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The Nature of Our Humanity
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Editor’s Introduction: The Nature of Our Humanity
Lee Ann Elliott Westman
Rutgers University—Camden

The Summer 2017 issue of Interdisciplinary Humanities draws its inspiration from the Humanities Education and Research Association’s 2016 annual conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. The board sent out a call for papers inviting submissions on the theme of “The Nature of Our Humanity.” The call considered New Orleans itself as an example of how the theme may work:

The humanities have always grappled with life’s most important questions and challenges: not only those posed by death, destruction, and loss, but also with the hope and regeneration found in human resiliency and recovery. To cite one example based on our 2016 Conference venue, New Orleans, in order to make sense of the tragedy caused by Hurricane Katrina, the humanistic disciplines especially were called upon to respond to that terrible act of nature. Such qualities, events, and cataclysms existing in nature—as well as nature’s beauty, behavior, and its human and non-human inhabitants and their drives and inclinations—provide a task for which the humanities are profoundly suited. Indeed, the nature of our humanity illuminates our discipline’s multiple forms and complex capabilities.

Conference presentations were encouraged to do the following:

[C]onsider the interaction between humanity and nature; loss and recovery; human resiliency; faith; religion, and nature; ecosystems and eco-biological research and their implications for humanity; humanity and essence; human achievement and destruction; the representation and reality of nature in all art forms; nature and nurture—as well as any and all other areas that clarify what it means to be human and how nature plays a role in that elucidation.
The submissions published in this issue of *Interdisciplinary Humanities* grapple engagingly with the conference theme. Matthew Landers’ *Free Will, Ethics, and the Biology of Mind* argues that the traditional concept of free will is challenged by contemporary science. Landers’ work is followed by Gwendolyn Dolske’s work, which argues for the value of another writer’s concept of female virtue. Her article *Wollstonecraft’s Vision of Virtue Realized and Averted: Analyzing Popular Female Protagonists in Young Adult Fiction* sees value in relying on Mary Wollstonecraft’s arguments about virtue to evaluate contemporary young adult fiction.

Kristin Lucas’s *Alice Munro’s “Family Furnishings” and the Vanishing Point of Realism* examines how Munro’s work is both realism but also something much less precise. Helen Clare Taylor’s *Flannery O’Connor and the Films of the Brothers McDonagh* finds significant common themes between O’Connor’s literature and the McDonaghs’ films. Richard Voeltz examines cinema as well with his analysis of film as a historical and cultural touchstone in his work *In Service of Empire and Heart: Dirk Bogarde, Cyprus, and The High Bright Sun* (1965). Finally, Weber Donaldson’s analysis of French literature illustrates important similarities between Michel Houellebecq’s François and Camus’ Meursault in his work *Is François the new Meursault?* Each of these thoughtful submissions considers some aspect of “the nature of our humanity.”

This issue of *Interdisciplinary Humanities* features Lesley Machon’s poem on the challenges of education with *Innovation Consternation*, a poem which asks cogent questions about how we learn and how we teach. Her poem is followed by six book reviews on texts related to the nature of our humanity. The reviews cover texts related to historical objects and ideologies, slavery, and urban spaces.

We are delighted that the works featured in *The Nature of Our Humanity* offer readers an opportunity to consider the 2016 conference theme and reflect *Interdisciplinary Humanities’* commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry.

We invite you to submit your work to upcoming issues of *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. A list of issues, themes, and editors as well as additional information about the upcoming conference and the issues below may be found at HERA’s website: [http://www.h-e-r-a.org](http://www.h-e-r-a.org).
Free Will, Ethics, and the Biology of Mind
Matthew Landers
University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez

Introduction

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the most foundational concept in the western Christian framework is the idea of free will. A strong conceptualization of the ethical importance of free will is absent from many religions of the world. Gods of the polytheistic ancient world, for instance, were continuously interfering with human agency. But Judeo-Christianity, perhaps more than any other religion, is obsessed with the notion that human action must be carried out freely to be ethically grounded. In the encyclical Gaudium et spes, Pope Paul VI cautions his readers: “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. [...] authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man.”

Goodness, or virtue, according to the Second Vatican Council, is a value that cannot be separated from the human capacity for “authentic freedom.” To be good (or evil, for that matter) requires freedom of action. Freedom is not only evidence of the divine mark within humanity, it delineates mankind’s specific kind of agency from that of the rest of creation. Man is a moral being, precisely because he is a free being.

Every social institution in western civilization seems to hinge on the idea of free agency. Enlightenment theorists Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau encouraged us to imagine that societies begin with an agreement between members through an act of consent. In Western societies, we agree to have our “natural freedom” limited by a set of rules that governs our social behavior; the violation of these rules, we understand, results in expulsion from the
group, from society itself. Free will is the linchpin, traditionally, by which social inclusion and social exclusion are theorized and practiced. The idea of free will is so completely common to us, culturally and intellectually, that we simply do not question its existence. The supposed consequences of doing so are frightening to contemplate. Yet, it is my intention, in this essay, to question the traditional conception of free will. In doing so, I will present a case, based in scientific understandings of human biology and neuroscience, that the foundations of our ethical tradition must be reevaluated, even down to the structure of the questions that we ask about human behavior.

**Purpose and the Mind**

Let us begin by asking a deceptively simple question: Why does the human mind exist? Given an opportunity, each of us would likely approach this question differently. The question of “why” is in itself highly interpretable, depending on one’s theoretical background. One may choose to answer the “why” in teleological terms: Namely, what is the intended purpose of the human mind? In most Western Christian traditions, the “why” of the mind is theologically important in establishing a link between man and God and in establishing the dignity of our existence: “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27 NIV)

Man, according to Paul VI’s letter, *Gaudium et spes*, “judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind.”2 The human mind exists as it does because God endowed mankind with an “intellectual nature” that “gently attracts the mind […] to a quest and a love for what is true and good.” It was God’s intention to create mankind with a capacity for “knowing and loving his Creator,”3 and this potential for knowing God is made possible by the very nature of our minds, which are endowed with conscience and granted freedom to direct the intellectual course of our efforts toward the good. Why does the human mind exist? In short, according to Catholic theology, the human mind provides the only adequate mental stage for “contemplation and appreciation” of the Divine. It was designed for that purpose. Love of God, it appears, must be cultivated intellectually, which is to say, freely. Reason, together with that capacity called conscience, provides the context and platform for moral culpability. Mind exists to make us morally liable beings.4

But how do we speak about the “purpose” of mind in evolutionary biology? When a biologist asks, “Why does the human mind exist,” the vestigial “why” pinned to the question examines causality in a very different
way. We are asking what natural processes, what chain of events, led to the occurrence of the human brain and its emergent properties? Considered from one point of view, it is possible to argue that the human brain does seem to serve a purpose. The intricacies of human culture, for example, are only achievable for the hominin neuronal model; however, we cannot assert that culture is the end goal of the human brain. Examined from the standpoint of evolutionary processes, any assertion about purpose or goals naturally supposes a kind of intentionality, or directedness, which is misleading.

To answer why the human mind exists, it is supremely important to understand how adaptation by natural selection works. Put simply, adaptation is a complex natural process that can lead to evolution; yet, evolution is not a directed goal of adaptation. Adaptation occurs when environmental pressures determine which novel gene rearrangements will be passed on successfully to the next generation, in such a manner that the preserved rearrangements persist, over time, because they grant recipient offspring a reproductive advantage. Again, it would be incorrect to claim that reproductive advantage is a goal of adaptation. Natural selection is a blind process. “Survival” is no more the goal of adaptation than heat is the goal of fusion at the sun’s core. Adaptation is simply a consequence of random natural processes. Nothing more, nothing less.

From the standpoint of natural selection, then, the hominin brain exists because its appearance—which was not sudden, but the consequence of a gradual process of adaptive accumulations—provided survival benefits to our ancestors. Our brain, the brain of Homo sapiens, is just one of many models that have existed throughout human evolution. As Jon Kaas notes, over the last six million years, “more than 20 hominin species emerged,” each with a different brain. It was only in the very recent past that the brain of Homo sapiens developed (between 200,000-300,000 years ago). For a time, we even shared the world with a few other Homo species, Homo neanderthalensis, Homo denisova, and Homo floresiensis. Homo neanderthalensis enjoyed a longer evolutionary history than our own (approximately 360,000 years), in fact, and only went extinct about ~30,000 year ago.

Every neuronal model that existed previous to, or concurrent with, ours granted some kind of adaptive advantage within a particular environment, at a particular moment in time. Our model is simply the latest in a series of adaptations to successfully find a niche; it is the result of incremental additions and subtractions at the genetic level, in response to environmental pressures. There is no guarantee that our brain will be the last model. In fact, if our species continues to exist, the environment is guaranteed to change, and the
processes of evolution will continue to alter our brains as new species of hominin emerge.

Biological understandings of the evolution of the human brain represent a new theoretical framework for understanding our own existence. Traditionally, the mind, as a subject, has fallen within the domain of the humanistic disciplines—most traditionally, the subjects of philosophy and theology. Even now, when we (by which I mean Humanists) discuss the mind, we tend to do so in conformity with the traditional subjects of philosophy: namely, those great human capacities that we call Reason and Free Will. The human mind is, we are tempted to say, a work of art, different from the minds of other creatures, whose actions are bounded by the determined limits of instinct; the human mind is the seat of intellectual potential and should be reverenced as such. As Gaudium et spes argues, our dignity, as a species, is somehow linked to our mental capacities for rational thought and freedom. Or as Pico della Mirandola wrote in the 15th century,

Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. 8

This is our tradition in the west. It is also the source of our status quo bias.

Traditional Philosophical Frameworks and the Problem of Authority

If we could put a traditionalist in a room with an evolutionary biologist and ask the two to explain their understandings of morality to each other, we might quickly discover an incongruity of opinion. Perhaps the traditionalist will quote Schopenhauer, who says: “Only insofar as an action has originated from compassion does it have moral worth;” and, moral action is when

[…] another [man] becomes the ultimate end of my will just as, otherwise, I am; and so through this: that I immediately will his well-being and do not will his woe, just as I otherwise immediately will only that of my own. 9

“Moral effort,” the traditionalist might argue, “begins with motives of compassion, moves to the intention of securing another man’s well-being, and ends with the corresponding, freely willed action.”
“You speak of altruism,” the evolutionary biologist might respond, “but the causes of any behavior in a biological organism are never so simply explained by words like motive and will. Many species, in addition to humans, appear to act altruistically. But most of this behavior can be modeled and predicted by variants of kin selection theory. Schopenhauer claims that only actions devoid of egotistical motives can be considered moral, but Hamilton showed that ‘altruistic behavior can be favored by natural selection,’ as a consequence of indirect fitness effects. Morality and will have nothing to do with it. All of our behaviors, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad,’ are products of the same processes of evolution.”

“But what about freedom,” the traditionalist might respond. “Surely you are not suggesting that all human behaviors can be explained by genetics, chemicals in the brain, habit, and evolutionary processes? How can we distinguish between moral and immoral acts, if we deny the freedom to act? We are more than just matter and process.”

“Perhaps we are just matter and process; perhaps we aren’t,” the evolutionary biologist might reply. “But on what authority do we prove either claim? On the ancient authority of the western philosophical/theological tradition, which tells us unequivocally that reason and free will exist? Or do we seek to make claims on the authority of scientifically-produced evidence, no matter what that evidence shows?” And so, the debate often goes.

I have indulged in an act of fiction writing to highlight a question that I believe is absolutely critical for the rest of this discussion: Namely, how much of our thinking about the mind is actually pre-staged in the terms of the discourse that we have inherited as participants of western culture—terms such as Reason and Free Will? This question gets to the heart of intellectual authority. Is there an accepted language, or a prescribed intellectual framework that shapes the way that we approach and examine our own humanity? Does this inherited framework in some way constrain the “why” and “how” of inquiry to a set of traditional considerations? Daniel Dennett poses the difficulty in a slightly different manner, suggesting that there is a “mythology” at play in the western tradition, an inherited intuition that states: “anything that is ‘wired,’ that is mere ‘machinery,’ couldn’t possibly have the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility.” This “intuition” leads us to feel squeamish when the traditional framework is questioned.

In his book on human agency, which he approaches from a Darwinian perspective, Paul Davies argues that philosophers, like theologians, tend to “endorse […] default assumptions” about what it means to be human. According to these assumptions, freedom and the capacity for ‘rational’ thought are “constitutive of what we are.”

The Nature of Our Humanity
of human agency are, as matter of historical fact, among the most venerated,” writes Davies.13 But if a branch of science (or even the whole weight of scientific inquiry) draws into question some aspect of these inherited assumptions, scholars in the humanities often have demonstrated an inclination to withdraw into a defensive position. The traditionalist’s tendency, Davies continues, is “to preserve our most venerable concepts by continually integrating and reintegrating them with everything else we believe to be true of the world.”14 This is especially true when scientific knowledge conflicts with our default assumptions about human existence. Every effort is made to conform new, often contradictory information to preexisting frameworks, particularly when the assumptions being challenged are seen as constituent pieces of the traditional view. Davies describes this reaction as “conservative” and/or “imperialist,” depending on the strength of the conceptual entrenchment of the assumptions and the severity of the resulting counter-attack. The fabric of intellectual authority threatens to unravel before our eyes, and with it any confidence that we enjoy as inheritors of these traditional understandings of human nature.

The question of authority is an important one. So much of what we consider to be given about reason and free will only appears so because of the authority that we tend to attribute to our intellectual patrimony—in particular, those ideas that have filtered down to us from the western Judeo-Christian tradition. But the modern sciences have given us cause to question that authority and the ideas that undergird it. Ultimately, many of these central ideas, so faithfully upheld by generations of thinkers, will yield to fundamentally new understandings. Many, like the dualist notion of an embodied soul, already have.

As with any overturning, however, there will be opposition. How do we begin to conceptualize the nature, or the meaning of our existence within a radically divergent framework? For starters, questions about meaning demonstrate how deeply entrenched we are. They reveal the extent to which our intellectual tradition guides the very construction of our investigation. We field the questions that we do, ask questions the way that we ask, because the western tradition—which is, in many fundamental ways, the product of a religious autocracy—favors certain lines of inquiry: questions about significance, purpose, and cause. These epistemological anchors lead us to theorize about other values: virtue, justice, equity, and freedom, among others. To alter this chain of thinking threatens to undermine these highly venerated concepts. But in expressing this concern, we recognize a conservative mindset interfering with our search for knowledge. We must ask ourselves, and it is imperative that we respond honestly: Is our goal to understand human
existence accurately? Or is the goal to preserve, and continue to privilege, a way of thinking that we believe has a “right” and “dominion over all other concepts and all methods of inquiry,” have we Humanists been acting as conceptual imperialists, as Davies suggests? 

Neurobiological Frameworks and Consciousness as an Artifact

What if to be human is to be one consequence of a long sequence of unintentionally occurring material processes? How do we then re-interpret embodiment, or morality? What if the body is not the traditional seat of the soul, or the seat of reason and servant of the will? What if mind is simply part of the biological body, the brain, operating under the same biological constraints of genetics, chemistry, and environment as every other organ? Does this really represent such an unthinkable reality? Does this mean that our behavior is completely determined, reducible to material causes, and thus beyond ethical considerations? Certainly, from the standpoint of ethical philosophy, some degree of freedom, or undetermined agency, is required as a precondition for both ethical consideration and ethical behavior. As Foucault declared shortly before his death in 1984:

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.

But we must consider what we know about the mind right now. And in doing so, we should first try to abandon terms like free will and reason, which I think complicate our discussion by introducing reductive frameworks and biases. In the words of neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, “classic discussions” about reason and will—which make use of enigmatic words like compatibilist and incompatibilist—feel “arcane,” when viewed in the same light as modern scientific evidence. So, we will not rely on traditional philosophic terminology in the following discussion.

Firstly, the brain is divided into hemispheres and regions; it seems to function modularly, with a high level of integration taking place through many neural pathways. But cognition itself is really just a complicated series of mental processes taking place in a spatially-distributed, temporally- and
interpretively-hierarchical manner. For example, human visual perception follows a pathway that takes it from the optic nerves, to the visual cortex in the occipital lobe of the cerebral cortex, located in the back of the skull. Here information is processed according to content and distributed along two different streams. This distribution makes possible specialized uses of the information by other regions of the brain. First-level processed information is relayed electro-chemically to other areas of the brain, along various pathways, where it will be processed further and “interpreted,” making possible a host of perception-based actions, from simple reflex movement, to more abstract forms of cognition.

The entire process has been mapped visually, in real-time, using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technologies. What these maps reveal is that what we generally think of as instantaneous visual perception actually occurs spatio-temporally across various regions of the brain. Importantly, each step of this process takes time to complete, as information streams into various regions of the brain. Information is categorized and distributed to specialized centers around the brain, where function-based computations are made and/or interpretations are generated. And, of course, we are unaware that any of this is occurring because it happens outside of conscious awareness. We only become aware of the work that the brain has done after the fact, once the information has been processed in multiple areas of the brain and presented to the prefrontal lobe, in a form that we call conscious awareness.

In fact, ongoing research demonstrates that what we call human consciousness occurs on a lag of about 100 milliseconds behind the present. The unconscious mind is responsible for “observing,” processing, and interpreting sensory information; it then presents the product of this work anachronistically in a reconstructed form that we call awareness. Our mental awareness of the present, which we think we are experiencing in real-time, is a symptomatic illusion of a process that David Eagleman calls postdiction. Everything that the unconscious mind presents to our conscious awareness is a mental reconstruction of a past that occurred 100 milliseconds before we became aware of it.

The bizarre, and perhaps troubling thing about all of this is that a significant amount of sensory information never makes it into our awareness. Furthermore, the information that does arrive in awareness is altered along the way, without our knowing. Sensory perception is only one example, of course. Research in neurobiology has shown repeatedly that the vast majority of our mental activity occurs without ever entering awareness, taking place at the level
of unconscious automation. This should not be a surprise. Leonard Mlodinow writes, the unconscious tier of our brain
devolved early in our evolution, to deal with the basic necessities of function and survival, sensing and safely responding to the external world. It is the standard infrastructure in all vertebrate brains, while consciousness can be considered an optional feature. In fact, while most nonhuman species of animals can and do survive with little or no capacity for conscious symbolic thought, no animal can exist without an unconscious.23

It is the unconscious tier of the mind that carries most of the weight of mental activity. Mlodinow goes on to explain why this is important: “the human sensory system sends the brain about eleven million bits of information each second. [...] The actual amount of information that we can handle [consciously] has been estimated to be somewhere between sixteen and fifty bits per second.”24 If, then, our brains had no way to process that amount of information before it reached awareness, our conscious minds would be so overwhelmed with sensory information that we would find performing even the slightest mental tasks nearly impossible. “Evolution,” Mlodinow continues, “has provided us with an unconscious mind because our unconscious is what allows us to survive in a world requiring such massive information intake and processing.”25 Processing such massive amounts of information must be streamlined in some way, if for no other reason than to preserve resources. The brain is an expensive organ to operate, consuming more energy than any other organ, except the heart.26 Not surprisingly, natural selection has given us a very efficient way to process gluts of sensory information: low-level automation. Unfortunately, this means that our neuronal model sacrifices conscious control for efficiency. To put a finer point on the claim, we never had much control over this information in the first place. Our brains are simply not wired in a way to provide a high degree of executive control over the information that enters through our senses.27

As a result, we perceive the world post hoc, as an artifact of unconscious mental processing. Our conscious mind is a higher-level capacity, a layer that exists on top of a much older, much more critical neural tier. One must remember that the human brain, including our capacity for a conscious thought, evolved as an environmental adaptation. Consciousness has obvious advantages, in biological terms, but the awareness that we have of our environment is far from perfect. Survival does not necessitate that our mental
representation of the world be absolutely accurate. We have no way of knowing if the simulacrum presented to our conscious mind is accurate. Often, it simply is not a true representation. Mlodinow concludes, “We accept the visions concocted by our unconscious minds without question, and without realizing that they are only an interpretation […], but not one that is in all cases the most accurate picture possible.”

