:

My work is very involved with the tragedy of unachievable states of being, a floating state that cannot be sustained; the difficulty of maintaining one’s psychic equilibrium (or balance) in a commodity-oriented world.⁷⁴

Koons’s series *The New* sheds further light on the fantasy at the heart of the basketball pieces and Hirst’s vitrines. In *The New*, vacuum cleaners and floor polishers are presented in plexiglass display cases. They are lit from below with fluorescent lights, casting an eerie glow around them, and emphasising the separation of these objects from the surrounding space. With their synthetic, fluorescent halos, they are marked out as “sacral” objects, in the ancient sense that they are set apart from ordinary life (just as the basketballs floating miraculously still are literally set apart from the world by the motion-cancelling devices with which we are told they are fitted). This is a very modern, secular form of the “sacral” and its technologies of display: the plexiglass cases evoke the museum with its mist of seriousness and – even more importantly – the shop-windows through which we gaze at fetishised items for sale.⁷⁵

72 Their first showing was at International with Monument Gallery in 1985.

73 In the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Koons told his interviewer, Klaus Ottman, “The show was about equilibrium, and the ads defined personal and social equilibrium. There is also the deception of people acting as though they have accomplished their goals and they haven’t: ‘Come on! I’ve done it! I’m a star! I’m Moses!’ ” Klaus Ottmann, “Interview: Jeff Koons,” *Journal of Contemporary Art* 1.1 (1988). <<http://www.jca-online.com/koons.html>> visited 10 August 2006. In a *Flash Art* interview he claims: “The basketballs denote social mobility particularly for urban blacks,” and later in the interview observes of the bronzes that “these tools of equilibrium would pull you under. This body of work, like *The New*, is about unachievable states.” (Daniela Salvioni, “Interview with McCollum and Koons,” *Flash Art* December 1986 / January 1987: 66-8, Full interview archived on Allan McCollum’s website at <http://home.att.net/~AllanMcNYC/Daniela_Salvioni.html> visited 10 Aug 2006.)

74 Koons, quoted on website <<http://www.csulb.edu/~karenk/20thcwebsite/439final/ah439fin-Info.00010.html>> visited 10 Aug 2006.

75 For Koons’s fetishism see Foster, “The Future of an Illusion” 91-105. It is not, however, my purpose here to pursue this as an angle of attack.

In such an “epiphany of consumerism”⁷⁶ – an ecstasy of a time beyond time – we are certainly not dealing with the desire for satisfaction in a use-value. It is the unsold, unused, still-packaged commodity that is foregrounded. Such a desire for “newness” is actually opposed to and imperilled by the entropy to which use submits it.⁷⁷ Koons fetishises the paraphernalia of display which protect the commodity from such contamination. He dramatises the gap opened by the commodity itself between use and appearance.⁷⁸ In consumer society it is increasingly in the latter that pleasure is sought. But the pleasure of the commodity is not simply to be sought in the Veblenesque status symbol, or Baudrillardian sign-value, which are “uses,” though of a different sort.⁷⁹ Koons’s sculptures dramatise another – more masochistic, deathly – process on which consumer desire is founded, in contradistinction to the rationality of use. Koons’s staging of the “new” highlights the mirror relation between subject and commodity. Just like Hirst (as the formal similarities with Hirst’s work make clear) these works compel us through physical confrontation with and misrecognition in the object. Koons exacerbates this specular relation through the anthropomorphic qualities of the objects that he chooses.⁸⁰ Within such a specular scheme, it is the glamour of the pristine surface of the new object – and of the sealed-off worlds of display which the vitrine mimics – which is seductive to the imagination. The for-sale, new commodity is the form *par excellence* of the ideal image in which, as Lacan describes so persuasively in his early seminars, the human subject alienates itself.⁸¹ This alienation is desirable in its pleasure-beyond-the-pleasure-principle, however melancholy and fixated

76 Eyestorm, “Equilibrium,” ed.

77 As Danoff puts it in his catalogue essay, “What Koons preserves about the appropriated works is not their function, since they are not plugged in, but the seductive beauty of their pristine newness.” I. Michael Danoff, “Jeff Koons,” *Jeff Koons* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 10.

78 This gap between use and appearance and use in the commodity form is discussed in Haug, “Commodity Aesthetics Revisited,” 18-24. It’s also, of course, a thesis of Baudrillard’s that twentieth-century capital has increasingly opened up a “sign-value” in goods, different from its “use-value.” (Baudrillard, *Critique*.)

79 Baudrillard, *Critique*; Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York and London: Random House and Hi Marketing, 2001).

80 Danoff notes: “The vacuums and floor polishers suggest animate qualities, bodies and appendages.” (Danoff, “Jeff Koons,” 7.) They have “torsos” and limbs. They are, furthermore, posed in ways such as emphasise these qualities – standing, lying, grouped into families, or with their hoses poised for action. The basketballs are objects with skins, and give the impression of fleshiness. They are – furthermore – filled with air, like lungs, and the motif of breathing seems to pervade Koons’s objects, whether the aqualung, the vacuums, or the dinghy, and to serve to blur the boundaries between animate and inanimate bodies: Koons himself has called them “breathing machines” (This unpublished interview, from 1986, is mentioned in Danoff, “Jeff Koons,” 7.)

81 Jacques Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester, Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 120-1.

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Fig. 101: Jeff Koons, *Aqualung*, 1985, from the Equilibrium series. Bronze. 69 x 45 x 45 cm. Image from <<http://neurotypisch.nl/koons/equilibrium.html>>.

on death this is. It is, nonetheless, through this ultimately narcissistic and fundamentally masochistic desire that the commodity captates us, through the deathly eroticisation of the idealised ego and of the body recognised in the ideal flesh of this commodity, which is, like Koons's basketballs or Hirst's shark, suspended in a state at once amniotic and mortal. Koons thus gives us in the basketball a "double" image, simultaneously funereal and maternal, referring backwards to what psychoanalysis marks as "regressive" (a desire to return to infancy) and yet also forwards to what Freud terms, quoting Schopenhauer, the "true result and to that extent the purpose of life"⁸²: death itself, and the more radical reversion to the inorganic.

Richard Klein has found in cigarette-smoking (one of Hirst's favourite motifs) the blueprint of the pleasure which the commodity offers.⁸³ What is sought in the cigarette is not pleasure but "death," though not the literal, physical death of the organism, but rather the death drive.⁸⁴ Koons is never more erotic than in his bronze aqualungs, an image of frozen breath and stilled biological process, transformed into a powerfully fetishistic object. Shopping, like smoking, is a compulsive activity, a pleasureless pleasure which is always disappointing in its consummation since it is not in fact aimed at consummation, but which is nonetheless – precisely because it is not aimed at fulfilment – an ecstatic, "sublime" practice.