Scales of Observation, Awareness, and Freedom

In what way does this information impact our discussion about agency? Research in neurobiology has all but proven that there is no split between the material brain and the mind. There is only brain, only matter. In addition, neurobiological research has disproven the idea that we each have a central control module called reason directing our thoughts and behavior. There is no little man sitting at a driver’s seat in the brain directing cognition, because there is no single driver’s seat. Cognition is a multi-tiered aggregation of distributed, modular processes, the majority of which—even much of the “decision-making”—we are completely unaware. The question then becomes, in what way are we actually in control, if so much of our mental activity is locked away from conscious awareness? Furthermore, what is the real value of free agency, if we, that part of us that does the deciding, are not even aware of the ways that our unconscious mind is shaping and re-presenting the external world to the conscious mind? If our perception of the world is so tightly constrained and controlled by the unconscious mind, how free can we claim to be? To quote neuroscientist, Michael Gazzaniga, we can ask the question differently: “What on earth do humans want to be free from.” Do we really want to be free from our unconscious mind? Is this even possible? Likely, the answer is “no.” It appears that we are not free (at least, not in a traditional sense); yet, quite paradoxically, the lack of freedom at one cognitive scale makes some limited kind of freedom possible at another.

Perhaps at this point you are thinking, “But I know that I am free. I am aware of my freedom each time I make a decision.” Perhaps this morning you went to a coffee shop. You approached the counter and ordered a large latte. Surely this was a fully conscious and free choice. You wanted a latte and you decided to order it. Part of the ambiguity that arises when we talk about free will comes from the fact that we can only speak about the subjective experience of that limited set of mental processes that emerge within the domain of one’s conscious awareness. Furlong and Santos rightly point out that one of the most universal assumptions we make “about the nature of free will is that we use our actions to achieve our goals and preferences.” However, the
experience of one’s own goals and preferences, as causal factors, occurs at a single scale of observation: namely, within the individual domain of conscious awareness. For most of our biological history, until the invention of technologies that allowed us to peer into the hidden workings of the brain, our subjective experience of consciousness was the only scale of observation available to us. However, the subjective experience of consciousness obscures the reality that cognition takes place across an entire range of cognitive processes, not just within the modality that we call awareness.34

What happens to the idea of free will when we view agency from all the different scales of mental operation, across the full spectrum of processes that take place within our biological brain? I have returned to this idea of scale throughout the essay, because I believe that it is important to recognize that the scale at which one observes any phenomenon acts as an epistemological filter, limiting the kinds of claims that can be made. Every examination is carried out at a particular scale of inquiry. We “zoom in” to consider a level of minute detail, or we “zoom out” to examine a wider perspective. The problem for most investigators is that we fail to recognize that the scale at which an inquiry is conducted directly affects the degree of certainty that we can have about specific claims. For example, I will never learn much about baseball through a detailed examination of baseball bats; I may learn a great deal about the physics of hitting a ball, but to really learn about baseball, as a complex system, I must expand my scale of observation to include a wider view of the general rules of play, offensive and defensive positions, and scoring strategies. This is not to say that a “zoomed-in” scale is less “real” or less reliable than a “zoomed-out” perspective. Baseball bats are an important aspect of the game. If, however, I restrict my inquiry to the scale of baseball bats, I may be led to make false claims about the game. Both detailed, and more general scales of inquiry reveal crucial information about given phenomena, but the conclusions drawn at one scale of inquiry may, in fact, contradict conclusions drawn at all other scales. To understand baseball properly, then, I must move back and forth between the different scales at which the game exists.

Physics provides another exemplar of the principle of scaled inquiry. In the physical universe, there are large bodies in motion, atomic bodies, subatomic objects, and quantum objects, all behaving differently at their respective scales. We know that any complete and accurate model of the universe (a “theory of everything”) must describe every physical interaction in the universe, at every scale in which physical interactions exist, since the properties of those interactions can be radically different at each of the scales. One cannot provide an accurate description of the reality of the physical universe solely from the scale of inquiry of planetary bodies, as Newton once thought.
Neither can one form an accurate model based solely on the properties of interaction at the quantum scale. If one seeks to formulate an accurate “theory of everything,” one must find a way to combine the various scales of inquiry. Only in this manner can one hope to unite the properties of every scale of physical interaction into one descriptive model.

I would argue that the examination of life itself, what it means to “be,” must take place in the same cross-scaling manner, lest we mistake one scale of our “be”-ing as the REAL. The truth of human existence, to use a crude phrase, is rather elusive. It cannot be found at only one scale of that existence. To describe any phenomenon properly, we must aim to sum the total of all the scales of existence operating at once—including those scales of existence that we may not have discovered yet.

So, when we speak of consciousness, we are referring to mental activity at a very limited scale of observation: Only that mental activity of which we are aware. This is a bit of a tautology, but, as we have said, the majority of our mental activities and processes take place at different (previously unobservable) scales: hemispherical, regional, neuronal, biochemical. The brain, and thus thought and behavior, are subject to a host of causal factors: genetic, epigenetic, environmental, pathological. Surprisingly, in the last few decades, researchers have shown that even energy depletion (lowered levels of glucose in the brain) reduces our mental capacity for self-control and rational thought in dramatic, mostly invisible, ways. In short, what we have come to regard as conscious awareness is, in reality, mostly unawareness of the mental activities that produce human behavior.

To provide a final example for the reader’s consideration, Tversky and Kahneman have written extensively about the many kinds of evaluational problems that emerge from the “decision-maker’s conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice.” They refer to the cognitive space (and conditions) under which a decision is made as a “decision frame,” arguing that there is strong causal relationship between the informational frame and the perspective of the decision-maker. Building on the groundbreaking studies of Tversky and Kahneman, research in social psychology supports the claim that decision-making can be influenced in profound ways simply by altering the way that information is framed, either positively or negatively. Ongoing studies reveal that this framing effect has an evolutionary history, which can be observed in the decision-making behavior of other primates, including monkeys. Furlong and Santos observe that a significant number of our “biases may be evolutionarily old tendencies, ones that natural selection shaped into unconscious cognitive mechanisms over
many millions of years.” Furthermore, they maintain: “Evolved tendencies of this sort tend to be rather tricky to override.”

Evidence is mounting to suggest that the framing effect bias is deeply rooted in our phylogenetic history and not, therefore, a consequence of free, conscious cognitive processes. In fact, framing bias appears to be a robust, unconscious phenomenon that can be bypassed consciously only with significant effort. Adding weight to this claim, a recent paper by Xiaoxue Gao (et al.) shows that a handful of genes contribute to the determination of one’s susceptibility to framing effects, including the DDC gene, which “encodes DDC, an enzyme that catalyzes the decarboxylation of 5-hydroxytryptophan to serotonin and L-DOPA to dopamine.” Of course, both serotonin and dopamine work to regulate pathways that “play critical roles in emotional processing.” Gao et al. explains: the effects of these genes “are not expressed directly at the level of behavior, but are mediated by their effects on brain regions responsible for specific cognitive and emotional processes.”

Put simply, the extent to which one is emotionally susceptible to framing effect bias largely is determined by a suite of genetic and biochemical factors that have nothing to do with conscious deliberation, or free agency.

So far, most scientific studies have concentrated on demonstrating that information framing influences “risk decisions;” but researchers are beginning to take an interest in exploring how “information descriptions can affect moral decision making” as well. For example, making use of the traditional “trolley problem” in ethics, Cao et al. have shown that moral decisions can be influenced by “framing descriptions.” Participants in their study tended to make one type of decision (utilitarian) when the trolley problem was framed positively—with regard to risk—and a different type of decision (intuitionist) when the problem was framed negatively. That ethical decision-making can be affected so easily by information framing has far-reaching implications.

Conclusion

Why, then, do I feel that I am free and in command of my decisions? Well, in a very limited sense, I am free. At the scale of awareness, the conscious mind appears to choose between available options constantly. Surely, for some, this is the essence of free will. Yet, the subjective experience of our agency occurs within a simulacrum. Our brains are constructing awareness behind our figurative backs, presenting options to the conscious mind in such a manner that we always “experience” the conscious mind doing the entirety of the work. Awareness is thus a reductive modality; and, in general, we have no view of what our brains are doing beyond that veil.
The real problem for traditionalists is that science has, in the last decades, expanded our perspective, our scale of inquiry, about the mind. Like Galileo observing the sky with his telescope, we now observe mental phenomena at scales that previously evaded us. If, then, one tries to prove the existence of free will by grounding one's argument in the subjective experience of one's own personal agency, as some philosophers have, history suggests that such a narrow field of observation might provide a misleading benchmark for analysis. To address our lingering questions about free will and moral culpability, we must look well beyond the minute scale of awareness.

Only now are we beginning to understand the contexts of our new reality. We are not creatures endowed with *Reason* and *Free Will*. Decisions are being made, but not always at the scale of conscious awareness—not always by “Me.” At the scale of my genome, at the scale of my neurochemistry, at the scale of my unconscious mental activity, I—the unified sense of self, the homunculus illusion that only truly exists within the constructed confines of conscious awareness—I am not choosing. As Roy F. Baumeister remarks, “Free will is just another kind of causing,” the “result, rather than the cause, of the multiplicity of alternatives out in the world.” What we call “Free Will” is an adaptive modality of the brain, which we experience as *free* at the scale of conscious awareness; yet, it is far from being the *only* process of the brain to shape human behavior. It may not even be the strongest causal factor.

We are left to wonder, how much about our daily existence is freely chosen? In light of what we know about the human brain, the question is unfitting. It belongs to another age. Freedom has been the obsession of our western intellectual tradition for millennia, but *freedom*, as we have imagined it, depends on a completely different understanding of conscious awareness than the one presented to us by modern science. Undoubtedly, changing our attitudes about the central importance of freedom will be difficult. An important question that we should be asking ourselves is: how might knowledge about the way that our brains truly work alter the way that we structure our social institutions? If, as Eddy Nahmias points out, “empirical evidence from neuroscience and psychology could show that the causal impact of conscious mental processes is limited,” how might this understanding alter our view toward moral responsibility? This question is incredibly important to related domains of ethics and jurisprudence. Is there culpability without truly free action? To quote Michael Gazzaniga once more, “The real issue isn't whether we are ‘free.’ The issue is that there is no scientific reason not to hold people accountable and responsible.”

As mentioned, not all human societies place the same importance on free agency that Judeo-Christian societies do. In fact, humans created and
maintained moral societies long before they theorized about free will. Furthermore, rules for social inclusion and social exclusion are common among many animal species. It has been our tradition to link the enforcement of these rules with our capacity for free agency; but, considering what we know now, this may be a relationship worth rethinking.

Of course, human societies are replete with examples of such linkage. Some societies simply imprison drug addicts because they believe that it is somehow the choice of the addict to abuse narcotics. Other societies condemn homosexuality, because they believe that sexual preference is the consequence of one’s own choice. Still others treat underage criminals as adults, because, in their zeal to punish, they believe that a child and an adult can be morally culpable (which is to say, intellectually capable of freely choosing “immorality”) in the same degree. But what would our societies look like if we discovered that our actions are not entirely freely chosen? How would this information impact our legal and social institutions? In a sense, these questions are already outdated. Human agency has been rewritten.

Recent research has suggested that what we believe about “free will” can have a strong impact on how we react both toward the idea of “immorality” and toward the punishment of “immoral” behavior. In a recent paper, Nathan D. Martin (et al.) concludes, “the more that people endorsed notions supporting free will beliefs, the harsher their attitudes toward wrong-doing and wrong-doers” tended to be.48 The implications of these findings are far-reaching, perhaps signaling an urgent need to reform, among other things, the way that we deal with criminality as a society. It is imperative that we begin to rethink our beliefs about the significance of human agency, lest we fall into the same intellectual traps as traditionalists of the past. This will be the great ethical challenge of our age.

Notes

2 Paul VI, I.1.15.
3 Paul VI, I.1.12.
4 The idea that one’s moral liability rests entirely on the use of one’s own reason, in freely choosing an action, without consideration for external influences, is called contra-causal free will. It is the traditional foundation for Judeo-Christian thinking about the role of freedom in moral action.
6 Ibid., 40.
13 Davies, 30.
14 Davies, 30.
15 Davies, 31.
17 Put simply, incompatibilists argue that determinism and free will are incompatible ideas; while compatibilists assert that both concepts are compatible. It is not necessary to argue for, or against the existence of free will to hold either position. The debate centers on the question of whether a determined actor can, to some degree, also be a free agent. If the reader wishes to assign a term to the views expressed in this essay, perhaps they fit best in the compatibilist camp, although this is a broad category in itself.
24 Mlodinow, 38.
25 Mlodinow, 38.
29 Mercier and Sperber, The Enigma of Reason.
38 Furlong and Santos, 360.
41 Gao et al., 1540.

43 Cao et al., 97.


45 Baumeister, 238.


Wollstonecraft’s Vision of Virtue Realized and Averted: Analyzing Popular Female Protagonists in Young Adult Fiction

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Introduction

Literature and philosophy often infuse each other and thereby create a work that transcends traditional modes of both storytelling and pure argumentation. Fiction fosters the ability to provoke and/or affirm positions by transforming them into a vision for the reader on a plane of empathy and imagination. Ethics constitutes one such branch of philosophy that may unfold in literature. According to Gregory Currie,

Fictions can act as aids to the imagination—holding our attention, making a situation vivid for us, and generally drawing us along in the wake of the narrative. If they help us to enter empathetically into the lives of the characters, we can come to feel what it is like to be those characters, make their choices, pursue their goals, and reap the rewards and costs of their actions.¹

Moreover, fiction, he adds, can be “moral thought experiments.”²

Media, movie deals, merchandise and a wave of other money-making outlets have launched popular young adult fictions into an un-parallel spotlight. Given the excitement and ubiquity of three books in particular, The Hunger Games, Harry Potter and Twilight, I will examine the protagonists of these fictions.³ The development of these characters, their virtue, relationships, and response to circumstance (a rejection or acceptance of convention) reflects a vision of gender analyzed by Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft’s work A
*Vindication of the Rights of Women* stresses that education is paramount to the maturity of the soul, the vehicle for living virtuously. Virtues, understood in the classical sense, are desirable characteristic traits practiced over time, expressed at the proper moment, and imbued with reason. Being virtuous, in essence, allows for a fulfilling life, and according to Wollstonecraft, a care of the soul that is necessary for a relation with the divine. Accomplishing this education takes place both in instruction and in culture. Two of the protagonists I wish to discuss demonstrate the very qualities Wollstonecraft argued were possible in women. *Twilight*'s protagonist, on the other hand, lacks self-sufficiency and desires nothing of the sort. It is her exponential appeal to young women that compels me to take a close look at her character in addition to the aforementioned.

**Wollstonecraft’s Position**

Wollstonecraft’s argument accomplishes three tasks: outlining the state of women’s education, dismantling arguments put forth by Rousseau, Dr. Gregory, and religion that purport women’s capacity for reason is limited if not nearly non-existent, and making the case that not enhancing the education of women is problematic practically and ethically. Virtue as such extends beyond physical characteristics and thus its practice and cultivation cannot logically be determined by gender. She asserts that, “Every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason.” Wollstonecraft emphasizes “every being” because reason and by proxy virtuous activity exists in the soul, a gender-less non-physical aspect of being. Thus, to render a being incapable of cultivating reason by pointing to their physical embodiment contradicts the very essence of reason and virtue. “Education” geared for women, as deemed fit by Rousseau and Dr. Gregory, emphasizes care of dress and seeking out the protection of a man. This focus directs attention away from reason and thus away from virtue. As a result, Wollstonecraft explains the peril: “But genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection.” Women, bombarded with such instruction, ultimately participate in this failure to enhance the mind. A proper education would re-orient this attention toward reason. Recognizing the cultural influence, Wollstonecraft writes:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.
If one is to be virtuous, and thus ethical then this must stem from an education that exercises the mind; to deny the development of reason is to deprive the individual the ability to be virtuous. How does literature intended for the youth express this ideal?

The “Intended” Audience

Thomas E. Wartenberg authored a provocative essay “Teaching Women Philosophy (as a Feminist Man)” where he describes and reflects on his experience as a professor at an all-women’s university. Part autobiographical and part analytic, Wartenberg explains the material for his philosophy course syllabus as taking on a new meaning for him once he had an all-female audience. Upon preparing his lectures on the Ancient Greeks he became increasingly aware of the way in which women were represented in the literature. This is not to say that women in philosophy had been unnoticed before, but he became hyper-attuned to the disparaging way women were spoken of in the texts. He writes:

What struck me most about this situation was not so much the presence of such sexist remarks in these classical texts, but my previous failure to accord them the sort of centrality that I now did.

Thus, he recognized that the history of thought, which needed to be conveyed to his audience, was something not meant for them. This experience forged a new understanding of the authors and context of philosophy; namely, the texts in question were written for an intended audience and that did not include women. He was, he writes, the intended audience and as a result overlooked the severity of disregard for woman’s capabilities emanating from the philosophy. He explains,

Being a white male I was able to feel a certain solidarity with the author of these texts because I could feel myself to be, in a certain sense, a member of his [Aristotle] implied audience in virtue of the fact that I was not being explicitly excluded from it.

Wartenberg’s observations usher in a vital element when analyzing literature philosophically: texts are not only written by a point of view but also with a particular audience in mind.

Now, this begs the question regarding the fiction of interest here and its inherent relation to portrayal of gender: for whom are these books written? The...
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The Hunger Games and the Harry Potter series, which feature strong female protagonists, are marketed toward both sexes thereby buoying virtuous traits and demonstrating that character is indeed built on reason and a “gender-less” soul as Wollstonecraft argued; however, the Twilight series, anchored by an idea of romance, appears to appeal to an intended female audience. Moreover, this portrayal of romance, and character, embodies a mentality Wollstonecraft found extremely tawdry. The book glamorizes a direction toward seeking protection from a man and nullifying a course of self-development. But I will return to this. For now, I turn our attention to young adult fiction, The Hunger Games, where the female protagonist emanates admirable character traits, or virtue.

Katniss the Courageous

The Hunger Games, by Suzanne Collins, takes place in a haunting futurist setting where one central power, the capital, governs an impoverished twelve “districts.” For sheer entertainment and assertion of power, the capital holds an annual “game” in which one boy and one girl from each district are selected to fight to the death in a vast outside arena, completely outfitted with cameras to televise the event. The last child standing wins and that district’s population is then showered with supplies for the following year. This story unfolds through the point of view of Katniss, the protagonist, who finds herself in the throes of this frighteningly ominous “game.” Our first hint of her bravery comes when her younger sister was chosen to participate, but Katniss insisted on taking her place thus sparing her sister the fate of the games. Katniss chose her actions with complete knowledge of the context and for the sake of being courageous.

Collins also sprinkles a budding romance to the plot to add tension, but this also reveals that romance and creating virtuous female characters need not be mutually exclusive, a concern noted by Wollstonecraft. Once the process of the game begins, we learn that the boy selected from Katniss’s district, Peeta, is no stranger to her; indeed, he confesses to have admired her from afar for years, but because there can only be one “winner” in the “game,” this ultimately compounds the inevitable problem of survival.

Katniss, the hunter at home, must become fashionable for the audience and undergoes extensive hair, make-up, and costume transformations for the television cameras. Inwardly despising this showcase, she plays along with the notion of feminine, but only for her safety. Katniss knows her character does not hinge on a public conception built from cosmetics, but rather from a sense of courage and loyalty. Her determination and evidence of virtue trumped conceding to cultural pressure that echoed of Wollstonecraft’s rejection of Rousseau: “But Rousseau, and most of the male writers who have followed his steps, have warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education...”
ought to be directed to one point—to render them pleasing.”\textsuperscript{11} And she writes of Dr. Gregory: “He advises them to cultivate a fondness for dress, because a fondness for dress, he asserts, is natural to them.”\textsuperscript{12} Just as Wollstonecraft admonished these assertions, Katniss also loathes the superficial value of a feminine, pleasing appearance. Indeed, her character’s response to this situation illuminates that devotion to dress and cosmetics is entirely \textit{un}-natural.