Damien Hirst thus does not turn Koons's work to a more morbid end: Koons is already entirely morbid. Hirst's transposition just reiterates what signifies on the level of form in Koons on the level of content, "literalising" it. Although it is no longer commodities but suspended bodies we find in Hirst's vitrines, nonetheless they still cleave to the modes of display and identification which emerge from Koons's exploration of consumer desire. It is the same subject of this desire which is solicited by Hirst's vitrines.

Indeed, although through the last chapters I have been looking at the shark as an emblem of the anxious social relations and forms of domination of capitalism, we must remember that, based around a commodity form, consumption is itself a part of this. The subject of consumption is not separate from the subject of production. The exchange relation of the commodity, though it cloaks the relationship between these two experiences, actually exists as a relationship between these two dimensions of life. When we shop, to whatever extent we put this out of our consciousness, we are nonetheless exchanging

⁸² Freud, "Pleasure Principle," 50.

⁸³ Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (London: Picador, 1995).

⁸⁴ Even if such a literal death may be the result of smoking, this is a secondary effect or a merely instrumental mechanism in relation to the purpose of the "death drive" as I am discussing it here.

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Fig. 102: Reebok advertisement, Liverpool Street Station, London, June 2008. Photo Luke White.

labour. This is a part of the morbid pleasure of shopping, the game of spending our labour power, spending the financial self that we have built up. It is the alienating pleasure of the *corps morcelé* which seduces us into spending.

In its history, the shark, a token of this nexus, has thus frequently been imagined in terms of consumption as well as of production. Sharks are, after all, the ultimate “consumers.” The “shark” enters the English language on display in the Red Lion, a site of leisure and spectacle, where, even as it is an otherworldly portent of the marvellous, it is also cut up and portioned out to be eaten “for dainty” – quite literally consumed.

In the case of Hirst’s shark, Saatchi is one figure through whom this ambivalence of the shark as a matter of both exploitation and consumption (accumulation and expenditure) has been imagined. The shark rapidly came to “represent” those associated with it (just as Copley’s patron Watson finds himself symbolically equated with a shark). Hirst as an artist is often imagined in terms of the new entrepreneurial spirit of the eighties and nineties, swimming his way to the top of the artistic food chain through self-promotion.⁸⁵ The shark became for many a “portrait” of its owner, an emblem of what Saatchi stands for, a ruthless advertising executive who pioneered a brand of amoral, sensationalist advertising for postmodern capitalism.⁸⁶ These images of Hirst and Saatchi as sharks speak of a larger figure for the eighties “yuppie” and the free-market ideology of Thatcher’s neoliberalisation, and for the entire class of arriviste brokers, oligarchs and media tycoons that have been so captivated – or rather captated, in a moment of self-recognition with the shark that holds them in its spell – by Hirst’s image. But the figure of Saatchi as a shark has been unstable. In interview with Jonathan Jones, Jake Chapman calls Saatchi a shark, but when Jones picks up on the metaphor later in the article it is to imagine him as “a gorging consumer of art” – an apex predator cruising the waters of the small East End galleries on Saturday mornings, armed with his cheque book (like Mac the Knife is armed with his hidden blade) and ready to pounce.⁸⁷ The metaphor’s ambiguity speaks of a folding between the capitalist and the consumer in the imaginary of modern capitalism. This folding of position echoes the doubling we have with that other patron of sublime shark-art, Brook Watson, who in Copley’s painting is both capitalist and victim. In both cases, the identifications in the image enfold the capitalist himself within the embrace of a monstrous capital.

⁸⁵ Jones writes of “Hirst’s shark swimming as efficiently as Saatchi himself through the waters of the free market.” Jones, “He’s Gotta Have It.”

⁸⁶ Saatchi’s rise in the advertising industry and his innovative methods are discussed in Ivan Fallon, *The Brothers: The Rise and Rise of Saatchi and Saatchi* (London: Hutchinson, 1988); Hatton and Walker, *Supercollector: A Critique of Charles Saatchi*.

⁸⁷ Jones, “He’s Gotta Have It.”

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Fig. 103: *Bill with Shark*. Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm. Private collection. Image from Damien Hirst, *Beautiful Inside my Head Forever* (London: Sothebys, 2008), 3:12.

Furthermore, if sharks serve as an image of the unsleeping predatory instincts of capitalism, they frequently do so in terms of ravenous consumption. In *Jaws*, though in the greed of the mayor and the business community economic exploitation forms one parallel to the voracity of the shark, Spielberg also sets up the rising consumer culture of the seventies as the other face of voracious capitalism in a series of scenes set on the beaches, under menace of shark attack. Spielberg gives us a riot of vulgar, clashing colour, with everything from beach huts to swimming costumes decked with bold, clashing patterns. These scenes are crammed with carnivalesque, oversized flesh, and Spielberg takes us through a series of sites of consumer spending from the souvenir stand to the video arcade. Spielberg seems to insist that it is the voracity of the desires of consumption themselves which power the violence of late-twentieth-century capital, just as they serve as the motor for his cinematic plot. If, as I've argued earlier, the figure of the shark in the movie thematises questions of the visibility and invisibility of violence in society in terms of the contrast between surface and depth, then this is also played through the contrast of the bright surfaces of over-consumption, undercut by the menace of the violence of shark attack lurking underneath.⁸⁸ It is the commodity itself, after all, which produces the phenomenality by which the labour and social violence of capitalism are made to disappear, which presents us as consuming subjects with a phantasmagorical world which can only be haunted by the forces which animate us.

There is a certain common logic of both representation and subjectivity inserted into the representations of sharks as we might think them more directly through their presentation of capitalist relations, in for example Thomson and Copley, and on the other hand in the way that Hirst's work, drawing on Koons, functions through and gives a body to forms of consumer desire. Underlying both is the commodity form, and what both figure, above all, is a relation in which a violently alienated self recognises itself in the captating figure of the commodity. This commodity always contains within itself a deathly aura since it is in itself an objectification of the violence done to the self as object of capital: what we recognise in the commodity is the fact that we are, already, commodities, even if this is also a recognition charged with a form of desire.

⁸⁸ Antonia Quirke has noted the dramatisation of the contrast between bright surface and lurking danger in the depths in *Jaws*'s depiction of American consumer culture. She tracks the way that paranoia about shark attacks has been repeatedly linked with anxieties about the beach as a site of hedonism and sexual freedom, and, thinking about the way that Spielberg uses an over-saccharine depiction of consumer society – a vision of it just too close to that of its advertising copywriters – to build a tone of anxiety writes: "Here is the full flowering of the particularly American paranoia that the apparent world is only a façade laid over reality." (Quirke, *Jaws*, 24.) She suggests that *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* are further articulations about this paranoia.

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Fig. 104: Stills from *Jaws*: the beach as a scene of riotous and jarring colour and pattern, consumerism and flesh.

Conclusion

Over the last two chapters I have been developing, from the basis of an iconography of the shark over the last centuries, a reading of the phenomenality of Hirst's *Physical Impossibility*. My argument throughout has been to tie this phenomenality of the shark to that of capital itself, both in terms of its violently exploitative economic relations of production and accumulation, and also, as I have come towards the end of my exposition, in terms of consumption. I find in both of these dimensions of capital a common logic of appearance, which involves simultaneously a spectral, phantasmagorical excess of appearance and also a cloaking of "reality." This is not, however, simply to be read in traditional Marxist terms, where capitalist culture throws up an ideological veil of illusion over the conditions of its ("real") economic base. Rather, we must understand such a complex logic of appearance – "spectral" in the Derridean sense that it undoes ontological distinctions such as that between base and superstructure, real violence and false appearance – as itself not something that obscures an underlying truth of capital, but which constitutes one of its fundamental mechanisms. It is the commodity form itself which serves to set this logic of appearance in motion, hiding the human economic relations of capital, in the same moment it dramatises them anew in a spectacular realm of the images of consumption, and in doing so transforms them. It is this fluctuation between the visible and the invisible, concealed and spectacular violence that the figure of the shark has consistently dramatised in Western culture.

The figure of the shark, however, also follows the logic of the spectral or phantasmagorical in another sense: as a monster – the apotheosis of "monstrous" appearance – it "de/monstrates," it makes visible. The shark, as a *revenant*, reveals that which is hidden, and in it the violence of capital shows itself, even within the ideological images which serve to disavow and conjure away such violence. The figure of the shark, in particular as we have it in Hirst's vitrines, I have come to argue, serves to fold back together the shared logics of consumption and production, and to make the latter visible in the former. It images a deathly form of desire in capital, which permeates the processes of production, accumulation and consumption. It provides an image in which the violence of production cloaked in the commodity, aimed as it is at the consuming subject, returns to the surface of a commodified culture. This violence, even as it is aimed at the subject of consumption, as I discover it in Hirst's sculpture, turns out to be grounded in the same desire which capital mobilises in the consumer; the phantasy scene of the commodity is one in which we are consumed in the very moment we consume.

A concept I have briefly brought up several times through this last chapter

is Giorgio Agamben's "bare life." It helped describe the violence meted out in the most brutal forms of eighteenth-century capital, with their reduction of people to the zero degree of humanity – to a "bare life" which nonetheless served as the vanishing point which grounded modern conceptions of political and economic equality. The body of the slave, as such a ground for the political and economic reality of modern life, held a certain fascination for eighteenth-century culture, and as we see it in Copley's painting and Thomson's poem, returns a certain ecstatic mirror image of the self within the circuits of an already globalising imperial capitalism. Does such a concept also, however, help understand a viewer's relation to Hirst's work, and to the morbidised bodies that he opens out for our inspection? It seems to me that the extent to which a "bare life" is registered in his work serves to highlight both the changes in capitalism over the intervening centuries, and also its continuity. In the West, at least, slavery and servitude of the type at stake in Thomson and Copley are no longer a legitimate part of our society, though capital is nonetheless, in the former Third World, still posited on the submission of populations to conditions just as exploitative. There are, however, developing forms of "bare life" at the centre of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western life which we can trace at the core of Hirst's sculpture, too, however much these are ameliorated, less obviously violent forms. Following Foucault, Agamben traces how the modern state depends on fostering the "biopower" of its population. Its legitimacy slowly turns from the right of the sovereign to domination over their subjects, towards a right grounded in the pastorship and care of those subjects, conceived in terms of their collective and "bare" vital capacities. Capital, too, in its economic development has followed such a trajectory, at the very least in the West, valuing its mass of subjects for their power to consume as well as to produce. Within such a developing modernity, the subject of the late-capitalist State finds their desires and their body ever more the object of power's calculations and manipulations, both in the political and economic spheres. Hirst's sculptures place us regularly within the complex of the sites of these calculations: the hospital – which Agamben counts a key institution of modern biopower – where the body becomes an object of scientific manipulation⁸⁹;

89 Thought in this way, Hirst's suspended bodies in their hyper-technological vitrines form an image of the "overcomatose body" which Agamben discusses at length and which serves in his account as a striking image of the nature of "bare life" in the Welfare State. Agamben's "overcomatose body" is brought up to discuss the fact that life and death have become now a matter of bureaucratic decision, since the body can now be kept alive beyond the traditional markers of its death, the cessation of activity in the heart, lungs, and now even the brain, but it also provides a powerful image of the body – of all of our bodies – as subject to the management procedures of the biopower of the state, a state legitimated by its very ability to foster and manage the body itself, which, as an object of the state's calculation becomes in its turn for us an externalised object, over which we have little control. We become everted, and experience ourselves as inert matter at the behest of a larger "system."

the workplace where its labour is extracted; and the marketplace, where its desire forms a resource for the producer of commodities. Hirst's sculptures, miming out the logic of the instrumentalisation of life, serves often to equate these different realms, recognising a single aesthetic surface which they present their subjects, and finding a similarly moribund body – become the object of manipulation rather than subject of desire – in each locus.⁹⁰

My account of the commodity has attempted to suggest that as well as a terrifying image, there is also a masochistic, deathly pleasure in this (mis) recognition of ourselves within the circuits of biopower; the misrecognition of the self in such an alienated but eroticised body is one of the mechanisms by which such power keeps its grip over us. I've hoped to lead us to the point where we can see that the commodity, too, involves what Wolfgang Haug calls a "technocracy of sensuality"⁹¹ – in which advertising, branding, market research, high-street monopolies, media representation and the like play their part, holding us within their circuits of control. Here, desire, libido, which Freud imagined on an economic model, itself becomes something rather like a "bare life" which can be calculated and managed in the name of an enhancement of such an asset to the system.⁹² This solicitation and management of a desiring economy based on a narcissistic tendency in the modern subject – deathly, oceanic, ecstatic, sublime – is the key to the phantasy, with which I started this chapter, of the body in the global space of Neoliberal capital from which Hirst's *Physical Impossibility* is produced and through which it addresses its viewers.