Once in the “game,” Katniss quickly realizes that her modus operandi must be furnished from ingenuity rather than a rush to violence. Outsmarting the others will require calculation and patience—tactics that distance her from committing killings. Only two deaths resulted from her actions; one to defend herself, and in another instance to defend another. Thus, her approach defies the function and meaning of the “game,” demonstrating an unbending principle to adhere to virtue rather than appease the imposed expectation of the capital. Meanwhile, Peeta separates from her, engages in fighting (with the intent of distracting others from finding her), but eventually he slows down due to an injury. Katniss discovers him quite weak, helps him recover, and collaborates with him to bring down the “game” itself involving a clever ruse where their essence remains intact despite the context into which they have been thrown. Virtue, then, is stronger than the pressure of the context; a contrary fictional approach to Goldberg’s \textit{Lord of the Flies}, for instance. The “game” as designed by the capital not only inundates the districts with fear by threatening the lives of their children, but it also elevates terror to a psychological platform by forging a certain artificiality meant to alter the children’s disposition and character from youth to killer all for the viewing pleasure of the elite. That is, the capital takes the youth and their personhood based on the likely premise that one’s character transitions according to circumstance. Katniss’s character is extraordinary precisely because she willfully evades this psychological degradation—an ability possible due to strength of virtue.

\textbf{Hermione the Intellectual}

Collins’s heroine builds relationships on a foundation of authenticity, loyalty, and friendship (reminiscent of a Jane Austin protagonist); and she exudes the unapologetic cleverness of another beloved female character in young adult fiction, Hermione from \textit{Harry Potter}. The \textit{Harry Potter} series captured much attention for a variety of reasons, including the ways in which J.K. Rowling delved into the world of magic and wizardry with craft, intelligence, and an incredibly uplifting spirit. These adventures unfold through the dynamic teamwork of three charming young characters, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger. Each character exhibits traits that contribute to successfully bringing down the evil Lord Voldermort. Herminone’s role, then, is nothing short of being an integral part of combating darkness.
When we are first introduced to Hermione she plops herself in Harry’s and Ron’s cabin on the train to the school Hogwarts and eagerly tells of the books she has been reading to prepare for class. The prospect of being chosen for Hogwarts is particularly special for her because her parents were not of the magic world; thus, from the start we note Hermione’s character as one of ambition and ability to transcend her situation. That is, Hermione enters Hogwarts based on talent and merit. On the train, she scoffs at Harry’s broken glasses, pulls out her wand, and repairs them with a spell leaving the boys awestruck by her command of wizardry. From the moment Hermione enters the story it is clear that she will be the “intellectual” of the group, and never once is her gender called into question as a factor for her character. In fact, her physical reality as defined by her lack of “pure blood” does become a point of contention with some misfits in the school; however, the authentic and “good” characters of Rowling’s books rush quickly to Hermione’s defense noting that birth and body are irrelevant factors for success. While the issue of gender does not arise, the issue of putting value of character by attributing significance to the body is truncated. Hermione’s excellence and devotion to study at Hogwarts highlights Wollstonecraft’s conception of a perfect education: “To enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent.”13 In Rowling’s books, Hogwarts itself becomes a sort of character, and the environment it fosters mirrors Wollstonecraft’s vision of equality.

In the classroom, Hermione shoots her arm up at the drop of a professor’s question, she receives accolades for completing difficult spells, and she once learned a spell to alter time so that she could take two classes at once. She is a lovable character because she devotes herself to reading and learning. Harry and Ron know they can count on her—thus this fiction removes any inkling of prejudice based on a presupposed “nature” of a female. Note the following passage illustrating the foundation of the friendship between Harry and Hermione: “It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermione as a friend. He didn’t know how he’d have got through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also lent him Quidditch through the Ages, which turned out to be a very interesting read.”14 The fruition of her character absolutely forged from a disposition encouraged by an environment such as Hogwarts where education is in the spirit of “goodness.”

In the latter books of the series, Hermione’s and Ron’s friendship matures into a young romantic love. Wollstonecraft argued that women’s attention to finding a mate by being pleasing could be disastrous, and that marriage must be based on friendship. We see that friendship serves as the groundwork for Hermione’s and Ron’s romantic feelings. For Wollstonecraft, attention to reason, and thereby the possibility of virtue, allows for an authentic and stable relationship:
Were women more rationally educated, could they take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be contented to love but once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship—into that tender intimacy, which is the best refuge from care; yet is built on such pure, still affections, that idle jealousies would not be allowed to disturb the discharge of the sober duties of life, or to engross the thoughts that ought to otherwise be employed.\textsuperscript{15}

If we take seriously Gregory Currie’s claim that novels can be “moral thought experiments,” and the position that work has an “intended audience,” then we can view these books as positive portrayals of virtue in the sense (or vision) of Wollstonecraft. Katniss and Hermione appeal to young readers of boys and girls alike, and thereby instill a platform of equality and possibility. These characters’ ability to embrace the virtues of courage and honor by choice, knowledge, and for its own sake, delivers an ethical position that gender as such cannot be a factor for excellence.

**Bella the Dull**

I view the first two characters as a refreshing alternative from the sweeping, yet daunting, phenomenon of the *Twilight* series where Bella’s character engenders little capacity of self-worth, endlessly pining for someone to create, through a form of destruction, a new identity for her. In direct contrast to Hermione’s enthusiasm, Bella finds school boring, she dreads physical education class, and she cannot keep her mind or her gaze off of Edward. Note Bella’s point of view:

\begin{quote}
I felt excited to go to school, and that scared me. I knew it wasn’t the stimulating learning environment I was anticipating, or seeing my new set of friends. If I was being honest with myself, I knew I was eager to get to school because I would see Edward Cullen.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The character is vacuous and dull because she never *does* anything. Without hobby or interest, she allots her time to being mesmerized by Edward, begging him to alter her very existence.\textsuperscript{17} She imbibes the phenomenon Wollstonecraft described as the problematic state of woman’s character:

\begin{quote}
Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts
\end{quote}
constantly directed to the most significant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour.\textsuperscript{18}

Seemingly half-dazed Bella mopes about unable to step outside (unless to visit the equally blasé forest by her home) or focus without the security of Edward. Stewing over Edward, she thinks:

I didn’t know if there ever were a choice, really. I was already in too deep. Now that I knew—if I knew—I could do nothing about my frightening secret. Because when I thought of him, of his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic force of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now.\textsuperscript{19}

Rather than anchoring her mind in development, Bella chooses to direct her curiosity towards Edward. He has explored the world, read an extensive array of books, and his knowledge stands quite superior to hers: “No doubt his quick mind had already comprehended every aspect that eluded me.”\textsuperscript{20} Desiring this superior being obliterates any movement towards action that would lift her disposition from boring to interesting. The relationship poses a disturbing a-symmetry because of Edward’s immortality and knowledge; thus, this celebrated fiction harkens to the very problem outlined by Wollstonecraft. “Men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties.”\textsuperscript{21} Bella’s entire aim hinges on being wrested away from her situation; she views herself as incomplete and desperately appeals to Edward for a secure future. Ignorance of the vampire world puts her at a disadvantage, and she is perpetually instructed on the ins and outs of this alternate reality. Hence, Edward becomes a necessary guide for navigating her naïve self around his vampire existence. Transforming into a vampire will allow her to stabilize her youth, making the physical infinitely important for happiness. Furthermore, Bella’s “uniqueness,” we learn, is due to the sweetness of her blood and Edward’s inability to read her thoughts—a talent he indulges in with other humans. This conveys a disturbing point; namely, Bella is a curiosity not because of virtue but because of her “nature,” the body into which she was born. Again, virtue flourishes upon rational activity; however, this incredibly popular protagonist, we are to believe, is interesting due to her bodily make-up and not from action. Wollstonecraft considers the danger in such a disposition: “But whether she be loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself.”\textsuperscript{22}

In contrast to the first two books, \textit{Twilight}’s intended audience is young women. One might object to my characterization of Bella by citing that this is
a romance and is hardly meant to be a statement either way of the way women ought to be! Or, that this fiction simply offers a fantasy. But the underlying assumption with such objections is that romance and virtue would be mutually exclusive. The latter objection suggests something even more troubling, namely, why is weakness and dependence a fantasy for young women in the first place? Wollstonecraft by no means eliminates love and marriage; rather she re-defines its perimeters so that the relationship, like the individual, may flourish.

On the problem of an asymmetrical romance, Wollstonecraft explains:

…is she, I say to condescend to use art and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband’s affection? Weakness may excite tenderness, and gratify the arrogant pride of man; but the lordly caresses of a protector will not gratify a noble mind that pants for, and deserves to be respected. Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship.23

Fondness, in this context, solidifies a relation where the man views the woman as a sort of pet. If women succumb to this role, then the imbalance elbows out mutual respect, the necessary condition for friendship. Playing the roles of a woman in distress and a weakling, accordingly, will entice someone to protect but it will not yield an authentic relationship.

Conclusion

Bella’s character is structured in such a way that she is dependent and bereft of hobbies or want for achievement. Young girls want to be Bella. They want an Edward in their life. Recall that Wartenberg emphasized an “intended audience” with literature, and Currie’s claim that literature can serve as a “moral thought experiment” because empathy is elicited in the development of characters. That is, as opposed to Rousseau’s and Dr. Gregory’s declarative statements about women which can be countered and evaluated, literature offers an avenue of identification for the reader. Young girls are transported into the role/fantasy of Bella where personal and intellectual pursuits are thrown by the wayside for the comfort, beauty, and protection of a man. If the manifestation of virtue is paramount as Wollstonecraft argues, then literature geared toward young women that highlights happiness as being in the world like Bella presents us with more than a simple case of criticizing bad literature. Work that encourages diluting self-growth implies a problem of morality. In contrast, at no point, for example, were Katniss’s or Hermione’s disposition imbued with presuppositions about gender, and thereby delivered a promising method of genuine character development. Wollstonecraft insisted that virtue
be developed in women, that the cultivation of reason in women was not only possible but needed.

John Stuart Mill offered a similar position in *The Subjection of Women*, where he argued that the legal subordination of women is “wrong in itself” and “hinders human progress.”

Like Wollstonecraft, he uprooted the argument that “nature” dictated a woman’s place in society, for nature was merely an “artificial” development due to forced repression and stimulation. One could not possibly have knowledge of woman’s nature because such evidence would require an isolation and study of the sexes; therefore, since no such evidence exists, and the sexes have only been known in relation to each other, a declarative statement regarding nature is impossible, rendering any law based on this assumption faulty and unjust.

Wollstonecraft, from a premise grounded in virtue ethics points out a similar contradiction:

> If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles and have the same aim.

One cannot maintain that virtues are traits built from a development of the mind, a non-physical part of the self, and at once use the physical as a basis underscoring a lack of ability for virtue. Rowling’s choice to make Hermione the logical, studious character allows for young and adult readers alike to visualize the possibility Wollstonecraft and Mill advocated for in their works.

For literature that makes its way into the hearts of the youth, it is laudable for Collins and Rowling to offer heroines with such dignity and a fierce ability to challenge an oppressive power structure. Given Wollstonecraft’s work, and the dynamics of the first two protagonists, it is evident that creating a young female character does not require an absence of virtue for her to be marketable.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 166.
5. Ibid., 42-43.
6 Ibid., 18.
8 Ibid., 135.
9 Ibid., 137.
11 Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 18.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 20.
14 Rowling, Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 133.
15 Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Women, 122.
16 Meyer, Twilight, 54.
17 Simone de Beauvoir’s novel All Men Are Mortal also portrays a young woman, Regina, eager to learn the means to achieving immortality; however, the position of the novel is structured to elucidate the ramifications of this un-human existence by making time and aging a central issue. In contrast to Meyer’s character Bella, Beauvoir casts Regina as a self-destructive, isolated narcissist as a critique of culture, not an advocate. Simone de Beauvoir, Tous Les Hommes Sont Mortels, trans. from French by Euan Cameron. London: Virago Press, 2003.
18 Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 43.
19 Meyer, Twilight, 139.
20 Ibid., 288.
21 Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 60.
22 Ibid., 27.
23 Ibid., 28.
25 Ibid., 27.
26 Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 25.
Alice Munro’s “Family Furnishings” and the Vanishing Point of Realism

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In 2013, Alice Munro, known for her stories about life in small town Ontario, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her fiction is popularly associated with regionalism and realism because of its deep sense of geographic and temporal place. When Munro was announced as recipient, Peter Englund, then permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, remarked “Alice Munro portrays with almost anthropological precision a recognizable, tranquil, everyday world with predictable, external accoutrements.” Less favourable reviews also remark on the worlds she creates, albeit with a sense of tedium rather than acclaim. Christian Lorentzen, in his well-known 2013 review in the London Review of Books, declared that her stories provide a “slice of sad life in the sticks.” Slightly more critically inflected is Lorentzen’s suggestion that while “It might be too much to call her an anti-modernist,” Munro is “someone on whom modernism didn’t leave much of an impression.” He continues, “I grew attuned […] to people’s residential and familial histories, details she never leaves out. How many rooms are in the house, and what sort of furniture and who used to own it and what is everybody wearing? To ask these questions is to live your life like a work of realism.”

Lorentzen’s misgivings notwithstanding, Munro’s relationship to realism is complex and her fiction is formally experimental. Indeed, reading reviews and criticism of Munro’s work, one could be forgiven for thinking there are two Munros, one a writer of precisely rendered realist stories and the other a writer of fluid and destabilized narratives. Her story “Family Furnishings,”
from the 2001 collection *Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage*, embraces the realist detail for which she is known—Lorentzen’s dreaded furniture and family history—while simultaneously calling into question the ability of such detail to accurately depict the world. “Family Furnishings” is a metafictional story that refuses, as much Canadian short fiction does, a binary of realism and postmodernism and instead merges them. Addressing that interplay of forms, and the story’s depiction of both assuredness and ambiguity in the narrator’s life, I argue that the story’s hybrid mode attends to what is at stake in the creation of narrative. “Family Furnishings” is about distillation of selves into others, the act of representation, and its limitations.

Numerous critics have considered Munro’s relationship to realism, and they tend to constellate around certain stories. “The Love of a Good Woman,” in particular, has been the subject of a number of insightful articles about Munro’s (postmodern) narrative techniques. Mark Nunes identifies Munro as a writer who defies readerly expectations about postmodernism while still “raising the same challenges of adetermination, overflow, and the denial of totalizing narrative.” He argues that Munro does not dilate on rupture and the ways that a narrative comes apart, but instead calls attention to “the conditions and contingencies” that “allow the pieces to come together.” Nunes employs the metaphor of “piecing” and feminist scholarship on the postmodern in order to convey the tension between fragment and cohesion in Munro’s fiction. He writes:

> While Munro’s stories call attention to the narrative fragments and multiple tellings, the narrative structure does not reflect a disruptive /eruptive postmodernism. […] Piecing emphasizes the productive nature of narration, not merely its disruptive effects. […] Contingent arrangements […] affirm the process by which meaning comes into being.

Nunes sees in Munro an affirmation of writing itself, which he refers to as a “constructive process that precludes either a return to wholeness or a perennial condition of disruption.” He is not alone in his sense that the ethos of Munro’s fiction is one of repair. Stephen Regan has argued that the fusion of experimentation and representation is a feature of Canadian short fiction that forges a unique brand of postmodernism. For Regan, Munro uses this hybrid form in a particular way:

> What is most unusual about the fiction of Alice Munro is that
at one level it reveals a postmodernist skepticism about the
capacity of language to signify intended meanings and yet at
another level exerts a sympathetic concern for those who
continue to search for meaning.9

I cite Nunes and Regan at some length because the recuperative pull and the
sympathy they identify as characteristic of Munro’s engagement with the
postmodern is not found in “Family Furnishings.”

“Family Furnishings” is perhaps unusual in its unsparing glance at
narrator-writer and the way she forges her career. Indeed, when the collection
was reviewed in Quill and Quire, the reviewer, Bronwyn Drainie, quipped that
the story could be subtitled “Portrait of the Artist as a Cool Young Bitch.”10
Writing, in “Family Furnishings,” involves both drawing upon family stories
and rejecting the very family whose stories are appropriated for fiction. The
emphasis on rifts and sundering characterizes not only familial relationships
but also writing itself, which is shown to have a tenuous and difficult
connection to the stories it draws upon. Attending to these rifts, my analysis of
“Family Furnishings” aligns with some aspects of the work of Ildiko de Papp
Carrington, who sees in Munro’s narrative strategy the aim of “controlling the
uncontrollable,” an aim that ultimately cedes to rupture and multiplicity;
however in “Family Furnishings” there is no attempt to access what is “really
there,” as Carrington puts it.11 With Katherine Mayberry, I see instability
delimiting narration, and the story metafictionally reflects upon such limits.12
Addressing the metafictional drive of “Family Furnishings,” Corrine Bigot
considers the embedded stories within the text.13 Bigot and I are similarly
interested in these two auto/biographical stories, but we differ in the reasons
for addressing them. Bigot develops a nuanced reading of the story’s secrets
and psychological repression, demonstrating their participation in the motif of
resurfacing, and my argument is that they underscore the thresholds of
representation.

“Family Furnishings” centers on the unnamed first-person narrator, a girl
who grows up in a small town, admires her older second cousin, and eventually
moves to the city to go to college. It charts her teenage years, from high school
to university, then into adulthood and two marriages. One facet of the story is
about the narrator growing up and realizing that she wants more than anything
to become a writer. The other attends in great depth to a different character,
the narrator’s father’s cousin, Alfrida. She is the proverbial black sheep of the
family, although we don’t know much of why until the end of the story. The
story is not linear, and the structure could be described as something like a
double helix, where the narrator tells the story of her growing up, and
interweaves her own life story with what she knows of Alfrida. In “Family Furnishings,” there are two biographies, the narrator’s, which follows a künstlerroman trajectory, and Alfrida’s, which is riven with secrets and ambiguity.

**The Artist’s Development**

The story begins when the narrator is 15 or 16, she can’t quite remember. But when the narrator was still in high school, Alfrida seemed to her lively and fun. She lived an independent life and pushed the limits of small town social expectations. She was someone the narrator liked and sided with, someone whose approval the narrator sought, and someone whom she admired. Alfrida was a “career girl” and a “city person.” She worked for a newspaper, wrote a column called “About the town, with Alfrida,” and her name was in the paper three times a week. She gave advice to brides and talked about china patterns. Even though she was absent, she remained a part of the narrator’s life through her writing.

The narrator’s early identification with Alfrida is thoroughgoing, and provides an initial avenue through which she forges distance between herself and the rest of her family. Alfrida’s appearance is the primary source of early disagreement between the narrator and her extended family. It isn’t that the narrator thinks Alfrida beautiful (she doesn’t) but that she thinks it narrow to assign her looks such overriding importance. It is Alfrida’s mouth and teeth that garner everyone’s attention:

> When her mouth was open wide—as it nearly always was, talking or laughing—you could see that some of her teeth had been pulled at the back. Nobody could say she was good looking […] but she was fervent and dashing.16

> “She always did have trouble with her teeth,” the aunts said. “She had that abscess, remember, the poison went all through her system.” How like them, I thought, to toss aside Alfrida’s wit and style and turn her teeth into a sorry problem.17

The narrator distinguishes her way of thinking from that of her family, especially her aunts. She is critical of her aunts for what they set aside, and asserts herself as different from them, as more capacious and open-minded.
My point is not that the story here affirms the narrator’s view of herself (it doesn’t), but that Alfrida is a gathering point for family consensus, and the person through which the narrator consistently imagines her differing habits of thought. In other words, in a story about the shaping of a writer’s life, Alfrida is the person who most strongly enables the narrator to see herself as different from her family and community, and to articulate her own identity as such.

Alfrida does not just evoke different ways of thinking, but elicits new ways of behaving as well. The narrator’s family is conventional; they are country people and have country manners. They do not, for example, quote the bible accurately, and say whore of Babylon. They say witch. Even Alfrida says witch. But while Alfrida adheres to some familial expectations, she defies others and brings with her a nonconformity that seems to the narrator modern and exciting. At dinner, while visiting the narrator and her parents, she offers the narrator a cigarette. The narrator details the response she expected from her mother:

Ordinarily, my mother would say she did not like to see a woman smoke. She did not say it was indecent, or unladylike—just that she didn’t like it. And when she said in a certain tone that she did not like something it seemed that she was not making a confession of irrationality but drawing on a private source of wisdom, which was unassailable and almost sacred.18

But surprisingly, in this moment her parents react with levity. So much so that they parody the expected response, saying “Ah, will you look at your daughter?” and “[h]ave to get the horsewhip out.”19 They didn’t approve, but they let their daughter smoke. It was, the narrator remarks, “as if Alfrida had transformed us into new people.”20 She continues:

My parents had been put in a corner by Alfrida—and also by me—but they had responded so gamely and gracefully that it was really as if the three of us—my mother, my father and myself—had been lifted to a new level of ease and aplomb.21

This reconfiguration of values and manners in the face of the offer of a cigarette is temporary and partial. The narrator’s parents do not sustain this “ease and aplomb,” but the narrator longs to inhabit it and continues seek it out, making for herself a life in the city by winning a scholarship to college.
The college is in the city where Alfrida lives, but the move doesn’t foster a closer relationship between them. Within months of starting school, the narrator receives a call from Alfrida to ask her over for dinner, but she refuses several invitations and sometimes makes up lies about having a date instead of saying she has to work, which she did every evening in the library. Now that she lives in the city herself, her education underway, the narrator quickly understands herself in opposition to Alfrida. The crux of the change is academic life in general, and literature in particular. The narrator’s “new friends” are people who want to know if you’d read *Look Homeward Angel* and *Buddenbrooks* (also, of course, intricate family histories drawn from autobiography). In contrast to the novels by Wolfe and Mann, pivotal and seemingly authentic, is Alfrida’s newspaper column. The narrator recalls that she “seldom looked at the paper that had once seemed to [her] the centre of city life—and even, in a way, the centre of our life at home, sixty miles away. The jokes, the compulsive insincerity of people like Alfrida […] now struck me as tawdry and boring.” Alfrida’s “insincerity” is in tacit opposition to the narrator’s own sincere and rigorous engagement with literature and culture. The break even brings about a reassessment of Alfrida in which the narrator projects backward in time her disapproval. She recalls that Alfrida was critical of the books in the family’s home, referring to them as a “[l]ot of hotshot reading.” And the narrator’s father, who did from time to time read those books, fell in with “her tone of dismissal or even contempt.” It is exactly this “kind of lie” that the narrator wants never to have to tell, and in order to achieve that she understands that she will “have to stay clear of the people I used to know.” Alfrida, who not long ago seemed so modern and daring, had “lost all importance” in the narrator’s life.

When the narrator is about to finish her second year of college and leave school to be married, she finally accepts a lunch invitation. She and Alfrida do not have much in common, and the meeting has its share of tensions. It also confirms for the narrator her need to be a writer. Her first published story, written years later, coalesces around a traumatic detail from Alfrida’s childhood recounted to her that afternoon. In the passage that concludes the story, the narrator remembers the long walk home from Alfrida’s that afternoon. She recalls:

I did not think of the story I would make about Alfrida […] but of the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories.

[…]
This is what I wanted, this was what I thought I had to pay attention to, this was how I wanted my life to be.26

The facet of the story that maps the narrator’s development as a writer does so through her perceptions of her father’s cousin. The narrator thinks of herself as changing and growing to pursue a particular destiny, and that development is articulated as she moves toward and then away from the apparently static and readily discernable figure of Alfrida. Becoming a writer, as the narrator tells it, is clear and surefooted. The story, however, presents us with a narrator who is not especially “self-conscious about her creativity,” as Isla Duncan suggests, and little is what it seems.27 “Family Furnishings” remarkable ambiguity is found in the parts of the story that emphasize the unknown and the unknowable, which underlies the narrator’s family history.

“Altogether Another Story”

“Family Furnishings” opens with a memory. It is a memory of Alfrida and the narrator’s father—they are first cousins—in the field when the First World War ended:

Alfrida. My father called her Freddie. The two of them were first cousins and lived for a while on adjoining farms. One day they were out in the fields of stubble playing with my father’s dog, whose name was Mack. That day the sun shone, but did not melt the ice in the furrows. They stomped on the ice and enjoyed its crackle underfoot.28

At a family dinner Alfrida recalls the moment in such detail—the frozen furrows, the ice crackling, the factory whistle blowing—that the narrator’s father can’t believe it.

How could she remember a thing like that? My father said.
She made it up, he said. “I did not,” she said.29

Her ability to recall that afternoon in such detail suggests a moment of importance. This memory, after all, begins the story. It establishes a long friendship between Alfrida and the narrator’s father; they were cousins and remained close for much of their lives. The women everyone calls Alfrida is
known to the father as Freddie, a playful nickname further suggestive of continued friendship.

This memory is repeated again, near the close of the story. The second time it appears it contains a slight but unsettling alteration. The narrator is at her father’s funeral, and she encounters a woman who seems familiar, but whom she doesn’t know. She thinks it might be Alfrida’s half-sister, but it turns out to be Alfrida’s biological daughter, a daughter she gave up for adoption. She explains who she is, and then apologizes, saying “excuse me for talking about myself and not saying how sorry I am about your dad.” She then begins an anecdote, as one does at a funeral, a story to show she knew something of the narrator’s father. But the story she tells, about Alfrida and the narrator’s father in the fields when WWI ended, conveys more than compassion for a loss. The difference between this version of events and the earlier one is the age of the cousins. In the first telling of the story, which narrator vehemently believed to be true, her father and Alfrida were children playing in the field. But Alfrida’s daughter places them as quite a bit older, coming home from high school. She is sure of the ages, she says, because Alfrida was “pretty good on remembering anything that involved your dad.”

The narrator herself does a quick calculation based on her father’s date of birth and realizes this woman, this stranger, has the ages more or less correct: they couldn’t have been children when the war ended. They were in high school. The narrator wonders why it never occurred to her before, why she was so sure they were young. As she is wondering why her knowledge of this event is flawed, she starts to realize that “the harmlessness that [she] had felt in this woman a little while before, was not there now.” The narrator tries to shrug off the difference in versions and in ages. “Things get changed around,” she posits. But the woman corrects her. She refuses the passive construction and insists that things don’t get changed by themselves, rather, “[p]eople change things around.” Why, then, was the story changed?

The woman tells the narrator that Alfrida and her father met in the fields to walk home; they couldn’t be seen leaving school together because “they would just get teased something terrible.” They are cousins, but clearly that doesn’t stop their schoolmates from thinking there was something romantic between them. The woman emphasizes that Alfrida was good at remembering any details about the narrator’s father. And, earlier in the story, the narrator speculated about Alfrida’s last visit to her family’s home, which took place the year before she left for college. She wonders why it was the last visit, and if that had to do with Alfrida’s romantic life. She may have asked if she could bring a “friend” (i.e., a married man) with her, and the narrator knows her parents would have objected to that. But she supposes too that her father
“might have had a special objection, also, to a man who could get a hold over Alfrida.”

Alfrida was very close to the narrator’s father. The central memory of the story is a recollection of the end of WWI, and it is an event that is misremembered for reasons that remain unclear or unclarified. Alfrida did, however, get pregnant and give a child up for adoption. Alfrida’s biological daughter seems to know something of how much the narrator’s father meant to her mother, and she appears to be a similar age, just a bit older than the narrator. And she enjoys punishing the narrator by telling her Alfrida’s criticisms about her, including Alfrida’s belief that “you weren’t ever quite as smart as you thought you were.” Is the women the narrator’s half-sister? Did the narrator’s father get her cousin Alfrida pregnant? I agree with Corrine Bigot’s reading of the story, and think that the answer is yes. But for the characters, there are no sure answers.

This moment of failed revelation in “Family Furnishings” can be profitably contrasted to the paternal secret in another Munro story, “The Love of A Good Woman.” In this story, Enid as a young child witnessed her father involved in a sexual dalliance with another women. The woman is sitting on her father’s lap with her top unbuttoned, and “one bare breast sticking out, the tip of it disappearing into Enid’s father’s mouth.” When Enid tells her mother what she saw, describing the woman’s breast like an ice-cream cone, her mother dismisses it telling her it must have been a dream, and “[d]reams are sometimes downright silly. Don’t tell Daddy about it. It’s too silly.” Enid does not immediately accept her mother’s explanation, but in time she comes to do so. We learn that “in a year or so she saw that such an explanation had to be right, because ice cream cones did not ever arrange themselves in that way on ladies’ chests and they were never so big.” In “The Love of a Good Woman,” a moment of paternal sexual indiscretion is seen and then suppressed, converted into a dream that allows the family to carry on. But in “Family Furnishings” there is no acknowledgment of the originary event. There is suggestion, variously remembered stories, and the family history that the narrator turns to when she begins her life as a writer. But it is a history that is shown to be as incomplete as the narrator’s knowledge of it. In “Family Furnishings,” the chasm between stories and the traumatic and amorphous lives they depict is vast.

“Family Furnishings” is certainly not the only Munro story to consider what is involved in the act of writing. Her 1971 Lives of Girls and Women also followed a küstlerroman trajectory and charted the young female narrator’s growth into a woman and a writer. That narrator, Del Jordan, remarks “what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light
on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting.” She longs to render in prose a physical and tactile world. Thirty years later, “Family Furnishings” revisits the idea of a girl wishing to become a writer, but with a more skeptical perspective on both representation and epistemology. Del Jordan understands that “the hope of accuracy” is “heartbreaking,” but in “Family Furnishings” the family history, which the narrator turns to first to understand herself and then as the subject of her fiction, is found to be fragmentary and elusive. The heartbreak isn’t found (only) in the inability to convey, but (also) in the inability to know.

“Family Furnishings” dwells on ambiguity in human lives and relationships. It focuses on a specific moment, location, and way of life. But all the specificity and exactness are revealed to be incapable of conveying people and events, because the most intimate family details are unknown and even unknowable. Against all the uncertainty and instability, the narrator draws on events of Alfrida’s childhood and writes a story. The narrator’s first published work tells a story. It fixes an event in prose, taking multiplicity, uncertainty, and trauma, and crafting it into a work of fiction. “Family Furnishings” show us selves rendered into others, all the while reminding us that the selves are complex and shadowy, and never wholly discernable. By depicting the creation of a story, and what underlies it, “Family Furnishings” reveals the human agent, the narrator-author, shaping a fiction, and it shows us what the fiction does not, or cannot, convey.

I’ll conclude by recalling Lorentzen’s criticism: “How many rooms are in the house, and what sort of furniture and who used to own it and what is everybody wearing? To ask these questions is to live your life like a work of realism.” He’s got it backwards: to answer those questions—that may be (living life) like a work of realism. But to observe the details and ask the questions, but provide neither clarity nor answers is not a work of realism. It is a work about the limits of realism.

Notes

3 Mark Nunes has also made this point about the schism in Munro criticism. See his “Postmodern ‘piercing’: Alice Munro’s contingent ontologies.” Studies in Short Fiction 34.1 (1997): 11-26.

Nunes, 11.

Ibid, 11.


Ibid, 12.


Ibid, 87.

Ibid, 90-91.

Ibid, 93.

Ibid, 86.

Ibid, 86.

Ibid, 86.

Ibid, 87.

Ibid, 98.

Ibid, 98.

Ibid, 99.


Ibid 117.


Ibid, 84.
29 Ibid, 84.
31 Ibid, 115.
32 Ibid, 115.
33 Ibid, 115.
34 Ibid, 116.
36 Ibid, 96.
Flannery O’Connor and the Films of the Brothers McDonagh

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Martin and John Michael McDonagh, brothers with Irish roots, create movies that assert the possibilities for grace and redemption as forces operating even in a post-Christian, secular culture. Their *dramatis personae* are damaged and grotesque misfits—hitmen, murderers, the abused, the suicidal—in hyperreal contemporary narratives that recast big spiritual themes. Each central character is an Everyman whose story-arc is anagogical—that is, it can operate as an allegory of a soul’s journey from life to death. The protagonists of Martin McDonagh’s *In Bruges* (2008) and John Michael McDonagh’s *Calvary* (2014) are compelled to face death confronting their responsibility for acts of violence committed by themselves and others and to recognize, ultimately, that forgiveness and sacrifice are transactional. These chronicles of sinful or apathetic people revise the orthodox morality tale so that redemptive grace originates in unexpected, even unwanted sources. This subversive narrative strategy reveals the influence of a writer who brings her characters to grace or salvation through “any indifferent thing, as well as evil itself, [as] an instrument for good,” and who described her plots as “anagogic.”¹ Both brothers appropriate tropes from the work of the twentieth-century Southern writer Flannery O’Connor.

John Michael McDonagh acknowledges O’Connor’s influence on his writing in a number of interviews, noting that her belief-system operates as a sub-text in her fiction. He says:

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What I loved about O’Connor was, she was obviously a deeply committed Catholic, but as she said, you could read her stories and her books and you could think that she was an atheist . . . she wrote for the other characters, not for her. . . you would come out thinking “oh, she must believe in nothing.”

In the same way, McDonagh’s work merely adumbrates Christian scripture or liturgy and yet his storylines describe a transformative journey from anomic to salvation. He confirms his methodological debt to O’Connor in a description of an upcoming film project to be called The Lame Shall Enter First. The title comes from the Flannery O’Connor story of the same name in which an unrepentant sociopath with a clubfoot propels the protagonist to a recognition of his own spiritual self-deception. We are told that the film is “to star [Brendan] Gleeson as a virulently misanthropic paraplegic,” which suggests that the film and the story will share not only O’Connor’s title but her theme and method, too.

Flannery O’Connor’s fiction often deals with sudden deaths and acts of cruelty, and in this she provides another trope for the McDonaghs. The audience for both Calvary and In Bruges may be dismayed by the amount of gore they have to witness; both films are rated “R” for “strong bloody violence.” Gruesome action not only informs the background narratives—from a flashback of a gangland killing to a darkly comic but grisly scene in a butcher’s freezer full of huge and dripping carcasses—but bloodshed also provides the context for each film’s climactic transformation. O’Connor wrote that “[the novelist] may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience.” She would point out that for the Christian writer, the anagogical vision must comprehend death, as it is the doorway to eternal life, and that fiction must match in ferocious intensity the violence of Christ’s Passion itself in order to administer the shock necessary to salvation. The McDonagh brothers employ this redemptive coup de grâce in their contemporary stories about gangs and guns. Violence seems intrinsic to the genre, but their screenplays function both as fables about redemption and as thrillers as grotesque as any of O’Connor’s horrifying instruments or objects of salvation.

A study of the films Calvary and In Bruges, then, will profit from an understanding of O’Connor’s thematic praxis. Like theirs, O’Connor’s vision is not overtly Christian but instead “Christ-haunted.” Christian themes are lurking just below the surface, felt but not necessarily overt. Her characters are outcasts and rejects; they are often marginalized because of a physical defect or
a crime. Most express a nihilistic, bleak, or atheistic view of the world, and they are arrogant yet ignorant of their hubris. But these exiles of the spirit are not converted or punished at the hands of some morally righteous do-gooder. In fact, as in, for example, “The Lame Shall Enter First” (1965), it is often the do-gooder himself who must be rehabilitated because he has become smug, complacent, even what Davis J. Leigh calls “pharisaical.” O’Connor eschews as pabulum the easy narratives in which evil is always conquered by good. She stated that “[h]er subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil,” and that in many of her stories “the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace.” She mediates the possibilities for redemption not through conventionally holy or pious agents, but almost accidentally, through characters as flawed as those they redeem. She asserts that her proper function as a Catholic writer is to map the journey of the spirit “into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not congenial.” Describing this aspect of her work, she says:

It is hard enough for [the reader] to suspend his disbelief and to accept an anagogical level of action at all, harder still for him to accept its action in an obviously grotesque character. He has the mistaken notion that a concern with grace is a concern with exalted human behavior, that it is a pretentious concern. . . . Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence.

We see this technique in both *Calvary* and *In Bruges*, whose characters represent the very opposite of “exalted human behavior.” While Father James Lavelle in *Calvary* is a priest, he is also a recovering alcoholic who has come to the priesthood later in life. He does not even represent a pious role model for his parishioners; rather, they despise him as the representative of a corrupt institution with nothing to offer them. Similarly, Ken and Ray from *In Bruges* are literal outlaws, on the run not only from conventional law and order but also from their punitive gangland boss. Yet both films offer redemptive grace to these misfits amidst the same kinds of “uncongenial” and “strange places” where O’Connor locates her fiction.

We can explore the technique of several of Flannery O’Connor’s most well-known short stories to further identify the tropes and motifs that the McDonagh brothers self-consciously co-opt. In “A Good Man is Hard To Find” (1955), for example, “the Misfit”—a notorious criminal—murders an entire family. His final act is to murder the Grandmother, but not before she has recognized and claimed a kinship with him that brings her to redemption.
Her epiphany, achieved moments before her death, is brought about by a depraved and coldblooded murderer. He paves her way to Paradise and yet is more sinful than she is. Simplistic Christian hermeneutics might find this methodology aberrant, but O'Connor said of this story that “violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace.” The story’s realistic plot encodes a paradigmatic narrative—the anagogical vision—of the Grandmother’s journey to salvation. The agent of her transformation operates “in the territory of the devil,” delivering the shock which destroys her apathetic and narrow smugness.

Peripeteia is a conventional plot device, but what distinguishes its use in the hands of Flannery O’Connor and the McDonagh brothers is that good is achieved through evil, and that often those in most need of redemptive grace are those who seem superficially content or pious. O’Connor’s short story “Good Country People” (1955) demonstrates this well. The protagonist, Joy, holds a Ph.D. in philosophy but is stuck at home with her mother because of a physical disability. She despises everyone around her as ignorant and unenlightened and has changed her name from Joy—which she finds unsuitable for a philosopher schooled in the darkness in the world—to Hulga, a moniker she thinks of as her “highest creative act.” The comedy of these incongruities dramatizes another “anagogical vision.” Hulga’s existential malaise must be healed, as, like Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation” (1965), she is brought from damnation to the brink of Purgatory, a positioning which makes possible the transformative purge of sin that Susan Srigley has argued is intrinsic to O’Connor’s theology. The agent of this change, the aptly named Manley Pointer, performs nihilism even bleaker than Hulga’s, although her arrogance blinds her into judging him just another ignorant rube. The shock of the ironic reversal he administers to Hulga strips her not only of her wooden leg but of her pride and of her conceit. But although Manley Pointer, the fake Bible salesman who carries condoms and whisky, seems to have out-Hulgaed Hulga, the revelation of his cynical swindling reveals yet another level of her illusion. For in the last paragraph of the story, after he has left her helpless and bewildered in a hayloft, “she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.” Manley Pointer is walking on water. O’Connor again locates a spiritual metanoia in the territory of the devil. For, despite all appearances, Manley Pointer redeems Hulga by forcing her to concede and confess her joyless nihilism and thus enables her to be saved.

The girl with Ph.D. is not better or wiser than everyone else but instead is spiritually numb. Flannery O’Connor confounds our expectations; her work is consciously disruptive of conventional pieties, yet her characters achieve grace.
in the end. Both *Calvary* and *In Bruges* appropriate O’Connor’s ironic reversals as they document the travels of misfits and sinners who become catalysts and agents of salvation. Like Joy-Hulga, Father James Lavelle ought to “know better,” but does not. Similarly, Ken, the hitman hiding out in Bruges, claims not to believe in Purgatory but gives his life to shorten his colleague Ray’s time there. In these films, to quote O’Connor again, “[o]ften the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence.”15 We are never quite sure who will deserve redemption and who will be the vehicle for grace—until the climactic moment when it happens.

Of the two films, perhaps John Martin McDonagh’s most recent work, 2014’s *Calvary*, most explicitly examines the function of grace in the “territory of the devil” as it interrogates the roles of culpability and atonement in a culture that denies that it is “Christ-haunted.” The screenplay’s sub-text suggests a need for charity and forgiveness in a fallen world, but this need is fed through revenge and pride rather than compassion. In fact, the film seems to dramatize O’Connor’s dictum that “evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.”16 Its title alludes, of course, to Christ’s place of crucifixion and its protagonist is a priest, Father James Lavelle, who has taken holy orders later in life after the death of his wife and the adulthood of his daughter Fiona. He is also a deeply flawed human being who “has no answer” and has “nothing to say,” not only in response to confessions of sin but even to his own daughter, who has attempted suicide. In the remote seaside village of atheists and indifferents, a desert of spiritual dryness, Father James is a good man frustrated and silenced by the apparent meaninglessness of the priesthood and his inability to effect change in his parishioners. In true O’Connor style, the film’s focus is not on the obvious sinners but on the redemption of Father James himself through the evil and violence of others. Father James must be moved from passive observance of the community to acceptance of his role as their scapegoat, as he eventually offers himself willingly as sacrificial victim for the sins of a Church which has tolerated and covered up systematic abuse of children. The agents of his change are the sinful parishioners—which include even a cannibalistic serial killer—all of whom he ultimately is able to forgive before he goes to the place appointed for his death. The plot, then, has affinities with both “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People” in its use of “any indifferent thing” as an instrument for effecting good.