90 For example, Hirst's "spot" paintings, talking the bright, graphic language of advertising, take the name of pharmaceuticals, conflating medicine and advertising.

91 Haug, *Commodity Aesthetics*, 17.

92 One of the immediate objections to the way I have been putting this is that such a "system" is not nearly as "organised" or controlled as such an account may imply. Hence, for example, Scott Lash and Celia Lury write of a "disorganised capitalism." (Lash and Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 203.) However, nonetheless, what emerges from the "liberal" disorganisation, is nonetheless an emergent structured and systematic whole, in which governments and the like intervene "managerially," and the form of which is at least partially regulated by both those major companies with the clout to structure the market in their own interests, and by both local and global governmental bodies. Within such giant structures, whatever degree of "disorganisation" they may involve, the experience of the individual is nonetheless one of inhabiting and being moulded by a "given" structure.

Conclusion

The Hirstean Sublime as Aesthetic of Capital – A Summary of the Work.

Throughout this dissertation I have pursued, in the proposition of a “Hirstean sublime,” an aesthetic of a historically recurrent imperialist capitalism and its commodified products. This sublime, forged in the repression of the antagonisms of our society, has served as a form of capital’s ideological self-depiction, but also as a mode of representation through which, even as it is projected outwards, the traumatic experience of capital is registered. Such a sublime has become a structuring aesthetic modality of the modern subject, an *inconscient esthétique* which determines our sensibilities, the forms through which we apprehend our realities, and which works its way to the core of our cultural phantasies, pleasures and desires. It is a mode profoundly in harmony with the discursive, monetary, and libidinal economies of capital – though harmony is a peculiar word to use to describe either capitalism or the sublime: they are in harmony, that is, in their disharmony. The two share a fundamental rivenness, with the sublime having been repeatedly articulated in terms of its contradictory nature, at once pleasure and pain: Dennis’s “delightful Horrour” and “terrible joy”¹ which became in Burke a “tranquillity tinged with terror”² and gave rise to Kant’s “negative pleasure” (*negative Lust*) which marks the conflict that splits the faculties within the subject, and the subject from its world.³ The sublime echoes a conflictuality in the commodity form itself, the subjects of capital (mis)recognising themselves in its products through a phantasy scene folding together labour and consumption, desire and violence. It is this phantasy scene, with its phenomenality of phantasmagorically pulsating absence and presence – the absent presence of spectral capital as sublime object of desire, neither properly material nor ideal, here nor there – which Hirst’s sculptures, at their best, solicit in us.

I started my pursuit of the Hirstean sublime and its exchanges with capital

1 Dennis, cited in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, vol. 1996 (London: Fontana, 1996), 449. These phrases come from Dennis’s account of his 1688 crossing of the Alps, a foundational document within the modern history of the sublime. Dennis finds in this experience a mysteriously contradictory but overwhelmingly ecstatic pleasure around which his poetics of the sublime will go on to be based. Dennis writes of the Alps that he had “walk’d upon the very brink in a literal sense of Destruction [...] The sense of all this produced in me [...] a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled.”

2 Burke, *Enquiry*, Part 4, Sect. 7 (“Exercise Necessary for the Finer Organs”), 165.

3 Kant, *Kritik Der Urteilkraft*. §23.

through an analysis of the logic which emerges from Lyotard's essays on the sublime in *The Inhuman*. Rather than an aesthetic of the avant-garde's resistance to the homogenising logic of capital, these revealed a complex discursive temporality in which capitalism's New and the avant-garde's sublime Now are mutually constituting moments. Capital is not so much a monad which will swallow everything, but a machine, the destructive powers of which feed on the probabilistic management of risk in an alternating movement of the opening and closing of the event. Lyotard's essay presents us with the problem that, in spite of the way that the sublime is frequently imagined as transcending the banal order of commodified culture, "there is something of the sublime in capitalist economy."⁴ The sublime is the aesthetic category through which capital's imaginary is formed, just as the sublime is formed in the capitalist imaginary. The rest of the dissertation pursues this insight in a rather more empirical and historical manner, testing it against the evidence of a cultural history of the capitalist sublime.

In this task, it is in particular to the early eighteenth century that I have been drawn – a moment in which the discourse on the sublime was reaching a new level of importance in Western thought (especially in Britain) alongside the appearance of the institutions of modern capitalism and the social transformations these were wreaking, and the resulting transformation-through-commodification of culture. My discussions of Pope and Cibber find the sublime at work in the "Grub Street" literary industry, fostering the replacement of a Neoclassical poetic of form with a culture based on the technics of affect, a culture in which we meet a series of uncanny prefigurations of Hirst's present-day practice. This shift is a matter, as Joan DeJean suggests, of the demographic spread of cultural consumption, and also of the commercial imperatives underlying this.⁵ It is the shift which Foucault describes, culminating in Gothic "tales of terror" and Sadean fiction, where literature is no longer autonomously concerned with its own form, but is now chained to the heteronomy of producing (non-literary) affects. This production is in turn at the service of an economic imperative to compel and to transport, which I identify as a modern, commercial form of Longinianism.⁶

4 Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 105.

5 DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*.

6 Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 60-3. Foucault writes that the languages of the Gothic "tale of terror" and of Sade "are constantly drawn out of themselves by the overwhelming, the unspeakable, by thrills, stupefaction, ecstasy, dumbness, pure violence, wordless gestures, and [...] are calculated with the greatest economy and precision to produce effects (so that they make themselves as transparent as possible at this limit of language to which they hurry, erasing themselves in their writing for the exclusive sovereignty of that

Alexander Pope, as a social and cultural satirist, attacks this commercialised Longinianism in his *Peri Bathous* and the *Dunciad*, in a terrifying vision of the irresistibly de-forming and spectralising powers of capital, where all order, truth, value and form is being dissolved in the omnivorous consumption of reality by capital. In Pope, just as in Lyotard, capital appears as an unstoppable “monad in expansion.” Though Pope sets a Neoclassical sublimity against this commodifying and banalising culture of dulness and bathos, the opposition is unstable, just as with Lyotard, and Pope’s dulness – in a rapturous vision – takes on the properties which would soon become canonically those of the sublime object: scale, power, formlessness, dynamism, terror, the defeat of the powers of the human imagination. In Pope, there is (already) “something of the sublime” in the capitalist cultural economy. This ambivalent reaction appears, in the light of Chapters 6 and 7, as a matter of the peculiar folding-over of desire and exploitation in the commodity form, the contradictory core of the sublime’s “negative pleasure.”