Lavelle’s epiphany is wrought through O’Connor-esque violence. The film seeks to shock us from its opening line, uttered in the darkness of the confessional by an unidentified voice: “I first knew the taste of semen when I was seven years old.” The camera does not show us the face of the speaker,
unnamed until the final showdown on the beach at the end of the film, but stays closely on Lavelle to gauge his reaction. His answer undercuts the shock with dark humor but also frames the film like a play, as he comments, seemingly without emotion, on the “arresting opening line” of his own drama. This device highlights his choice to play the role that this conversation sets out for him. Another character later describes himself as playing “the clichéd role of the atheist doctor”; Father James tells Fiona that there might be a “third-act revelation” like a play at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. In some ways, Father James is acting the role of a priest, as he self-consciously puts on its uniform of the old-fashioned soutane, a costume that tells his audience who he is. In the third act, he flees from the village, hoping to change his fate, but then willingly returns and finally commits to playing his chosen role. He wills himself to return and wear the soutane again.

Lavelle's enactment of the role of a priest called “Father James” might remind us that the early Church dramatized its liturgy; what we might now call “plays,” such as the “Quem Quaeritis” from the tenth century, or the twelfth-century French Jeu D’Adam, represent what Michael Kobialka calls “the performance of meaning”: ritualistic enactment of Biblical texts with roles taken by priests as part of, for example, an Easter service. This “liturgical drama” erased the boundaries between sacrament and narrative as a way to interpret theology for the lay community. Calvary can be read, like these early plays, as an allegory of Holy Week—when Christ entered Jerusalem and initiated the events which led to his death—in a new script with Father James Lavelle as the lead. The unseen parishioner in the confessional sets the drama in motion by announcing that, because a priest, now dead, repeatedly and brutally abused him, he will revenge himself on the Church as a whole. Father James must personify an institution which, as the following dialogue from the screenplay reveals, has not voiced a response to its accusers:

LAVELLE: Why don’t you make a formal complaint? You can testify—
MAN’S VOICE (O.S.): The man’s dead.
(There is silence for a moment.)
LAVELLE: I don’t know what to say to you. I have no answer for you, I’m sorry.
MAN’S VOICE (O.S.): What good would it do anyway, if he were still alive? What’d be the point in killing the bastard? That’d be no news. There’s no point in killing a bad priest. But killing a good one? That’d be a shock, now. They wouldn’t know what to make of that.
The Church—in the person of Father James Lavelle, the “good priest who will be sacrificed—stands condemned for its silence and indifference. The “shock” that the off-screen speaker wants to administer is familiar to us from the stories of Flannery O’Connor; a violent act will move the impenitent from spiritual alienation to reception of grace.

McDonagh sets his fable in an Irish coastal village that is as Gothic and bizarre as any community in the works of Flannery O’Connor. The inhabitants of the village seem like the emblematic figures in a medieval Everyman play rather than realistic characters, and they represent the gamut of the Deadly Sins. Amongst the adultery and wife-beating, the drug use and the drinking, Father James encounters several lost souls whom he counsels, such as Milo, the young man who feels that there is nothing for him in the village, or the sinful Veronica, the woman caught in adultery. Michael Fitzgerald, the wealthy but corrupt stock-broker, wants to contribute a huge sum of money to the Church as penance for his financial sins, but Father James makes it clear that this is not the medieval Church where we can pay for indulgences. Like Joy/Hulga in O’Connor’s story, each of the villagers is full of ennui and cynical despair, but cannot seem to help reaching out to the familiar Institution of the Church for help. Other characters share the anomie of a post-Christian Ireland, where the Church—figured in Father James in his soutane—has seemingly abandoned and betrayed them. As one reviewer says, in this film Father James “is seen as a symbol of a broken past, not a hopeful future. What emerges is an image of today’s Church struggling to act as a wounded healer in a deeply wounded community.” That the healer is himself wounded echoes the dynamic of O’Connor’s ironic reversals.

This Irish territory of the devil is not just a morality play but a mystery story; we do not know who the would-be assassin is and it could be any of this ragged gang of apostates. Like O’Connor, McDonagh represents his anagogical vision in a present-day comedy of the grotesque. We know from the first scene that Father James is facing assassination. We are introduced to the potential assassins, each of whom is given a plausible profile for murderous rage. Initially, the viewer might think that the film is about Father James discovering—in a conventional race against the clock—who it is that threatened him in the confessional so that he can put a stop to it and save his own life. It turns out, however, that that is not the arc of the story at all. Father James Lavelle has known from the opening scene in the confessional who his murderer will be; he has recognized the voice, as he tells the Bishop, but he chooses not to reveal to him—or to us—who it is. The realistic mode of this contemporary film encodes a “liturgical drama” of personal sin and
forgiveness. Father James grieves for his dead wife, his suicidal daughter, and ultimately for the recalcitrant and nihilistic parishioners whom he cannot seem to help or heal. He forgives his daughter for attempting suicide, and, in a turning point in the film, goes to the prison to interview and console even the cannibalistic serial killer Freddie Joyce, an act of love for the sinner for which he is scorned by his parishioners. They cannot understand forgiveness, an error which underlies the major trajectory of the plot, as it is the unknown murderer’s inability to forgive which has impelled him to seek vigilante justice instead of mercy. Like “The Misfit” in O’Connor’s story, the murderer is the unwitting instrument for Lavelle’s “moment of grace.”

The film narrates Lavelle’s journey towards grace, but its fable also constructs him as the redeemer of his community, whose death inspires not retribution but a series of acts of forgiveness. The film operates as an allegory of the events of Holy Week; just as Christ knew who it was who would betray him, Father James has known from the first moment of the film who his murderer will be. In a wonderfully O’Connor-esque moment, Father James, having told the Bishop about his plight, watches him lick sticky donut residue from his fingers in a grotesque parody of Pilate washing his hands of Christ. Calvary has overt Christian allusions but it can also be read as a larger, more mythic drama, suggesting the archetypal connections between the Christian mythos, the sacrifice of the Fisher King, or the ancient Jewish ritual of the scapegoat. This is an explicit thematic link with the work of John Michael McDonagh’s brother Martin McDonagh, and especially his 2008 film In Bruges, which also considers atonement, sacrifice, and the appropriate expiation for sin.

In Bruges has a cast of characters that could have walked out of a Flannery O’Connor story; they are all—bar one—thieves, murderers, and gun or drug dealers. The three main characters come from an under-world: gangland, where human life is traded in cycles of revenge. Even the protagonist’s beautiful love-interest turns out to be a petty criminal who runs drugs and robs tourists. Here again, evil is not a “problem to be solved,” as O’Connor puts it, but a background ambiance against which good must struggle to rise. In fact, Bruges stands in for Purgatory, in between Hell and Heaven, the realm of sinners who seek to purge off their sins and climb towards Paradise.

Martin McDonagh has commented in a number of interviews that the germ of the film was the conflicting reactions he personally had to the medieval beauty of the city of Bruges; on the one hand he was charmed and delighted by its picturesque qualities; on the other hand, he became a little bit bored and even rebellious after absorbing the huge amount of “culture” foisted on a wanderer of its well-preserved streets. These antitheses—boredom
and delight—inform the characterizations of Ray and Ken: two hit men sent from London to lie low in Belgium. Like his brother’s _Calvary_, Martin McDonagh’s film is deeply philosophical in its treatment of Ray’s culpability; it asks how, if at all, he can atone for his accidental murder of a child. Ray’s Purgatory is his remorseful anguish; in a more theological sense, Bruges becomes Purgatory in its “inbetweeny” status, as he calls it, between a “shit-hole” and a “fairy-tale.” Ray, tortured by boredom and shame, is a sulky, foot-shuffling, moody child in a spiritual time-out, waiting for his fate to be decided by Harry Waters, the inflexible Arbiter of justice who is off-screen for two-thirds of the film, and for whom Bruges is a childhood fantasy of Paradise. If Ray’s story is an anagogical journey, Ken is the catalyst for transformation, the “agent of the devil” who administers O’Connor’s necessary shock.

It is Ken and Ray’s viewing of Hieronymus Bosch’s surreal painting “The Last Judgment” in the Groeninge Museum which prompts a discussion about Purgatory. As they study the triptych Ray is clearly contemplating how he will be judged and asks Ken if he believes in “all that stuff.” When Ken begins to talk about the painting’s subject, Ray interjects: “Purgatory’s kind of like the inbetweeny one. You weren’t really shit, but you weren’t all that great, either.” Ken admits that although he was raised Catholic and then rejected most of its teachings, he still tries to lead what he calls a “good” life, despite the fact that he has been a hired killer for many years. We are plunged into moral ambiguity. Like _Calvary_, the film interrogates our certainties about good and evil. Ray and Ken’s conversation is unfinished, but it clearly creates sympathy in Ken for the agony Ray is experiencing after killing a child on his first job as a hit man. Here we see shades of the Misfit or Manley Pointer: characters who, though hardly sinless, effect transformation in the life of another. Ken has killed many people, but the film’s focus is on the possibility for redemption for Ray.

In the flashback which shows us the killing that initiates the action we see two sides of a confessional—clearly an important location in the work of both brothers—which divides the murderer by a wooden partition from his victim. The shooting, then, is literally framed within the rituals of sin and absolution. The film makes clear that Ray’s sin is not the murder of the priest, but the unintentional collateral death of the little boy waiting to confess. Ray’s sullen, nail-bitten moodiness is not just because he is a sulky child being dragged around a medieval museum—although he is, as his refusal to climb towers for a view, or to wait in line to touch a holy relic, make clear—but because he is, as he puts it, “trying to get his head round” the fact that he has killed a little boy. The movie asks if and how Ray might purge off his sin and whether he can achieve—or be granted—any kind of grace. Bruges may be “the territory of
the devil” but as the film unfolds we establish that it clearly is not Hell, despite
the demonic figures who step out of Bosch’s painting into the film’s final
scene. Bruges is only Purgatory, because of the “inbetweeny” potential for
mercy that it offers. Both Srigley and Leigh comment extensively on
O’Connor’s ideas about the “purgatorial vision” which illuminates her
characters’ complacent blindness as they are purified. In the same way, while
Ray is the character waiting to find out if he is damned, Ken is suddenly able
to see that he must sacrifice himself to enable his friend’s redemption.

When Ken gets the call from the still unseen Harry directing him to
assassinate Ray (the camera traces Ken’s reactions minutely as he listens to the
voice on the phone in an extraordinary six-minute shot) we hear and see his
growing horror at being directed to kill the “boy,” whom he now regards as a
tragically vulnerable neophyte. Harry’s code of ethics is laid out starkly:

Harry: When it all comes down to it he blew the head off a
fucking little kid. And you brought him in, Ken. So if the
buck doesn’t stop with him where does it stop?
Ken: It stops with me, Harry. That’s an easy one.

Ken, whose wife’s death has been avenged by Harry, must choose between
Harry’s simple but rigid system of retributive justice and the mercy he wants to
extend to his fallen protégé. Although Ken does follow orders and obtains the
gun to shoot Ray, assuring the gun dealer Yuri that he will indeed “do it,” and
following Ray to the children’s play area in order to kill him, he is completely
arrested when he sees the tearful Ray put a gun to his own head. Rather than
shooting Ray or even allowing him to commit suicide, he stops him. In one of
the movie’s many moments of black comedy, the two hit men retreat to the
shelter of the children’s climbing equipment.21 As they sit boxed in together,
they seem to be in a confessional, where Ken, now the Father Confessor, hears
Ray state his sins and tries to offer him absolution. Ray sobs “I killed a little
boy!” as Ken reaches out and holds him like a father comforting a child. His
response is the third-act revelation that changes the course of the plot:

Then save the next little boy. Just go away somewhere, get
out of this business, and try to do something good. You’re
not going to help anybody dead. You’re not going to bring
that boy back. But you might save the next one.22

Ken offers Ray redemption in that, as he later says to Harry: "The boy has the
capacity to change. The boy has the capacity to do something decent with his
But Harry’s rules about honor mean that, as Ken let Ray go, Ken himself must now pay the price for the death of the child.

The theological context of Ken’s forgiveness is underscored by the film’s setting at Christmas, with angelic choirs of children singing carols on the streets and decorations in the hotel. Marie the innkeeper—the only unambiguously good character in the whole movie, who tries to interpose herself physically into the final shoot-out to save Ray—is heavily pregnant, and thus seems to stand for the Virgin Mary figuring the promise of rebirth and salvation. In the second scene of the film she even tells Ken and Ray that her hotel is fully booked because of Christmas, and that there is no (more) room at the inn. These allusions suggest the story of Christ’s Incarnation, which in itself implies his Crucifixion, as the archetype of Ray and Ken’s negotiation of death and purgatory, as Irina Melnikova points out. The film is another anagogical fable which tracks the soul’s journey through violence to the shock of grace.

After Harry learns that Ken has let Ray escape he comes to Bruges himself to resolve the “matter of honor.” He takes Ken up the bell tower to kill him, only to learn that the real object of his revenge, Ray, is back in Bruges. Ken’s fatal leap from the tower in his attempt to warn Ray is his final willing act of sacrifice, like that of Father James in Calvary (both roles being played by Brendan Gleeson in these two films by two brothers). However, Ken’s death is not expiation enough for Harry, who is determined to hunt Ray down. But in the final scene it is Jimmy the dwarf, dressed as a child for the Boschean film-within-the film, who is the child who dies in place of Ray. Just as Ray kills the child accidentally in the confessional because his bullets pass through the priest’s body, so the dwarf is a substitute for Ray the fun-seeking child, and in an exact parallel to the murder that precipitates the action of the film, Harry shoots at Ray but the bullets pass through his body and blows the head off the “little boy.” The cycle of retribution ends as Harry then shoots himself in the head, because it is now he who has killed a little boy.

Harry is dead because he has followed his own code of justice that commands an Old Testament eye for an eye. Ken, however, has refused to follow this code. The mercy he extends has instead required him to willingly sacrifice himself for Ray, in the hope that this act might bring redemption and change. Ultimately, perhaps it brings grace only to Ken himself. Similarly, in Calvary, Father James accepts his role as scapegoat to atone for the sins of the Church in the hope that the village, as microcosm, might forgive and heal. In the final wordless scene, Fiona goes to the prison to visit the killer to forgive him. She becomes the emblem of healing, with her bandaged wrists a reminder
of her own suicide attempt, her human frailty forgiven by her father before he died.

These two films offer readings of Flannery O’Connor’s anagogical vision. They use her techniques to tell stories about honour among thieves, about sinners who are saved, and about the martyrdom of the damned. In violent and contemporary genres, they co-opt her tropes and replicate her narratives about redemptive grace. David Edelstein has written that the McDonagh brothers “share a penchant for high moral seriousness enlivened—often jarringly—by an antic Hibernian spirit.”

We see this seriousness in the nuanced movies that both entertain and examine large theological questions in homage to O’Connor’s concern with the soul’s journey.

Notes

2 Emily Belz, “This movie is not for hipsters.” *World Magazine*, August 2014.
7 “On Her Own Work,” *Mystery and Manners*, 118.
9 Ibid., 204.
10 “On Her Own Work,” *Mystery and Manners*, 112.
13 “Good Country People,” 291.
14 In *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), Ralph Wood suggests that Pointer is only a “pseudo-savior,” a view affirmed by Davis S. Leigh, SJ, but to my mind, a savior is a savior. Pointer points the way; he is the truth and the light for Hulga.
16 Ibid., 209.

20 *In Bruges.* Dir. Martin McDonagh, 2008.

21 Catherine O’Brien points out that this conversion takes place in a children’s playground in a park, which she connects to Augustine’s epiphany in a garden. “In Bruges: Heaven or Hell?” *Literature and Theology* 26.1 (March 2012), 102.

22 *In Bruges.*

23 Ibid.


I'm not anxious to make films that have a message. Generally speaking, I look for a story that is a reflection on the modes and manners of the times.

~Ralph Thomas, Director, The High Bright Sun

By November 1964, upon the premiere of The High Bright Sun, the cycle of British Empire in danger films came to an end, leaving very little in danger to protect, either through strategic fight or flight, or via putative moral resolution in conjunction with benevolent justice. The paper will focus on how this particular Rank Organization film reveals the erosion of British masculine power along with an expressed cynicism towards the British project of decolonialization. Oftentimes, the British comes across as silly, or even nihilistic, albeit remaining dogged in their duty. The role of American actors will be to magnify the loss of British power by playing characters that seem to counter British eccentricities. While cynical and weary about upholding the British imperial project, The High Bright Sun offers little sympathy for anti-colonial causes or sentiments. Sitting safely on the political fence, the film does not make any attempts to undertake a deep analysis into the multivariate troubles in Cyprus; the violence against the British is portrayed as not being ideological, but a generic brand of evil. This puts the film into the category of post empire cinema that Jon Cowans interestingly calls “liberal colonialist film.” Unlike more conservative colonialist films, he argues that “liberal colonialist” cinema in some cases went so far as to actually help undermine key
elements of colonialism. But minimally, “Postwar films on colonialism turned increasing ambivalent...creating new functions for the genre.” While manifesting this very sense of unease and ambiguity about decolonization, *The High Bright Sun* not only helped in fashioning a myth of British colonial benevolence in Cyprus and elsewhere that is now being punctured by new evidence, but also played a key role in expanding the James Bond Franchise which had already begun in 1962 with *Doctor No*.

British Empire in danger films had tried to appeal to the American Cold War and invoke world sympathy, by playing up the idea of the British Empire as the upholder as well as protector of western values which seemed to be imperiled on numerous political, social, and cultural fronts, as opposed to an empire that conquered, subjugated, and oppressed millions around the globe. Owing to the need for a trans-Atlantic appeal, Americans starred in feature roles in *The Planter’s Wife* (1952), *The 7th Dawn* (1964) *Safari* (1956), *Elephant Walk* (1954), *Something of Value* (1957), *Exodus* (1960), *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966), and *Bhowani Junction* (1956). From the very beginning, this sub-genre of the larger British Empire genre has posed a problem for film historians. Jeffrey Richards, in his still venerated 1973 classic study of Imperial film *Visions of Yesterday*, dispenses with them in one significant paragraph:

> Many films have sought to depict the passing of the British Empire: in Kenya (*Simba, Safari, Something of Value*), Malaya (*The Planter’s Wife, The Seventh Dawn*), Palestine (*Judith, Exodus, Cast A Giant Shadow*), Cyprus (*The High Bright Sun*) and India (*Bhowani Junction, Nine Hours to Rama*). But as Leslie Halliwell has commented: ‘The emergence of new states is a painful business as a rule and most of these films give the impression of being so much tasteless picking at sore points.’ I have excluded these films from discussion either because they are simply action pictures or romantic dramas which have introduced Mau Mau or Malayan terrorists for the sake of topical colour, or because they fall into the school of films which is anti-Imperial and therefore, lies outside the scope of this study.”

Richards also excludes what he terms “Dominion Westerns” such as the Australian *Eureka Stockade* (1948), or the Canadian “Mountie” pictures, such as *Macdonald of the Mounties* (1952) and *O’Rourke of the Royal Mounted* (1953), which he opines are Hollywood alternatives to the otherwise classic cowboy/western films. In *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Culture*, James Chapman and
Nicholas J. Cull boldly assert that they have written “the first study of the cinema of empire in over 35 years,” which is a commentary on the cinema of empire being considered distasteful for much of the period since *Visions of Yesterday* owing to “…its perceived ideological reaction and cultural conservatism.” Analogously, it must be noted that *Zulu* (1964) has been included on a website list of “the top 10 conservative films of the modern era” in addition to being “…the most influential war film of the modern era.” Chapman and Cull state, “When the cinema of empire returned in the 1950s, it took on a very different hue. The pervading theme of British-made empire films of this period is the idea of the empire under threat?”; this reinforces the notion of an empire imperiling sub-genre of late imperial cinema. Yet, they devoted only one chapter to this sub-genre through the Hollywood film *Elephant Walk* (1954) and the overbearing influence of the CIA in its ideological slant as being less distasteful to Indians. Pertinently, the old imperial adventure film did make a comeback in the 1950s with clones such as *King of the Khyber Rifles* (1953) and *Storm over the Nile* (1955), a blatant rip-off of *The Four Feathers* (1939). The swan song of the old style imperial adventure was enlivened with the Rank Organization’s *North West Frontier* (1959), also known as *Flame over India* “that both harks back to the empire cinema of the 1930s and anticipates the more critical examination of the imperial project that would emerge in the 1960s.” These films were clearly derivative in that they were seeking to ride the wave of popularity of the American western/cowboys-Indians genre. Similarly, Chapman and Cull opine that films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Zulu* (1964), and *Khartoum* (1966) are not innately ideological or imperial adventure films; instead, all of them fall under the genre of the Hollywood blockbuster epic, containing merely a patina of ambivalence about the enterprise of empire.