Examining Cibber – as a precursor of Hirst – has given me a somewhat different angle on these phenomena. Through Cibber I gain an intimate glimpse of the workings of such a commercial sublime within its subject. The sublime at once bars its subject from the ideal position of full speech, yet also gives that subject a series of resources through which it creates a place – however compromised – in the world. The sublime we thus come up against in Cibber and Hirst is approached through a complex of strategies of irony, appropriation, and parody which map out a subjective space between the poles of the rise to the sublime and the fall into the ridiculous.

The problem of bathos has thus permeated this dissertation, dogging as it does culture’s attempts at the sublime. The sublime is more a matter of an impossible ideal than something ever instantiated. It is an imperative term,

which they wish to say and which lies outside of words)” (60-1) Literature, with the eighteenth century is thus opened up into a heterogeny: writing of the novel of terror, Foucault claims that “novels of this type were not meant to be read at the level of their writing or in the specific dimensions of their language; they wished to be read for the things they recounted, for this emotion, fear, horror, or pity which words were charged to communicate [...]. Language [...] was required to transmit an event to its docile and terrorised reader, to be nothing but the neutral element of pathos” (63). For my own purposes, I need only add to Foucault’s argument the importance of money – the imperative of selling the novel – within this new discursive economy of literature. The heteronomy of language in relation to affect is also, as Pope already feared, a heteronomy in relation to the market. For Foucault this change mirrors a profound change in the nature of literature. The text is no longer produced to ward off death by being repeated forever (as with the Homeric epic) but rather, takes its place as a fleeting production requiring a barrage of novelty to fill the gap which opens onto the terrible nothingness of death and the cessation of language. Such a temporality of literary production, its orientation to an open, uncertain future, rather than the same of an eternal recurrence is, of course, the condition of modernity. But it also marks the capitalist literary economy of “novelty” which Lyotard describes.

rather than a descriptive one.⁷ The practices of the sublime always involve falling short, in their merely “negative” presentation of the unrepresentable. There is thus always something a little pompous, absurd, something untenable about the presentation of the sublime in art. It requires from its audience a certain self-deception.⁸ It always threatens a plunge into bathos, which is probably the most normal outcome of the cultural experiences which circle the discourse of the sublime.⁹ Artists such as Cibber and Hirst, who are wedded to the sublime but always denied it, and whose cultural pretensions to provide something “more” are always exposed by their obvious motivation within the market, are particularly prone to the fall into bathos. It is particularly a problem for the artist who sets about, motivated by the market, setting up a technique for manufacturing the sublime, founded as that discourse is on the production of a discursive and affective excess beyond already-instituted systems of signification. The need to manufacture the sublime is an entirely contradictory and paradoxical imperative, though nonetheless a restlessly productive one. Burke, too, is a part of this apparatus, his book setting out to know the bases of sublime experience in order to ensure its more certain production. His reduction of the sublime to physiological and psychological mechanism was mocked by Richard Payne Knight, who declared that whatever “astonishment” and “terror” he might feel at the sight of Burke himself striding down St. James’s without his breeches and armed with a blunderbuss, he would scarcely call the sight sublime!¹⁰

The final part of the dissertation turned to Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility*, tracing its place within the history of the recurrent motif of the shark within modern Western culture. I build on an insight developed in my first “Interlude” that the “natural” sublime is a displacement of properly *social* anxieties to argue that the shark, as the embodiment *par excellence* of counterpurposive, monstrous nature serves as an image of the counterpurposiveness of the second nature of capital itself. The shark is the “inhuman” image of the all-devouring “monad in

7 It is more a matter of the command “be sublime!” (or alternatively, “give me the sublime!” “know the sublime!” or “experience the sublime!”) than the statement “this (which we already have) is sublime.” Even such claims have buried within them the demand for, or promise of, a repetition.

8 In Kantian terms, a “subreption.” Kant, *Kritik Der Urteilskraft*, §27. (The Latinate term *Subreption* is used in the original German text.)

9 See for example Barbara Penner’s work on romance tourism, which discusses disappointment in honeymooning couples in their encounters with Niagara Falls. Penner is astute in understanding the centrality of expectation rather than fulfilment in such cultural encounters. Barbara Penner, “Land of Love: Romance Tourism in North America,” *Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place*, eds. D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 207-26.

10 Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 2nd. ed, (London, 1805), 377.

expansion.” I trace in representations of the shark a reiterated phenomenality, fluctuating between absence and presence, which mimes out that of capital, too, and its cloaked social violence, which returns in distorted, spectacular forms within the phantasmagoria of the commodity. Hirst’s shark elicits in its viewers a complex and ambivalent phantasy scene which maps them into the circuits of capital, both as majesterial subjects of commodity consumption, yet also as mere objects for manipulation by the inhuman agency of capital. In this, it restages an ambivalence which is central within our complex relation to, desire for, and self-(mis)identification with the commodity.

Significance and Limits of the Work

One of the key stakes in my account of the Hirstean Sublime – its significance beyond the interest of Hirst himself, or discussions about the nature and function of the history of the discourse on the sublime – has been the work of (re-)envisioning capitalism itself, a problem which, certainly from a Marxian perspective (and perhaps irrespective of Marx), is *the* fundamental intellectual task which faces us today, and has faced us, in fact, since the steady rise of capital through the late middle ages and early modernity to become the central institution structuring modern life, and regulating human actions and relations. In many ways (and this is a sobering thought) this places my own work within a tradition stretching back through Lyotard, Marx and even Pope. Capital remains for us, however, profoundly enigmatic, a mystery structuring our experience, which, in spite of the attention of some of the greatest minds over the last centuries, still remains somewhat obscure.¹¹ The difficulty in understanding such a foundational fact of our existence is exacerbated by the very mutability of capital, which over the last thirty-odd years – just as thinkers have been returning to the notion of the sublime – has been subject anew to profound transformations, requiring from us a constant reevaluation of our relation to the intellectual tradition theorising capitalism.¹² In our moment of neoliberal flexible accumulation, the more familiar images of capital – the factory, the industrialist, and so on – seem increasingly alien, and the nature of value, plunging ever more into the realm of appearance, seems to call for

¹¹ I am thinking amongst others of Marx, Simmel, Benjamin, Weber, Braudel, Baudrillard, Lyotard – not to mention a host of more “liberal” thinkers from Smith through Sombart to Keynes... though this body of thought is sparkling and insightful, there is much on which the authors do not agree, and much which remains obscure, which fits the facts badly, and which does not, ultimately, add up. Capital, it seems to me, the obscure and sublime object of desire in our society, seems to mark an irreducible Gordian knot at the heart of our way of being in the world. Mutable and yet always the same, capital eludes us.