As Jonathan Stubbs observes, “*The High Bright Sun* is a striking departure from the heroic narratives normally associated with British imperial cinema, but at the same time it did little to question the underlying assumptions of imperial ideology.” The *High Bright Sun* (1965) is the first British action/adventure empire in danger film set in Cyprus during the EOKA (*Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston—National Organization of Cypriot Fighters*) that depicts the revolt against British occupation in the 1950s. They demanded *enosis*, union with Greece, which was turned down by the British. EOKA militants killed as many as 105 British troops between 1955 and 1959.

*The High Bright Sun* was directed by Ralph Thomas, and produced by Betty Box, based on a novel by Ian Stuart Black, who also wrote its screenplay. As was the case with his fellow novelist Ian Fleming, Black had served in British
intelligence during the Second World War; however unlike the creator of James Bond, he served with RAF Intelligence in the Middle East as opposed to the Naval intelligence. It features British actors Dirk Bogarde and Denholm Elliot, American actress Susan Strasberg, as well as George Chakiris, a Greek American dancer and actor best known for the 1961 film *West Side Story*; it was for this move that he had won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Bernardo, a leader of the Puerto Rican “Sharks” gang. The studio hoped the addition of American actors would enhance the market share in the United States and internationally. It also “starred” the 1st Battalion Duke of Edinburgh’s Royal Regiment (Berkshire and Wiltshire).

Despite the fact that Battalion was stationed in Malta, an opportunity was presented to select members of each Company to visit Bari and the Gargano in Italy where this film was made to serve as extras. Apart from Army pay, they were also paid by the film company, leaving no doubt for a pleasant tour of the Cold War duty. At that time, producer Betty Box remarked, “we let the War Office see the script and it was quickly agreed that from a sensible propaganda point of view in a film about Cyprus it must be preferable to use pucka servicemen rather than a load of sloppy Italian extras.” Director Thomas portrays British soldiers as being dogged in their duty. Turks meanwhile are shown to be conspicuous by their complete absence, which is interesting since the British employed them as police in Cyprus. To its credit, the movie does feature some exotic Italian locales, along with a few unexpectedly gritty and contemporary depictions of guerilla war. Going beyond a story of tough love and conflicting loyalties between a British soldier and an American civilian situated in Cyprus, its portrayal of Dirk Bogarde’s Major McGuire is reminiscent of Sean Connery’s characterization of James Bond as just “a dull prosaic English policeman.”

With *The High Bright Sun*, Betty Box and Ralph Thomas had managed to convince Dirk Bogarde to do a ninth film for them and Rank. Bogarde had previously played in the empire in danger Rank film *Simba* (1955) about the Mau-Mau revolt in Kenya. Box recalled that this was the only time in their ten-year association when Dirk was “a less than happy member of the unit.” Apparently, the heel of Italy did not agree with him as he demeaned the city of Foggia by terming it as “Hot Watford,” and complained about his “rather iron curtainy hotel.” In fact, midway through film production, Bogarde and Thomas reportedly had a huge fight, with the former screaming, “Finish the fucking film and get me home.” As a matter of fact, he was suffering from an inflamed liver and heatstroke, but he persisted in his work with a dogged determination that was congruous with his on-screen character Major McGuire. However, it would be fair to surmise that he was not
wholeheartedly involved in the project. By now, he had done a couple of brilliant films for director Joseph Losey—*The Servant* (1963) and *King and Country* (1964)—and he could discern the difference between them and the Thomas-Box Rank “potboiler” production. The film reviewer for *The Times* wrote about his plight:

Before the beginning of his partnership with Mr. Joseph Losey, Mr. Dirk Bogarde made rather a specialty of being splendid in appalling films. Here he is at it again; while on the screen, delivering Mr. Ian Stuart Black’s trite and improbable lines, our interest is aroused and we can even, by careful suspension of our critical faculties, believe one or two of them to be witty or intelligent. But really Mr. Bogarde is battling against impossible odds.21

Apart from Dirk Bogarde, other reviewers expressed slightly kinder opinions about this film. Here is an excerpt from the February 6, 1965 review for *The Tablet*:

So let us begin with soldiers….*The High Bright Sun* (Leicester Square Theatre, A certificate)….is a story of divided loyalties, of ambush, murder and confused idealism, and Ralph Thomas, who directs from a script by the author of the original novel, Ian Stuart Black, has not done a great deal to make it more than one among many such films of action within an historical framework. But all the same, this is a picture worth seeing: for one thing the Eastman color Cyprus backgrounds are wonderfully beautiful in their sun-bleached distances….And then the dialogue is extremely sharp, with an authenticity that rarely fails—a difficult thing to pull off in a film as deliberately “British” as this.22

It may be helpful to outline a brief summary of the plot and its characters. Set in 1957 in Cyprus, Juno Kozani (Susan Strasberg), a Cypriot-American archaeology student, is carrying out research into some unspecified part of the history of the island.23 She resides with an old friend and classmate of her father, Dr. Andros (Joseph Furst). After an opening scene where she avoids being stabbed by two Greek-Cypriot youths because her accent implies that she is “American, not English,” she witnesses the gruesome death of two British soldiers who are ambushed by EOKA terrorists. In a daze or haze (a
recurrent theme that Strasberg seems to underscore throughout the duration of the film), Juno is unable to identify the killers to the local British intelligence officer, the suspicious, stiff-upper-lipped, and cynical Major McGuire (Dirk Bogarde), who at one point, threatens her to tell the truth or else he will deport her back to “Coca-Cola Land.” For McGuire, Juno represents “…both an uncooperative colonial subject and the citizen of an overbearing postcolonial superpower.” She then stumbles into a terrorist cell meeting only to realize that the man wanted by British authorities, EOKA leader General Skyros (Gregoire Aslan), a fictional stand in for the actual EOKA leader Colonel George Grivas, is hidden by her host Dr. Andros, who is now revealed as an EOKA collaborator.

George Chakiris plays Haghios, an EOKA fighter, who is smart, young, suave, rich, drives a great car, and dresses well; at the same time, he is fanatically dedicated to the cause. In a memorable scene, when he gets stopped at a British checkpoint due to curfew violations, he is told by a British soldier, “Long way from home, aren’t you?” to which he responds with the classic colonial liberation retort, “Aren’t you?” This is one of the few times sympathy is invoked for an anti-colonial cause. He now decides that Juno must be eliminated because of what she saw as well as her growing romantic relationship with McGuire, who is undergoing a messy divorce, and looking for romantic solace. Although Haghios organizes an ambush to kill Juno on her way to the airport, Dr. Andros’s son Emile (Colin Campbell), who has a crush on Juno, gets killed while trying to save her. (Any opportunity for a deeper exposition of a romantic and ideological conflict is totally lost on the character of Emile.)

Juno not only manages to escape her murderers, but she also thwarts the sexual advances of a lascivious Cypriot businessman who “has seen pictures of American girls in magazines” before being rescued by McGuire. He brings her to his apartment, the “McGuire Hilton,” which remains totally unguarded for some inexplicable reason, given that it is, after all, the residence of a top British intelligence officer. Thereafter, Haghios leads an attack on McGuire’s apartment which fails after much gunplay and bombs with the assistance of a drunken and equally cynical British intelligence officer, Baker (Denholm Elliot), who had an affair with McGuire’s wife, as did most of the regiment as it turns out. Juno then flies to Athens and sees Haghios on the plane, expecting the worst. Baker also gets on the plane. Upon arrival, Haghios tries to kill her. Baker intervenes, but is shot dead by Haghios, who in turn is killed by McGuire, who happens to be at the Athens airport in the wake of a transfer (as a punishment) from his C.O for concealing Miss Kozani. In the end, Juno reunites with McGuire.
Throughout the movie, there appears a mysterious figure, shown as Prinos in the credits, who is constantly trailing McGuire. Described as a “sneaky little bastard with a bald head and big nose,” he is played by George Pastell, a Rank regular character actor who specialized in playing devious, sinister, foreign, Middle-Eastern types. He turns out to be a private detective hired by McGuire’s wife who, as the final credits begin to roll, serves the Major with divorce papers, citing Juno as the other woman. McGuire tells Juno that “You better get your lawyer to sort it out….After all, it is a sort of justice” in what turns out to be the film’s last line. The relationship with the American Juno ends up being some sort of compensation for a dispiriting experience in holding up the British Empire. Notably, Nigel Stock plays the stereotypical, ineffectual, loony, pipe-smoking Colonial Blimp type C.O. who spends his time surreptitiously reading letters in women’s magazines.

According to a review in Variety, “Betty E. Box and Ralph Thomas elected to make this film because they regarded it as ‘a suspenseful drama which could be played against any background.’” As mentioned before, no attempt was made to depict a deeper and more relevant analysis of the prevailing situation in Cyprus (not that this should be expected), which admittedly is a complicated enough endeavor to daunt any historian, let alone a humble filmmaker who is clearly not interested in making message films. In fact, many reviewers in Britain took objection to this stated divorce between action and romance, and the actual political events unfolding in Cyprus, indicating an apparent unease about Britain’s role in the world. However, motives or the attitudes of the principle characters are never explored beyond superficial emotions at best.

Yet, the mostly bland, even camp, dialogue can be revealing, especially as regards the general attitudes towards Americans, the British, and most importantly, British colonialism. Juno comes across as trying to be a neutral American amidst the state of emergency proclaimed by the British. “You are just a tourist here,” Maguire tells her, but when people are murdered “just across the sea from the birthplace of democracy”….one needs to take a stand, “just because you happen to be here” because “it is your duty.”

At one point, Juno claims that she does not understand politics. Rather than choosing to study the past, she should welcome “the great and glorious future of Cyprus,” Haghios trumpets. After his refusal of the “Turkish coffee,” a discussion of American instant coffee ensues at a dinner party. (Actually both Greek and Turkish Cypriots make their coffee the same way.) Subsequently, Haghios asks Juno if Americans also have any real coffee. She replies in the affirmative, adding that not everything is instant or fake in America. To which Haghios provocatively responds, “Then do you have any real people to drink it?” He goes on to question her Greek Cypriot patriotism, because she
proclaims she is now an American. This is not an insignificant point, considering the Greek American interest in Cyprus at the time. Skyros himself implores Juno, “Do you not have any sympathy with your people and our cause?” The dialogue between McGuire and Juno varies from banal “British men never make passes in cars” (McGuire), “But only because they make such small cars” (Juno), to more dramatic, “There are no rules, just survival….What makes you think I am any more gentle than they are?” (McGuire) Here the British officer implies that in order to fight terrorism one must resort to brutal methods.

That McGuire is not a nice guy becomes evident when he tries to flip Dr. Andros to the British side as a double agent by threatening to reveal to his companions that it was his son Emile who had killed the two EOKA gunmen in order to protect Juno. “And you know what that means,” he sinisterly intones. Juno wants to be impartial, but she eventually sides with the British soldier hero: “You are a respectable officer in the British army—Sun never sets and all that—You will never behave like Skyros.”

Particularly revealing are two discussions between Major McGuire and Dr. Andros which can be easily overlooked in the screenplay as throw-away lines. The first one occurs when McGuire, during the course of questioning Andros says, “We don’t live in very liberal times, do we Doctor?” After glancing over to a servant outside the window, whom he suspects of being a spy, he launches into a sarcastic commentary on how difficult it becomes these days to find good servants in Britain who are as loyal, servile, and conscientious as this chap. Yet even more extraordinary is the exchange where Dr. Andros, who appears to be pro-British on the surface, steadfastly denies any involvement with terrorists, to which Major McGuire responds, “If there is one thing we British hate more than an enemy it is a hypocrite….You see we are such superb hypocrites ourselves.”

Finally, there is a formal visual composition on the screen that deserves special mention because it is crucial to the ideology of the film. When the viewer first enters McGuire’s apartment, there is a lovingly-executed, slow-tracking shot of the meticulously spread out collection of a British officer’s entire kit, cap, swagger stick, and grooming accessories that clearly establishes the bona fide of Major McGuire himself and his role in the film as a British officer who upholds colonial order, regardless of how taxing and unappreciated it appears. Yet, it is intertwined with a strong sense of nostalgia for lost dignity and masculine authority. McGuire’s cynicism about his job in addition to his divorce from an unfaithful wife makes him an example of what Wendy Webster refers to as “the loss of British male authority and the End of Empire” found in one of her categories of the post-empire film.”27 As Stubbs
observes, “Despite his authoritative personality and robust physicality, McGuire is far removed from the heroic martial masculinity associated with the British empire in popular culture.”

Apparantly, *The High Bright Sun* falls into a category of films that Jon Cowans terms “liberal colonialist” in that McGuire may be completely cynical about the project of colonialism yet he does his duty without doing anything to disparage imperialism. While the underlying presence of ambivalence about colonialism cannot be ruled out, nothing clearly undermines it. “Empire films, in short, became more politically complex after World War II,” Cowans concludes. Some clue pertaining to the confusion surrounding this particular film and decolonization reveals itself immediately in the multiple titles used upon its release. When imported to America, it was given the title *McGuire, Go Home!* and cut by 13 minutes. Without doubt, that title has a more anti-colonial/liberation ring to it. *A Date with Death* became just another release name. In France, it was known by the title *Derniere Mission a Nicosie* (*Last Mission to Nicosia*).

Viewed today, American and British audiences can certainly identify with the futility of pointlessly armed patrols, stifling roadblocks, rounding up suspects, a hostile populace, and fruitless investigations, all under a hot sun while waiting to be shot or blown up at random.

By 1965, super spies, secret agents, and 007 had become a rage, and historically-based, non-fantastic tales of colonial intrigue and revolt were already ten years out of date, which makes Denholm Elliot’s character Baker even more distinct, despite the fact that he only had nine minutes of screen time. He really is a secret agent who saves the day on more than one occasion, which prompted one recent reviewer to muse that “If 007 really existed, he might be something like Baker—a social misfit who nonetheless is a dead shot.” Denholm Elliot would go on to star in some of the popular *Indiana Jones* films. In fact, Thomas had directed a spoof of James Bond *Hot Enough for June*. To keep pace with a gamut of secret agents, the chief among them being James Bond, Thomas transplanted the character of Bulldog Drummond into swinging London in *Deadlier than the Male* (1966) and *Some Girls Do* (1968). Meanwhile screenwriter Ian Stuart Black would go on to write scripts and serve as an associate producer for the British TV show *Danger Man (Secret Agent* in the United States) between 1964 and 1968 that featured Patrick McGoohan as Secret Agent John Drake. The film that heralded the phenomenon of 007 James Bond, *Dr. No* (1962), demonstrates how this series will come to represent the British identity, i.e. British race, recreating grounds for racial sovereignty by reactivating the mystique, as opposed to its power, of the British Empire, on a global podium. By the time of *The High Bright Sun*, two
other Bond films—*From Russia With Love* (1963) and *Goldfinger* (1964)—had been released. Bond represents a fantasy figure that compensated for Britain’s loss of empire. He embodies what Simon Schama called the “romance of anachronism,” and Wendy Webster termed the “old imperial romance of manliness.”

After 1945, British troops found themselves in a succession of controversial and downright nasty wars spanning across not just Cyprus, but also in Malaya, Aden, Kenya, as well as the undeclared war in Northern Ireland. All these conflicts could never prevent decolonization despite delaying it. The empire in danger films from the 1950s and 1960s had to walk a fine line between portraying duty, courage, and even violence, with a cynical dedication to the empire, and a “British sense of fairness,” even in the face of “barbarism and terrorism,” in overseeing the peaceful end of the British Empire. In a very real sense, *The High Bright Sun* embodies the last film of a parochial British empire before this “empire” went global through the endearing persona of James Bond in *Dr. No*. Now, it is no longer the empire that is in peril, but the world itself which Bond manages to resuscitate through a combination of old-fashioned imperial pluck, snobbery, absolute disdain for human life, and a touch of technology. No longer fighting dubious battles against change in former colonies that evinced little sympathy from majority of the global audience, even now has its origins in sinister organizations or individuals, for which no apology is merited. This was one of the ways in which Britain came to terms with the fact that its actual global power ebbed away rather quickly, implying that the guile and competence of one man would have to keep the British end up, so to speak. In *Fight or Flight, Britain, France, and their Roads from Empire* Martin Thomas writes about the “drama of decolonization”:

> Alongside the bullets and the bombings of colonial wars, subtler weapons were deployed: words and images, propaganda, and diplomatic persuasion, claim and counter-claim in the world’s press. This was a war of rhetoric, of pithy comments, and searing imagery. Its mounting significance highlighted the fact that colonial conflicts were less about controlling territory than about controlling populations and swaying international opinion.

By 1964, the internationalization of decolonization had clearly turned the corner against “claimed ethnic superiority” and “hierarchical systems of imperial domination.” Yet in the on-going battle for the legacy of
decolonization, which was particularly evident in the case of the British Empire, seemingly innocuous entertainment such as *The High Bright Sun* did play a crucial role. This film, in conjunction with previous empire in danger films and documentaries, sanitized, simplified, exploited, mythologized, and even sympathized with the conundrum of decolonization in the face of British decline, especially in comparison to the perceived botched, violent, and brutal experience of France. In 1965, Sean Connery told an interviewer that the Bond pictures were “largely celluloid confections….Remove the exotic touches and what have you got? A dull prosaic English policeman.”\textsuperscript{41} If *Dr. No* in 1962 harked back to the quintessential old nostalgia for Britain’s imperial past, why was it perceived as something fresh and innovative? “The answer,” James Chapman writes, “lies not in the narrative ideology of the film, but in its visual style.”* Dr. No* had done enough to establish the glossy look of the Bond films, something Jeffrey Richards termed “colour supplement chic.”\textsuperscript{42} Although Major McGuire is capable of acting as nasty as Bond, expressing weariness, and even lying while doing his job, he usually apologizes for any such misbehavior. Thus, he epitomizes the British officer who is resourceful, diligent, fair minded, dedicated yet cynical and always committed to the task at hand of maintaining order. Such scrupulousness frequently goes unappreciated by ungrateful Cypriots like Haghios and of course, Juno, the American tourist who makes it a point to maintain her neutrality until she sees the light and sides with him. Perhaps, getting the girl compensates for his frustrated masculinity provoked by his thankless job and failed marriage. As Jonathan Stubbs concludes, *The High Bright Sun* “…resonated with a broader sense of unease which surrounded Britain’s departure from the world stage, reflecting the anxiety felt in some sections of British society as the nation adjusted to the diminishment of its imperial role.”\textsuperscript{43} Made three years after *Dr. No* used Jamaica as a location, *The High Bright Sun* tries to exploit the exotic locales and sun-drenched vistas of Cyprus, i.e. Italy, in order to charm the viewers. But by 1962, the torch had already been passed from bland, historically based, unpleasant stories about the end of an imperial empire to the much grander cosmopolitan world stage occupied by James Bond. British cinema in the 1960s was remarkably diverse, well-distributed, and creative, ably complemented by generous doses of American finance. Despite its share of ambiguity and cynicism with regard to the mission of decolonization, *The High Bright Sun* never reputed the role of imperial Britain. Thus it denoted the last of a sub-genre of imperial films of the empire in danger that created a sanitized screen. The film conveyed an overall legacy of the British understanding and benevolence, rather than, as Caroline Elkins writes, based on her research about the suppression of the Mau-Mau in Kenya, a reality where “British
colonial repression was systematized and honed in the years following the second world war." These images sadly obscured the grotesque violence and malicious motivations of the British during the process of decolonization that is now just coming to light, not just in Cyprus, but in almost every region where counter-insurgency campaigns were conducted against liberation movements, leading to a “renaissance” in the study of decolonization.45

Notes

1 For the first full study of *The High Bright Sun* in post-empire British popular culture see Jonathan Stubbs, “‘Always ready to explode into violence!’: Representing the Cyprus Emergency and decolonization in *The High Bright Sun* (1965), *Journal of European Popular Culture* (6, 2, 2015), 103-116.
2 Jon Cowans, *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 72-73. Although Cowans only examines films from 1946-1959, the category of “liberal colonialist film” clearly applies to *The High Bright Sun*.
3 Ibid., 13.
5 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 67-86.
10 Ibid., 8-9.
11 Ibid.
12 Stubbs, “Always Ready,” 114.
13 For other examples of the Cyprus emergency in British popular culture see Stubbs, “Always Ready,” 105-107.


19 Ibid., 109.


22 Ibid., 110-112.

23 I think the name Juno was chosen not by coincidence given her relationship with McGuire. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses Tiresias is struck blind by Juno, goddess of Motherhood, for having revealed that a woman’s sexual pleasure is greater that a man’s.


26 Stubbs, pp. 112-113.


29 Cowans, Empire Films, 72-73, 90-92.

30 Ibid., 13.


33 Erickson, “The High Bright Sun,” 3.

34 Film is also known as Agent 8 ¾ (1964) with Dirk Bogarde as Agent Nicolas Whistler. It was completed less than a year before The High Bright Sun, which bears resemblance to a comedic version of From Russia with Love (1963).


37 Simon Schama, “Shake Us, Stir Us. James Bond is Back and Cooler than Ever. The Iconic Spy at 50,” Newsweek, November 5, 2012, 38 and Webster, Englishness, 205.

38 For a significant new contribution into how European societies were remade as imperial bonds lessened see Elizabeth Buettner, Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Introduction, 1-19. For cinema see 63, 383, 81, 494.

39 Martin Thomas, Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and their Roads from Empire (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 351. As a point of interest for the legacy of empire, as well as the centrality of film, Thomas in his introduction uses the film Hors-la-loi (Outside the Law), a 2010 film directed by Rachid Bouchareb about three Algerian brothers caught up in their country’s struggle for independence from France and the controversy it generated over collective memory in contemporary France, as a way to begin to understand his topic:

Arguments over the depiction of an especially violent episode in France’s recent colonial past offer an entry-point to the issues discussed in this book. For, if Hors-la-loi was anything, it was a study of why those living under colonialism took up arms against an imperial regime that refused to give ground. It was a cinematic depiction of the choices inherent in ‘fight or flight’. What, then, does this seemingly simple phrase imply? (1)

40 Ibid.

41 Kamp, 258.


Is François the new Meursault?
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Did Michel Houellebecq have Camus' Meursault in mind as François' precursor, when he was writing his 2015 novel Soumission or Submission1? Although the differences between these two protagonists are quite striking so are the parallels. This dichotomy, however, is not contradictory to the thesis of this essay that Houellebecq consciously modeled his anti-hero protagonist François, after Meursault.

Both Meursault and François, narrators of their stories, are single, highly sensual young men, loners, and atheists, who are also outsiders but keen observers of the insiders of their societies. Nor does either, in the first parts of the two novels, espouse altruistic or sincere humanistic feelings toward their fellowmen; both are self-centered and self-contained—unwilling and unable to bond with others in a meaningful way. And is not Houellebecq2 goading his readership when François declares to professor Rediger—as they discuss food and wine—that “Je trouve qu'on ne parle pas assez du Meursault!”

That Houellebecq has had Camus on his mind for some time is beyond the teasing stage in Soumission and more transparent in another earlier Houellebecq novel. Julian Barnes notes that,

No French writer could begin a novel “Father died last year” without specifically invoking Camus’ The Stranger. Houellebecq's narrator is called Renault, perhaps hinting that such a man has become a cog in a mechanized society; but the name also chimes with Meursault, Camus’ narrator. And for a clincher: Renaud’s father has been sleeping with his North African cleaner, Aïcha, whose brother beats the old man to death. When the son is brought face to face with his
father’s murderer, he reflects, “If I had had a gun, I would have shot him without a second thought. Killing that little shit…seemed to me a morally neutral act.” Cut to Meursault’s gunning down of the Arab on the beach in Algiers and his similar indifference to the act.3

The evident question to be asked at this point is why Houellebecq, it is claimed, has “rewritten” Camus’ *L’Etranger* as an intertext for *Soumission*. For starters, it is manifest that Camus and Houellebecq are both bitter critics of the societies that Meursault and François inhabit and view them as unprincipled and inauthentic:

Certaines des observations de Houellebecq dans *Soumission* entrent en résonance avec celles de Camus. La société française en particulier se délite, tout repère ferme s’effrite. Le pessimisme est de mise. L’inanité de toute révolte établie, les acteurs d’une société anomique se résignent ou se résigneront, ils soumettront.4

Camus sums up the essence of *L’Etranger* in this famous quote: “Dans notre société tout homme qui ne pleure pas à l’enterrement de sa mère risque d’être condamné à mort.”5 He expands on this paradoxical statement by claiming that Meursault is condemned to death because he doesn’t play by society’s rules. “Meursault ne joue pas le jeu. La réponse est simple, il refuse de mentir.6 As an outsider he wanders alone in his society in a solitary, private, sensual existence.

Houellebecq’s critique of French contemporary society in *Soumission* is equally scathing if not more so. As Adam Gopnik succinctly puts it: “the French elite are cravenly eager to collaborate with the new [Islamic] regime, delighted not only to convert but to submit to a bracing and self-assured authoritarianism.”7 In the 1940s, Meursault inhabits a colonial society, Algeria, where Christianity and French culture dominate and where Islam is relegated to the background. In 2022 France, François, on the other hand, witnesses the rise of a dominant Islamic state that supplants both Christianity and secularism. The tables have turned and done a complete volte-face: two asymmetric ironic parallels.

Although François and Meursault are both outliers, they are keen analytic observers of the insiders of their respective societies. François cuttingly describes the faults and character defects of his colleagues and acquaintances: “le gentil Steve avec son joli et inoffensif visage, ses cheveux mi-longs, bouclés et fins.”8 Of Marie-Françoise, his colleague, “cette divertissante vieille peste, assoiffée de ragots à l’extrême.”9 And of Godefroy Lempereur another colleague: “Il avait un cachet intellectuel de droite assez séduisant, me dis-je, ça
lui assurait une petite singularité à la fac.”

Meursault is equally observant and no less analytical. When asking for two days off to attend his mother’s funeral he reflects: “Mon patron, tout naturellment, a pensé que j’aurais ainsi quatre jours de vacances avec mon dimanche et cela ne pouvait pas lui faire plaisir.”

Nor can one forget his memorable description of Thomas Perez at his mother’s funeral: “Ses lèvres tremblaient au-dessous d’un nez truffé de points noirs. Ses cheveux blancs assez fins laissaient passer de curieuses oreilles ballantes et mal ourlées dont la couleur rouge sang dans ce visage blafard me frappa.”

Nor is Meursault ever a participant or a team player in society’s “games.” Looking out over his balcony one Sunday evening, he describes the fans and players coming back from the soccer stadium; one of the players yells up to Meursault that “On les a eus” while Meursault nods as if to say “Yes.”

Camus’ portrayal of Meursault in this scene, as an observer and outsider, adds another dimension to the meaning that Meursault “ne joue pas le jeu.”

François, unlike Meursault—but not the authorial Camus—is highly judgmental and critical of his fellowmen. He doesn’t like the young people he tutors or teaches and deigns to have coffee with the insignificant Steve. He is essentially a misanthrope: “L’humanité ne m’intéressait pas, elle me dégoûtait même, je ne considérais nullement les humains comme mes frères, et c’était encore moins le cas si je considérais une fraction plus restreinte de l’humanité, celle par exemple constituée par mes compatriotes, ou par mes anciens collègues.”

Meursault, on the other hand, refuses to make moral judgments. He neither condemns nor condones Raymond’s beating of his mistress and thinks that Raymond’s story about his mistress’ “betrayal” is “interesting.” Nor is he disgusted by Salamano’s beating of his dog.

Neither François nor Meursault initially show any sign of empathy or concern for their contemporaries. Altruism is in neither man’s vocabulary. They are indifferent to and disinterested in the well-being of their fellow humans. Neither protagonist has bonded with their male associates or girlfriends. Marie and Myriam are barely more than sex objects. Salamano, Raymond, Céleste, Emmanuel, and Masson are simply cardboard characters in L’Étranger to keep the story line moving.

His relationships are either accidental or work related; they are not in the category of de la Boétie’s and Montaigne’s. Although François shuns his male colleagues, he does have a true fictional friend in J. K. Huysmans, the subject of his scholarly research and writing.

Both François and Meursault are distinctly sensual and sexual men but in different ways. With François, the ultimate gourmet, food and wine are his passion, if not obsession. His enumerations and descriptions of wines and food are passionate and seemingly endless: “Les petits pâtés chauds étaient délicieux, épicés mais pas trop, je reconnus la saveur de la coriandre. Et le vin était sublime.” And when dining at Marie-Françoise’s, he is in a state of semi-ecstasy: “[E]lle avait préparé une salade de fèves accompagnée de pissenlits et de copeaux de parmesan. C’était délicieux, tellement que je perdis un instant le
Some three quarters of a century earlier, Meursault is preparing boiled potatoes. Though he likes his café au lait and an occasional glass of wine, no gourmet is he: “Je suis descendu acheter du pain et des pâtes, j’ai fait ma cuisine et j’ai mangé debout.”

Although Meursault eats only to live, as opposed to François, and though he isn’t especially reactive to the sense of taste, he is highly responsive to the senses of sight, smell and touch. Well-known, of course, is the effect of the sun, both positive and negative, on Meursault’s behavior. His attachment to the physical word is played out by the role of the sun where he basks in its benevolence but where he also becomes its malevolent captive causing him to kill an Arab in its blinding light.

If taste is low in the ranking of Meursault’s senses, sight, smell, and touch are at the top of the list in that order: “Le concierge a tourné le commutateur et j’ai été aveuglé par l’éclaboussement soudain de la lumière.”

When following his mother’s bier, he narrates: ‘Et le vent qui passait au-dessus des collines apportait ici une odeur de sel.”

Meursault’s sensuality also exhibits a fastidious tactile nature:

Avant de quitter le bureau pour aller déjeuner, je me suis lavé les mains. A midi, j’aime bien ce moment. Le soir, j’y trouve moins de plaisir parce que la serviette roulante qu’on utilise est tout à fait humide; elle a servi toute la journée.

Reacting to the sight of Raymond’s forearms “très blancs sous les poils noirs,” Meursault finds it a little repulsive.

While François and Meursault are both heterosexual, François exhibits a distinctly feminine side; Myriam tells him: “Oui, en théorie tu es un macho, il n’y a aucun doute. Mais tu as des goûts littéraires raffinés: Mallarmé, Huysmans, c’est sûr que ça t’éloigne du macho de base. J’ajoute à ça une sensibilité féminine, anormale, pour les tissus d’ameublement.”

Meursault, however, is a man’s man, a macho who exhibits none of François’ feminine sensibility; his apartment is messy and disorderly and he has no interest in fine cuisine or in refined literary tastes. But in his own understated way he is as intelligent as François, one could argue, and perhaps ultimately more discerning given his acumen, his perceptiveness, and his humanistic awakening at the very end of the novel.

François’ obsession with sex, aside from his research and publications on Huysmans, keeps him afloat in his existential struggle against loneliness and despair. His sexual encounters are so numerous as to become boring and soulless. The explicit and graphic descriptions of François’ encounters are neither titillating nor salacious. They merely accentuate François’ venality. Gopnik claims that:
Houellebecq’s heroes always seem truly puzzled by the emotional rewards that other men claim to get from children and work and family and even sex. Anhedonic in the extreme, Houellebecq finds the conventional pleasure-seeking surface of French life entirely absurd, which is one reason he satirizes it so effectively. He can be very funny about the details of modern sex—his protagonists find the objective, clinical details underwhelming—and is fearless in admitting to his own inspection of them, as in this description from a moment of Internet porn: “The penis passed from one mouth to the other, the tongues crossing like flights of swallows, lightly troubled, in the somber sky…when they are ready to leave Europe for their winter pilgrimage.” The parodic note, neither contemptuous nor indignant but preternaturally calm, is distinctively Houellebecq’s.

Meursault, on the other hand, likes sex but it isn’t an obsession. He has an affair with Marie, a former typist in his office, but tells her he doesn’t love her. Nor does François really love Myriam although he thinks he does; he is just afraid of being lonely. Meursault loves his mother “comme tout le monde” he tells the examining magistrate. Both reject society’s definition of sentimental love. Although both protagonists are loners, François is desperately lonely while Meursault is alone. François’ reaction to the absurd, in the first parts of the two novels, differs markedly from Meursault’s. François’ numerous lamentations contrast markedly with Meursault’s apathy and stoicism. François suffers from existential anguish when confronted with a meaningless universe: “Le 19 janvier dans la nuit, je fus submergé par une crise de larmes imprévue, interminable.” When he visits Myriam’s parents he is visibly shaken: “C’était une tribu, une tribu familiale soudée; et par rapport à tout ce que j’avais connu c’était tellement inouï que j’avais eu beaucoup de mal à m’empêcher d’éclater en sanglots.” Meursault, unlike François, finds solace and joy in his attachment to the physical world. When leaving his oppressively warm office one evening he declares: “[[J’ai été heureux de revenir en marchant lentement le long des quais. Le ciel était vert, je me sentais content.” And upon returning home after his mother’s funeral: “…et ma joie quand l’autobus est entré dans le nid de lumières d’Alger et que j’ai pensé que j’allais me coucher et dormir pendant douze heures.” Meursault’s initial contentment with his life is captured in this most lyrical and joyful passage from L’Étranger:

Je suis sorti un peu tard, à midi et demi, avec Emmanuel qui travaille à l’expédition. Le bureau donne sur la mer et nous avons perdu un moment à regarder les cargos dans le port brûlant de soleil. À ce moment, un camion est arrivé dans un
fracas de chaînes et d’explosions. Emmanuel m’a demandé “si on y allait” et je me suis mis à courir. Le camion nous a dépassés et nous sommes lancés à sa poursuite. J’étais noyé dans le bruit et la poussière. Je ne voyais plus rien et ne sentais que cet élan désordonné de la course, au milieu des treuils et des machines, des mâts qui dansaient sur l’horizon et des coques que nous longions. J’ai pris appui le premier et j’ai sauté au vol. Puis j’ai aidé Emmanuel à s’asseoir. Nous étions hors de souffle, le camion sautait sur les pavés inégaux du quai, au milieu de la poussière et du soleil. Emmanuel riait à perdre haleine.29

Unlike Meursault, who enjoys the simple pleasures of life, “les odeurs d’été, le quartier que j’aimais, un certain ciel du soir, le rire et les robes de Marie,”30 François finds no communion with nature in a cold, rainy, gloomy Paris that Meursault refuses to move to when his boss proposes to transfer him there and that is the setting of François’s bleak domain: “C’est sale, Il y des pigeons et des cours noirs. Les gens ont la peau blanche.”31 Although Meursault is an ideal employee and liked by those who know him, he is not by society’s measures a normal man.32 Society and the casual reader of L’Etranger view Meursault as a pariah and an outcast for having smoked cigarettes and drunk coffee at his mother’s wake, for not knowing his mother’s age, and for having gone swimming and to a Fernandel film with Marie the day after his mother’s funeral. But unlike François, Meursault never openly reveals his inner feelings until his encounter with the prison chaplain.

If Meursault as Camus’ protagonist is non-judgmental, Camus as the porte-parole of L’Etranger is a mordant critic of contemporary society and religion. His satirical portraits of the examining magistrate and the prison chaplain are both scathing and humorous. When Meursault tells the examining magistrate that he doesn’t believe in God, the magistrate replies: “Voulez-vous…que ma vie n’ait pas de sens?”33 And when the prison chaplain tells Meursault that the justice of men was nothing compared to the justice of God, Meursault tells him that it was the justice of men who condemned him to death. The introduction of “la bizarre petite femme” into the story line—when she asks to sit down at Meursault’s table at Celeste’s and when she appears at Meursault’s trial as an observer—would seem to embody and symbolize the society which not only condemns Meursault, but which more significantly is to be condemned by Camus. The automatic, robotic gestures and behavior of “the strange little woman” symbolize a society that is deprived of its humanity and that has become a kind of inanimate objectified Sartrian “being–in-itself.”

François wears his anguish on his sleeve. At the Relais du Haut Bercy, after unpacking and hanging up his clothes, François laments: “…je commençais à me demander ce que je faisais là. Cette question très générale,
François, unlike Meursault, has no sudden revelation or awakening in finding a solution to his ongoing existential plight. He sinks further into despair when after a telephone conversation with Myriam, he declares: "Je me sentis envahi par une solitude terrible, et je compris que je n’aurais plus jamais le courage de rappeler Myriam, la sensation de proximité qui s’installait au téléphone était trop violente, et le vide qui s’ensuivait trop cruel."38 In a spiritual quest to Rocamadour to visit the black Madonna, in hopes like Huysmans, to experience some sort of revelation to overcome his atheism, François fails to find redemption in Catholicism. After another one of his sobbing fits, François decides to return to the Abbaye de Ligugé where Huysmans had received his oblature. After a three-day stay there, he realizes that his trip was another failure and returns to Paris where he confides that he finds no satisfaction to be back in the midst of his fellowmen and to return to his apartment “où personne ne s’aimait et que personne n’aimait.”39

An outside solution finally rescues François from his total despair: a letter from the head of the Editions de Pléiade offering him the editorship of a new Pléiade edition of Huysmans’ oeuvre. He arranges an interview with the editor, Bastien Lacoue, and accepts the offer. Phase one of the seduction game: François gets to do what he loves next best—writing about Huysmans. Lacoue
slyly and coyly mentions during their interview that Sorbonne President Rediger has deeply regretted François’ departure from the venerable university after the Islamic regime change (only converts to Islam are eligible to become faculty members). Phase two: François meets with the charismatic Rediger, drinks a sublime “Meursault,” savors some delicious canapés prepared by his oldest wife, and discovers that Rediger also has two other younger wives. (It would appear that both François and Rediger, not to mention Houellebecq, in drinking a “sublime Meursault,” are literally and figuratively flushing “Meursault” down the drain). Rediger tells François that he wants him back at the Sorbonne, gives him his book Dix questions sur l’islam and asks François to consider converting. It doesn’t take François long to decide: “Comme sans doute la plupart des hommes, je sautai les chapitres consacrés aux devoirs religieux, aux piliers de l’islam et au jeûne, pour en arriver directement au chapitre VII: ‘Pourquoi la polygamie?’”

As Christopher de Bellaigue aptly puts it “… the clincher for François when converting is sex. He wants more of it and this is what polygamy offers. He also wants his old job back.” For de Bellaigue Submission is a satire of contemporary life seen through the eyes of highly-sexed men like François and Bruno of Houellebecq’s Les Particules élémentaires. Steven Poole, in accord with de Bellaigue, goes one step further by declaring that “[t]he real target of Houellebecq’s satire…is the predictably manipulative venality and lustfulness of modern metropolitan man …. “

Adam Gopnik concurs contending that “the principal target of the [novel’s] satire…is the spinelessness of the French intellectual class including the Huysmans-loving narrator.” He also argues that Houellebecq, as a satirist, “likes to take what’s happening now and [to] imagine what would happen if it kept on happening.” This is the central joke and point of Soumission, Gopnik claims, viz, that the French elite are a craven bunch eager to collaborate with the new Islamic regime and to submit to authoritarianism. Steven Poole also argues that Houellebecq is mischievously and gleefully making the point that Islamists and anti-immigration demagogues, viz., the leaders of The National Front, ought to be on the same side since “they share a suspicion of pluralist liberalism and a desire to return to ‘traditional’ or pre-feminist values, where a woman submits to her husband – just as ‘Islam’ means that a Muslim submits to God.”

While François’ callous submission to venality is a reflection of the degeneration of twenty-first century “metropolitan modern man” as Poole claims, Germaine Brée argues that “[Meursault’s] whole generation had lived its formative years in the climate of ‘malaise’ or spiritual unrest prevalent in Europe during the interval between the two world wars. L’Etranger expressed Camus’ awareness of that malaise and of what Camus was to call the ‘absurd’ in man’s condition.”