¹² The very structure of historical time which entails such a shifting relation to knowledge, itself a product of capitalist modernity, is of course, part of what we must understand. Hence my use of the notions of hauntology, the figural, the afterlife and *Nachträglichkeit*

a profound reimagining. Paradoxically, it is the pre-industrial past of capital which seems to offer us the images and resources in which we can recognise and come to grasp our own experience.¹³

The kind of contribution that my work here might make to an understanding of capital – aside from being a small one with regard to some of the great and original thought which has been done on the topic – is of a very particular kind. My work is not that of an economist or sociologist, nor for that matter an ontologist, and does not claim competence in such fields. Coming instead from the standpoint of a study of “visual culture,” its focus is on a history of the forms of cultural representation of modern society, it does offer a certain testing of established ideas from these fields against historical data, which allows a critical engagement with them, in the light of our current shifting historical context. As a work of visual-cultural history, my work can only trace capitalism as it is represented and registered in cultural images and texts. The danger is that I may thereby be mistaking capital’s self-presentations – its phantasmagorical misrepresentations – for its “true” nature. However, I have a certain mistrust of those spatialising metaphors through which we think representation, which imply that the image is a mere surface or “superstructure” in relation to an economic or social reality or truth that lies “behind” or “underneath” its veil. Late-twentieth-century thought has often emphasised the extent to which logics of representation are in fact a part of the “economic base.” Money itself is a representational form which is caught up within the more general systems of signification which circulate through society and culture, even as representations are caught within and transformed by their forms of economic circulation. This is at the very least implicit in Marx’s account of the commodity, and has been expanded, made more explicit in recent years by writers such as Jean-Joseph Goux, Marc Shell and Jacques Derrida.¹⁴ This representational logic of capitalism has in recent years become more pronounced, as capital itself has become increasingly “informational,” and “immaterial” – as it is increasingly absorbed into electronic systems of communication, and as its products are increasingly themselves signs and images. Getting to grips with capital as a logic of representation as well as an economic “reality” is increasingly important.

A central resource in the understanding of capital which I have drawn

13 As I have been writing this dissertation, one of the things that has kept me fascinated with the images of the early eighteenth century has been the series of news events which seem to signal our plunge back into the milieu of the Whig ascendancy of the Hannoverians: “cash for honours” scandals, “presidential” prime ministers, imperial wars, rocketing national debt, rabid speculation and a series of “bubbles,” along with the rise of a class of “super-rich” financiers, concern about population migration, and the increasing precarisation of labour and the opening of a wealth gap... I can hardly *but* imagine Blair and Brown as latter-day Walpoles.

14 Goux, *Symbolic Economies*; Shell, *Money, Language and Thought*; Derrida, *Specters*.

on is Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. The image of capital's representational world which emerges from my work is of its "spectrality." Capital is neither entirely Ideal or material – even if Pope fears the loss in it of the relation to the Ideal, and if Lyotard fears in it an enchainment of material reality to the iron law of rationality. Capital is a thoroughly perplexing phenomenon, which, after Derrida, seems more a matter of the "haunting" of matter by the intellectual forms of money (and vice versa) than either a purely Idealist or materialist account can admit. It is such a perplexing spectrality in both the forms of value and the world of images which we meet in particular in the accounts of the early eighteenth century, and which seems to be returning in full strength in today's world, and which, I have been arguing, underlies the phenomenality of Hirst's sculptures. This "spectral" world of capitalist appearances has a highly phantasmagorical character. But this is not meant just in the sense that Marx uses the term "phantasmagoria,"¹⁵ to designate an unreal world of images thrown over the top of a now-obscure reality. Rather, such a phantasmagoria involves the return of the phantoms of that which representation otherwise represses. Social reality and its history returns, in a dreamlike – nightmare – form, within the Spectacle of consumer culture. This haunting of the capitalist image marks a tendency to atavism, return and repetition which is at the heart of the *Nachträglichkeit* of capitalist history itself. My work has thus traced "hauntologically" that which haunts capital's imaginary, as it is instantiated in Hirst's work.¹⁶

Another significant stake in this dissertation has been the question of how one writes the history of modern culture. I have sought an innovative historiography of art which ties together present and past, recognising the *nachträglich* relation between the two: the shifting significance of the past in the present, and of the present in the past. In doing so, I eschew more traditional models of the linear unfolding of modern art, from movement to movement, proposing a cultural-historical time of return, reiteration and repetition – a time of culture's haunting. The object of such a history, is, of course, utterly spectral, and so "hauntology" is the mode of history appropriate to capitalist modernity. It is such a haunting which I investigate through Hirst.

The cultural history within which I place Hirst also has a rather different timeframe from the ones which dominate the narratives of contemporary and modern art, as they are instituted, for example, in their museums, or even in critically sophisticated textbooks such as Foster, Krauss, Bois and

15 See Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 1, Sect. 4.

16 To think the sublime in these terms, or to find the sublime at the heart of such a project is not arbitrary. The very vocabulary of the "phantasmagorical" springs from the cultural history of the supernatural, Gothic sublime.

Buchloh's *Art Since 1900*.¹⁷ Such restricted periodisations of modernism (and "postmodernism"), starting usually in the late nineteenth century with the impressionists, serve to disavow the relation of contemporary culture to that of a broadly conceived capitalist modernity, just as they tend to privilege the diachronic, internal relations of a history of art over the synchronic relations of high culture to its wider context. Such narratives seem now highly problematic, and serve little use, at the very least in understanding a contemporary artist such as Hirst, whose work, a part of a culture industry as much as any "avant-garde" or "modernist" movement, would fit very poorly into its narratives. The "modernity" I propose as an alternative interpretative framework can be found already in Pope's anti-modern response to a commercialising proto-industrial world. It is an awareness of the traumatic uprooting of the present world from the continuities of the (imagined) past due to the modernising forces of capital.¹⁸

More particularly, however, the contribution which my dissertation makes to knowledge lies in terms of its intervention into discussions of the sublime and of Damien Hirst. I see my dissertation as providing a certain challenge – or at least a supplement – to theorisations of the sublime which, like Lyotard's essays, propose it as a resistant aesthetic, whose histories can be located within the high-cultural narratives of Romanticism and modernism. My dissertation reveals something of the workings of the notion of the sublime as it is used as an affirmative category in making judgments about artworks. Rather than the high-cultural narratives this process both relies on and in its turn supports, I trace the interchanges between sublimity and the commodification of culture, and propose the sublime as a complexly ambivalent aesthetic, intimately tied to the workings of capitalist culture, and its very logics of production. There has been a certain amount of work which has looked at the sublime as a category at work in various examples of commodified culture.¹⁹ However, my work adds an investigation of the long-term systemic relationship between the sublime and the imperatives of the culture industry.

In tracing this commercial imperative, my dissertation has also turned in particular to the early-eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime. This moment is in itself relatively sidelined within discussions of the sublime, which

17 Hal Foster, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

18 See also Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*. Ankersmit argues that the ruptures of modernity sever a link to the past, constituting our identity in terms of the impossibility of what we are no longer (322-7). This experience of rupture ties together the revolutionary modern with a conservative such as Alexander Pope who is aware of his place in the modern world, and of the impossibility of recovering a lost past, but nonetheless remains wed to that ideal lost world, experiencing modernity as exile.

19 For example, Scott Bukatman's or James Donald's work on the sublime in cinema: Bukatman, "The Artificial Infinite," 254-289; Donald, "Fantastic, Sublime, Popular," 233-51.

generally focus on the Romantic period, or on the relation of this later Romantic thought to modern and contemporary culture, and rarely push themselves back past Kant or Burke. The early eighteenth century, however, is of utmost import in the history of the sublime: it is the period in which the figures of the sublime – its cluster of motifs, affects, themes, tropes, and the like, and the sensibility these fostered and ministered to – emerged in the form in which we recognise them today. Burke and Kant, in this sense are relative latecomers. Histories and theories of the sublime forget the early eighteenth century at the risk of it becoming a historical “unconscious” of the discourse, from which returning “symptoms” emerge. It is precisely the embroilment of early-eighteenth-century thought within the sordid worlds of the political and economic that contemporary theory tends to find an embarrassment, and wishes to sweep under the carpet in the name of a supposedly purer aesthetic realm.

My dissertation also has an original contribution to make to the rather thin scholarship which surrounds Damien Hirst, in spite of his being one of the most significant (if also complicit) contemporary artists. I have sought in this dissertation to find a rather different way of writing about his work from the polemical art-critical debates which have surrounded it. I have brought to Hirst a different set of histories and ways of discussing art in order to explore what it is in his work – however ideologically questionable it may be – that is so compelling. The power of compulsion I identify in it is in part my own, a compulsion I have felt in front of his best works (or after seeing them) quite in spite of what I feel about Hirst himself or the integrity of the mode of art practice which he has taken up. However, the popularity of Hirst’s works – along with all the repeated parodies which mark the extent to which this work has become an icon of our times – testifies to the fact that this is not merely a personal idiosyncrasy on my part, but is itself symptomatic of a larger cultural resonance which the images hold within our cultural imaginary.

Some Final Words on Hirst

In pursuing an understanding of how and why Hirst’s *oeuvre* has, at its best, such a power, and what is involved in this, my work has tended to suspend the rush to moral judgment which criticism has tended to indulge. However, I feel that a final task of this conclusion is to say a little more about where my analysis has left an understanding of Hirst’s work, its efficacy, and its viability as an artistic practice. Hirst remains for me a troubling artist, deeply accommodated to capitalism’s processes and cultural forms. I much prefer artistic projects characterised by intellectual and political integrity, which I can enjoy with an altogether easier conscience. However, Hirst’s work, I have

argued here, articulates the antagonisms and paradoxes of our hypertrophic neoliberal capitalism, precisely because it is itself so completely integrated into its system, and riven itself with its contradictions. Hirst, I have been arguing is the place where the “symptom” of such a system arises most fully, in a way in which it will not in the critics and opponents of that system.

Hirst, then, remains an artist with an ability – however patchy this is – to produce powerful, highly condensed images, iconically memorable, persistently troubling and affecting. They stand as a “dreamwork” of capital, just as Benjamin proposed the commodity in general to be.²⁰ Hirst’s work – the ultimate cultural commodity of our moment – exacerbates such a dreaming. Dreams, of course, are complex things, and just as they loosen the censor of consciousness and allow contents to return to representation, they also serve to keep us asleep, coding and recoding the stimuli that might cause us to waken so that they become reasons to stay dead to the world. The same, thought Benjamin, was true of the collective dreamwork of the commodity. This, it seems to me, is a productive way to understand Hirst.

But what about Hirst’s viability as an artistic subject? Hirst has certainly achieved a certain social viability. His rise from humble origins to fame and fortune – to a country manor house and a string of restaurants, a jet-setting lifestyle, a second home in Mexico, and to the position of cultural entrepreneur – is a modern-day tabloid fairy-tale, full of the myth of equality of opportunity. It speaks a trajectory of aspiration achieved. Hirst’s headline-grabbing artistic procedures, his ironic stances, his self-promotion and clowning self-performance, publicly enacting of the role of “working-class boy made good” (although in his chameleon-like game of class, he seems more the type of the petit-bourgeois than the *ouvrier*: caught between aspiration above and an identification with the popular below, it is traditionally the petit-bourgeois, deprived of clear class identity, who makes masquerade a form of being)²¹ have been finely judged, it would seem from their success, a brilliant piece of speculation on the value of his own counterfeit coin.

Yet Hirst often remains for the press – like Cibber in his day – a socially comic figure, a clownish Dunce who is tolerated to the extent that he is “good for a laugh.” And indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 5, Hirst’s strategy of impersonation and parody leaves him in a double bind, where he remains dispossessed of his own artistic language, and of the position from which his work might speak.

To be sure, within this position of exclusion, which is imposed as much as chosen, there is a certain room for manoeuvre, for self-valorisation, and for

²⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades*.

²¹ See for example Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 229.

an ontological destabilisation of the symbolic structures which one inhabits. However, in Hirst's career, after an incredible creative burst between 1988 and 1992 in which virtually all of Hirst's vocabulary was established – the spots, the cabinets, the vitrines, the animals in formaldehyde, the shark, the flies and butterflies, monochrome paintings, the ping-pong balls suspended on jets of air, the themes of death and decay, medicine, museums and the brashly pop-cultural, the idea of producing works in series and the institution of a "factory" system with which to do this – there seems a certain fumbling, as if Hirst rapidly becomes hampered by his phenomenal success and by the pressure of producing signature products for a system which demands at once the constant shock of novelty, but also the recognisable identity of a product or "brand."²² He becomes, that is, rapidly held within the production of what Lyotard calls the "New" in contradistinction to the sublime "Now."

A sense of feeling trapped often comes into Hirst's own discussions of his works, as his career develops. He develops a litany in which he pits a faith in "art" against the power of money, expressing a desire for something truly – and rather naively – "authentic" which his own procedure, smart and knowing as it is, belies and makes impossible.²³ He ends up, that is, trapped in the contradiction between the two, and in spite of the money (with all the obvious happiness this has brought him, as he has settled from being seemingly a rather troubled young man, with a prodigious and obviously self-destructive appetite for drink, drugs and public self-exposure, to a rather more sane and settled maturity) there remains a certain artistic "lostness" and a lack of satisfaction. I am not entirely sure that his gamble is entirely a desirable one, even on the level of a personal social trajectory.

But I wouldn't want entirely to divide Hirst's work into two, positing

22 See for example Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 93. Hirst says: "I'm in the situation where I'm surrounded by every [...] gallery in the world telling me to shut [...] up and churn it out."

23 See for example, Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, 93. Hirst says "Great art is when you come across an object and you have a fundamental, personal, one-to-one relationship with it, and you understand something that you didn't already understand about what it means to be alive. That's why people with loads of money want to possess it. That's why it's worth so much [...] money. But it isn't. They want to possess it, but they can't." On the following page Hirst says: "I've been caught in the media. It's tempting to shy away from it. But I'm not shying away from it because I think art's better than all that." Further down the page: "I've doubted everything in my [...] life, absolutely everything. Except art. [...] You can do anything with art. It's fundamental to my [...] being. Art's my thing. It's the structure of who I am. And you can't unwind that. Because if you unwind that, you unwind me." There is a poignancy which runs throughout the later half of Hirst's interviews with Gordon Burn, as he wrestles with the effects of fame, financial success and the commodification of his work and his persona on his ability to produce artistically satisfying work, bound as this is with an creative desire with which Hirst's very identity is bound. His repeated appeal to a transcendent power in art – taking one beyond money, the market, the gallery system or the culture of celebrity – reads very much as a defence mechanism.

a “good” initial, creative period and then a long, “stuck” one, as the work is subsumed within the industry it seeded. Even in this later period, a proportion of Hirst’s work escapes the plunge into bathos. Primarily it has been the work which has acceded most to his status as a producer of commodities. It is not those attempts at new “original” ideas, his theatrical and sometimes rather silly gestures, which tend to remain successful, but his works refining the basic ideas of his earlier work into an immaculately staged spectacle of the icy sheen of technological surface, works which combine the sublime with a certain frigid beauty. This is seen in his huge, mirror-surfaced pill cabinets such as the nine-metre long *Standing Alone on the Precipice Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror* (1999-2000), or his scaled up spot paintings (the startling *Idomethane 13-C* [2001]), or the elegant display cases containing gorgeously fragile animal skeletons such as *Where Are We Going? Where Do We Come from? Is there a Reason?* (2004).

But Hirst perhaps only really escapes his double bind – and only temporarily – in the more recent strategy where he “trumps” his commodification in ever more hyperbolic gestures. As Paine noted, “One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again.”²⁴ *For the Love of God* (2007), a cast in platinum of a human skull, covered every inch with premium quality diamonds, was a distinct return to form for Hirst, garnering again the media attention and critical interest which had eluded his work since the late 1990s, and producing once more a genuinely knotty and haunting object. In this, Hirst escalated the whole scale of his enterprise so that the capital involved in it once more does its work as “part of the composition.” It is a work which more emphatically than any other before presents – with incredible literalness – capital as its sublime object of desire, instantiating most clearly the logic of the capitalist sublime which I have been arguing has been at the heart of Hirst’s aesthetic. In this work, Hirst once more mobilised the devices which made the shark such a perplexing object. Like the shark, the skull was always-already a media image, but an image with which it did not coincide in the flesh – an excessively material Thing, as well as something excessively unreal. It played its sensuous materiality – the fascinating aesthetic sparkle of its diamond-coated surface – against the intellectual fact of its fifty-million-pound price-tag, staging in exacerbated form the paradoxical nature of the commodity as, in the words of Marx, “*ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*”²⁵: at once intangible value and also solid

24 Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* [1794-5], in *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, 1995), 751 cited in Kirwan, *Sublimity*, 175, note 5.

25 Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 1, Sect. 4. The English translation given is rather inadequate: “something transcendent.” Marx writes, more literally: “a sensible supersensible thing.” His wording is much more Kantian than his translator’s.

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Fig. 105: *Where are We Going? Where Do We Come From? Is there a Reason?* 2000-4, detail.

stuff. It brings to visibility, even more clearly than *Physical Impossibility* did, the spectrality at the core of the commodity form itself. It stages a mismatch between the imagination and the understanding, a clashing of the faculties, in the material presentation of the immaterial which is also, of course, that which Kant discovers at the heart of the sublime, just as it is what Marx finds in the principle of the commodity. (It says much about the changes in the world of art that what Hirst managed to conjure in 1991 with the mere sum of £70,000 – the sum spent on the shark – now takes £13 million of working capital to enact!)

Hirst's skull, an artwork (in)famously causing a "blip" on the world diamond market, also, just as I have proposed the shark before it did, is a work which activates a phantasy scene of consumption and the power of the commodity which interpellates its subject within the sublime – and terrible – spaces of capital's flows of money, labour and goods. The ultimate commodity art, it is perched on the edge of the ridiculously vulgar. Yet there is also a darkness within its seductively glittering surfaces, and, haunted by the violent exploitativeness of the diamond trade which produced it, the face it puts to capital is, appropriately enough that of death itself, its glittering surfaces resembling those of a hyper-technological weapon as much as a piece of jewellery.

Such a dark but seductive vision of capital, relying on the sublime as a central core of capital's aesthetic technology, I have been arguing, is structural throughout Hirst's work. It does not inhere at the level of its "intent," but haunts it as the condition with which Hirst has had to grapple as an artistic subject in the spectacular and highly capitalised world of contemporary art. Such a vision, in fact, has permanently haunted the discourse of the sublime.

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Fig. 106: *School: The Archaeology of Lost Desires, Comprehending Infinity, and the Search for Knowledge*, 2007. Mixed media (including 30 sheep, one shark, two sides of beef, sausages, two doves, glass, steel, formaldehyde). Dimensions variable. Installation view, Lever House, New York. Collection of Aby Rosen. Image from Flickr, posted by "tomatoncheeze." <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gimmesanity/tags/damienhirst/>>.

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