In another comparison of the differences between these two eras Chauout has described this malaise more pithily:
In the thought of Sartre and Camus, one does not have the choice not to choose and one must invent one’s own values. But it is one thing to be confronted with meaningful existential choices. When Sartre was writing, *Dasein*—condemned to be free—had to choose between Resistance and Collaboration, or between taking care of one’s aging, beloved mother and waging war against fascism. It is another thing altogether in post-historical Europe, when *Homo eligens*, the individual, fated to choose, must do so between masturbating in front of a Youporn video or engaging in a threesome—pornography and sexual activity constituting the supreme stage of consumerist addiction.47

From a Sartrian and Camusian perspective, Meursault is a kind of neophyte—an “engaged,” humanist protagonist *en voie de développement*—while François is the epitome of *mauvaise foi* or “bad faith,” who “plays the game.” François’ demise is one of submission and capitulation to society’s false values; in 2022 France he is unable and/or incapable to act and to revolt authentically. Houellebecq is certainly making the point that 21st-century modern man has become feminized, soft, as well as inauthentic and corrupt. The “old” Meursault of *L’Étranger* could never be a real or fictional character for Houellebecq, and that is Houellebecq’s point. The “old” Meursault has been transformed and “trans-gendered” into a “new” Meursault in the person of François whom Houellebecq sees as another species: 21st-century modern man. He uses Camus’ *L’Étranger* as an intertext for *Soumission* to emphasize the importance and significance of the sociological changes that have taken place during these two eras. Camus’ heroic Meursault of the ‘40s has morphed into the person of François who, like modern man, as Chaouat claims: “suffers from an excess of autonomy and—yes, submission.” In this same article, Chaouat discusses an intriguing book, *Zero Gravity Man*, by Charles Melman, a psychoanalyst, who “argues that most of his patients suffer no longer from a sexual repression…but on the contrary from a deprivation of repression that results in all kinds of narcissistic perversions and dysfunctions.”48 It would seem that François, in addition to *Submission*, has had another starring role in *Zero Gravity Man*.

So much for honor, and so long moral rigor, courage and resistance, laments Marianne Martin in her article, “Camus ou Houellebecq: Comment Choisir son Héraut?”49 Her subtitled article, “Du renoncement houellebecquien à la rigueur morale camusienne, la grosse tête fait de l’ombre au Titan,” is a no-holds-barred, full frontal attack of Houellebecq whom she accuses as a “[d]énonciateur acerbe de l’humanisme et des Lumères….“50 Martin unabashedly defends the relevance of Camus in today’s society:
Tout d'abord parce qu'en France, des gens continuent la lutte, que l'égalité n'est pas atteinte, que les attentats de Paris ont prouvé l'importance de l'amour de la liberté, de l'attachement à cet humanisme qui fait ‘gerber’ le narrateur de Soumission.51

As outlined above, it has been argued from the outset of these two novels—apart from their respective eras—that Meursault and François could have been fraternal, if not identical twins (given their shared attributes) had their ultimate trajectories not taken such dramatically different turns. Houellebecq has consciously chosen Meursault, as one of the most famous and celebrated literary heroes of 20th-century French literature as François’ precursor, to destroy once and for all honor and the heroic humanitarian truth seeker that is Meursault and concomitantly to throw Sartre and Camus under the bus, if not to the wolves. Houellebecq is “in revolt” against Camusian and Sartrian “revolt.” Like most authors promoting and advocating a new ethic, the old ones have to be thoroughly repudiated and discarded. Houellebecq has turned Meursault into François, making him into his new historic 21st-century man of the moment, while at the same time, pulling him down from his exalted 20th-century pedestal. It’s as if one were looking at the portrait of Dorian Gray—in fast forward motion—one of aging and changing ideology with disturbing and unsettling results.

Whereas existentialism provided an unambiguous solution to man’s human condition in L'Etranger and La Peste, readers of Submission are left with a postmodern dilemma reflecting a deep skepticism and distrust of ideology. While Houellebecq has created François as an anti-hero and transformed him into a new Meursault, so has he morphed himself into a new Camus, a quasi-“philosopher,” who seems to be continually seeking solutions in his novels. While it is claimed that in Submission, Houellebecq now looks favorably on Islam, this was not the case in 2002 when he was acquitted of inciting racism for having called Islam “the stupidest of religions.”52 In Houellebecq’s The Elementary Particles, Shatz states that “the new religion was Comtean positivism; in Soumission it’s Islam.”53 One can also see an evolution in Camus’ thought as well: from Meursault’s “revolt” in L'Etranger to an “evolving” Dr. Rieux, in La Peste. Kahn maintains that “[Le docteur Rieux] est le modèle du révo
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lue
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modeste mais légitime aux yeux de Camus, l’exemple aussi d’un humanisme du concret et de l’instant,”54 a kind of modest action hero representing a specific example of humanism to combat the absurdity of life’s condition.

The latest one, “submission,” has been the subject of a litany of articles dissecting Houellebecq’s position on Islam in Submission. What is discernible is that Submission is not only a rejection of Catholicism, given François’ aborted pilgrimages to Rocamadour and Ligugé, but also that France is a corrupt, venal society condemned to probable extinction. What it is uncertain and debatable is whether Houellebecq indeed does see Islam as a solution to the
crisis of contemporary France or if he is a simply a “disappointed mystic.” Adam Shatz goes so far as to state that:

[t]here are strong indications, both in [Submission] and in interviews, that Houellebecq sees Islam as a solution, if not the solution, to the crisis of French civilization. For Houellebecq, France’s dilemma resembles his own: France has attempted to replace God with the secular religion of republican citizenship and laïcité, but at the price of leaving deeper questions unanswered. And the abandonment of God has left France without a sense of direction or purpose: “The search for meaning has returned. People aren’t content to live without God.” This isn’t a new argument, but Houellebecq turns it to a very different end by suggesting that Islam, a younger and more confident religion, might be a better vehicle for setting Europe back on track than Catholicism, which has “run its course.”

Perhaps readers will have to wait to find out if Houellebecq provides another solution, other than submission, in one of his future novels. Suffice it to say at this point that Meursault and François are two disparate but similar protagonists with entirely different stories: one of evolution and revolt and the other of devolution and submission.

Notes

2 Ibid., 247.
3 Barnes J, Hate and Hedonism: The insolent art of Michel Houellebecq. The New Yorker, 7 July, 2003, 3.
6 Ibid.
8 Houellebecq, Submission, 29.
9 Ibid., 35.
10 Ibid., 60.
11 Brée, L’Étranger, 37.
12 Ibid., 33.
13 Ibid., 41.
14 Houellebecq, *Soumission*, 207.
15 Ibid., 247.
16 Ibid., 152.
18 Ibid., 26.
19 Ibid., 30.
20 Ibid., 44.
21 Ibid., 69.
22 Houellebecq, *Soumission*, 41.
26 Ibid., 111.
28 Ibid., 36.
29 Ibid., 44.
30 Ibid., 122.
31 Ibid., 63.
32 Ibid., vii.
33 Ibid., 39.
37 Ibid., 138.
39 Ibid., 228.
40 Ibid., 268.
44 Ibid., 2.
45 Poole, *Soumission*, 1.
48 Ibid., 1.
50 Ibid., 2.
51 Ibid., 2.


I entered a Masters of Education with a lot of hesitation
Would it be a load of buzzwords like “creativity,” “innovation?”
My B.Ed. had been just $15,000 worth of fluff
I didn’t want to discover more and more of that same stuff
I’m a teacher now. I have real students to engage
Chose the profession ’cause of passion, not for the wage
But the burnout of teaching, it can be real
Needed to rediscover wonder and a sense for the ideal
If I am honest, I’ll say that assignments like: “My Life as a History Text”
At first had me a little more than perplexed
But biography undeniably influences teaching
And the consequences of experience are in fact quite far-reaching
My classmates are humans, not avatars
Their stories reveal the persons they are
It’s also true of my students, whose opportunities greatly vary
Wide-ranging home lives and lots of emotions to carry
The casual discrepancies ought to be kept in mind
To inequality of opportunity, teachers cannot be blind
A lot of the learning that takes place is really quite informal
Our mindfulness of outside influences should be something normal
Such mindfulness demands scrutinizing ourselves
And dusting philosophical texts off of our shelves
They say it takes a village to raise a child but village life is rough
In a world of injustice, educating for responsibility can be tough
And our students know more than we usually give them credit
We teachers would do well not to forget it
Students appreciate when we tackle issues that are serious
The drama of the world is what tends to make them curious
From explorer journals to a classroom Renaissance Fair
To the community service projects we do to practice care
Education needs so much more than our present tech craze
The students need wonder; they need to be amazed
The purpose of education in not just giving students stuff to know
It’s empowering them to be able to challenge the status quo
Our definitions in education are continually evolving
As we learn from our experiences and past problem-solving
While I wouldn’t quite say the desire to learn itself is queer
Learning demands transcending boundaries and chasing out fear
With international pen pals and interreligious exchange
My students become creative and courageous makers of change
I’m introducing them to Mandela, Mother Teresa, Malala, and King
To these noble lives their own creativity and interest they bring
I’ve begun watching TedTalks each morning with coffee in hand
To gain insights from world shapers whose expertise is on-demand
I’m reminded to take care of myself, take time to step back and reflect
It does more good for my students than I might realize or expect
Our challenge is to present topics in a way that is compelling
To show the deeper reasons why students learn history and spelling
They discover ways to share what of themselves and the world is broken
Through journals and storytelling and the word that is spoken
My students come alive when the reasons for assignments make sense
They even appreciate when the things I expect of them are fairly intense
I intend to be a teacher always open to learning more
With my students building trust and deepening rapport
I will makes notes on my future experiences to fuel new reflection
And let the lessons from my students influence my new direction.

Notes

1 “We indeed teach who we are, then we better get to know ourselves, which means particularly to get to know and work on our inner life.” Falkenberg, Thomas. “Teaching as Contemplative Professional Practice.” Paideusis 20, no. 2 (2012): 25 – 35.
2 “It should be obvious that even with schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are casually available to the middle-class child (travel, books, etc).” Illich, Ivan. “Why We Must Abolish Schooling.” The New York Review of Books 15, no. 1 (1970): 9–15.
3 “Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction.” (Illich, “Why We Must Abolish,” 9-15)

“Students must be given opportunities to care. In today’s schools, group work has become popular, but the cooperative motive that inspired it is often corrupted. Groups are encouraged to compete against each other and team members often criticize other for doing less than their share of the work.” Noddings, Nel. “Moral Education in an Age of Globalization.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2010): 390–396.

“No matter how carefully teachers explained a topic, outlined what they expected from their students and expatiated on its interest and importance, the not-so-hidden message was always that this was something students did not know and were expected to learn.” Osborne, Ken. “The Teaching of History and Democratic Citizenship.” *The Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers*, no. 2 (2008): 3–14.


“Educational philosophy, I hope, gives students pause enough to think about openness to innovation and challenge and also yet gives us a sense of why it would be important to stay committed to at least some, however open and indeterminate sense of justice.” Mayo, “Philosophy,” 471-76.

Rury proposes that educational historians become innovative within their discipline and take up the important task “to play the role of conscience by raising questions of moral or humane concern that educators and policy makers (not to mention students) may find pertinent or compelling.” Rury, John L. “The Curious Status of the History of Education: A Parallel Perspective." *History of Education Quarterly* 46, no. 04 (2006): 571-98.

“… Pictures of a broken world speak directly to their (youth’s) future. Implied is their tomorrow. Whether this realization occurs in a dramatic moment of insight or slowly awakens as a vague awareness, the consequence can be uncertainty about the future or, even worse, some loss of hope.” Werner, Walt. “Teaching for Hope.” *The Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers* (2008): 193–197.

“An ethic of justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality and individual rights…while] and ethic of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative of nuance and cultivating caring relations.” Noddings, “Moral Education,” 390-96.
Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects is a collaborative effort of four historians and one photographer, and the images of the latter provide the face for a number of stories told by the historians. This is precisely what the book is about: telling stories through interpreting objects. The objects these authors interpret in the book are part of a themed exhibition of the same name, Tangible Things, organized at Harvard University in 2011, and serving as a laboratory for an undergraduate art course. The collaborators in both the exhibition and the book are mostly Harvard-based, with access to a rich repository of world-class collections, from among which they picked 280 objects1 to create the exhibition. They followed a four-pronged approach to placing the selected items: “Things in Place”—placing things into a category to which they would be commonly perceived to belong (i.e. art, history, anthropology, natural history, technology, etc.); “Things Unplaced”—filling display cases with “an unpredictable miscellany of objects” and directing viewers to “sort them”; “Things Out of Place”—placing things together that seemingly do not belong in the same category; and “Things in Stories—Stories in Things”—finding stories in selected objects as well as objects for selected stories. The book is organized in four chapters bearing the same exhibition titles, plus an introductory chapter and a concluding essay by the photographer.

In the context of the larger project, the book can be seen as a byproduct of this extensive exhibition and the stories produced by student as assignments during the art history course. In this sense, Tangible Things is a “miscellany” of stories told about selected objects or elicited by them. As the book’s title suggests, the main argument is that material things (objects) can be as good a source of historic knowledge as written records are: “We want to argue here that just about any tangible thing can be pressed into service as primary historical evidence.”4 Indeed, objects are a better source of primary historical
evidence, the authors claim, than text-based sources. They argue that text-based sources, which are traditionally utilized by historians to perform historic inquiries, “are severely limited” in that not all cultures in history have had writing systems. Therefore, “attention to singular, physical things can reveal connections between people, processes, and forms of inquiry that might otherwise remain unnoticed.” From the standpoint that not all human cultures left written records, but most of them left some kind of objects behind to be discovered and studied, the main thesis of *Tangible Things*—that objects are very important sources for historical research—is truly forceful.

The claim that objects—things, as the authors prefer to call them—can be a valid source of history is hardly novel. However, it is the authors’ demonstration of how that can be done—in other words, the methodology—that is impressive. The stories offered are numerous and topically diverse. For example, in the very same book one reads (i) about the beginning of botany in the nineteenth and early twentieth century from a pressed orchid specimen; (ii) about the giant Galapagos tortoise species, some hunted to extinction, from a tortoise shell specimen; (iii) about the history of tortilla-making from a surviving 1897 Mexican tortilla; (iv) about the love between Robert and Elisabeth Browning from the preserved plaster cast of their clasped hands (also on the book’s front cover); and (v) about the history of women’s college sports from a 1925 hockey dress, among other things. In other words, a single book of a little over 250 pages treats a variety of topics, ranging from A to Z on the thematic alphabet of world history. Naturally, the book’s themes are not exhaustive, for not even a much larger work, devoted to a single topic, can say everything about that topic. Yet, the stories elicited from objects are told in informative, though succinct manner, without unduly burdening the reader with excess data. What is even more helpful is the wonderful set of photographs that illustrates the book, depicting every storied object from more than one angle: from a close range, in an in-group setting, a detail from the object, etc. (In fact, the photographer’s essay, appended at the end of the book, largely explains the techniques of shooting the objects.)

A secondary claim the book makes is that grouping objects (and sciences) into rigid categories does not serve historic (or scientific) inquiry very well. A pressed orchid specimen, for example, is equally at home in the categories of natural science and art. The shell of a Galapagos tortoise may be immediately identifiable as belonging to natural history—in keeping with a nineteenth-century classification of museum objects into belonging to art, history, anthropology, natural history, technology, or commerce still in use at Harvard—but it also falls into the history and anthropology categories due to an inscription carved into it that “tells” its story: “Ship Abigail/1835/Benjamin Clark/Master.” This simple inscription reveals that the tortoise was caught by sailors of a Massachusetts whaling ship, called *Abigail*, led by Captain Benjamin
Clark, who landed on the Galapagos islands in 1835 in pursuit of tortoise meat for food. Just as the categorization of museum objects is problematic, so is the division of sciences into disciplines with impermeable boundaries and unbending research methodologies. History does not simply consist of written records, but is also a science of objects—so long as it is capable of using these objects to extract knowledge. As the authors put it, any “groupings are inherently unstable, just as humans’ relationships with the things that constitute these unstable groups or categories are themselves ever-changing.”

In summary, this book does not offer a revolutionary new theory of historic inquiry by claiming that objects are—or should be treated as—primary historic evidence of history. (Scholars of microhistory and material culture have been doing that for years.) However, the authors’ approach to presenting a diverse body of objects (things) as a source of history, coupled with beautifully illustrated pages, is compelling and highly artistic. Both students and teachers of art history can take away a lesson in the methodology of using objects to study history and culture from this book, among other things.

~Fatme Myuhtar-May
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Notes

1 Ulrich, Thatcher, Gaskell, Schechner, and Carter, with photography by van Gerbig, *Tangible Things*, xii.
2 Ibid., 21.
3 Ibid., 71.
4 Ibid., 2.
5 Ibid., 3.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 21.
8 Ibid., 87.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 78.
Book Review


**Prologue:** While reading a Hollywood memoir, Ben Urwand came across a passage that described Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM, cutting scenes from studio movies in the 1930s if they offended the German consul in Los Angeles. Urwand notes, “The image of the most powerful man in Hollywood working together with a Nazi set off a nine-year-long investigation that resulted in this book.”¹ When he consulted the Hollywood studio archives, Urwand found little evidence of this collaboration, but the German archives yielded more substantial evidence. He found that Hollywood studio heads, many of whom were Jewish immigrants, cut out scenes offensive to the Nazi regime in order to maintain their distribution rights in Germany.

**Chapter One: “Hitler’s Obsession with Film”:** Adolph Hitler watched a film every night after dinner. His adjutants took notes on his opinions of the films: he liked *King Kong*, Laurel and Hardy movies, and anything with Mickey Mouse. His adjutants categorized Hitler’s responses to film under the headings “good,” “bad,” and “switched off.”

Urwand argues that Hitler’s obsession with film sprang from his sense of its possibilities as propaganda. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler compares film with oratory and suggests that film might eventually be more powerful. As the Nazi party began its rise to power in 1930, Hitler and Joseph Goebbels initiated what some commentators called the “film war.”² In December 1930, Nazi party members rioted at the opening night of *All Quiet on the Western Front* to protest the film’s depiction of the German military. The Nazis pursued the matter in the legislature, eventually succeeding in having the film banned in Germany. Carl Laemmle, the president of Universal Studios, negotiated with the German Foreign Office to create an edited version of the film for German audiences, but the Foreign Office insisted the cuts be made to all versions of the film and sent agents to theaters all around the world to assure Hollywood’s compliance. Laemmle cooperated fully and thus began the decade-long collaboration between the Hollywood studios and the Nazi party. When Hitler
came to power in 1933, the studios began to deal directly with his representatives.

Chapter Two: “Enter Hollywood”: In 1932, Germany enacted a law placing quotas on the number of non-German films that could be imported, which included a crucial passage under the heading “Article Fifteen,” saying that any studio that distributed films anywhere in the world that were “detrimental to German prestige” could be denied permits for all of their films in the German market. Urwand argues that “Article Fifteen would prove to be a very effective way of regulating the American film industry”: American studio heads, prodded by the German consul in Los Angeles (a Nazi party member named George Gyssing), consciously eliminated any negative depiction of German characters from their films. The collaboration between the studios and the Nazis also led to the suppression of The Mad Dog of Europe, the one attempt at an anti-Nazi film in Hollywood by an independent producer.

Ironically, the Anti-Defamation League also lobbied Hollywood studio heads to limit films critical of Germany, believing they would antagonize the Nazi regime. Urwand further suggests the Anti-Defamation League’s efforts to stamp out stereotypical Jewish characters in Hollywood movies led to the virtual erasure of Jews from American movies until long after the second World War.

Chapter Three: “Good”: In this chapter, Urwand explores three American films that the Nazi party admired and used for their own propaganda purposes because the plots seemed to uphold what they called “the leader principle.” Gabriel Over the White House (1933) depicts an American president, who (inspired by heavenly intervention) dissolves Congress and solves the country’s problems of unemployment, crime, and debt. Nazi party members felt the film buttressed Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 with the innocently name “Enabling Act,” which had transferred all power to the chancellor’s office. The Lives of a Bengal Lancer (1935), starring Gary Cooper, portrayed a group of jovial young soldiers who initially dislike their stern, seemingly unemotional colonel. As the movie progresses, they come to understand the colonel’s deep and selfless devotion to the nation and, in the final scenes, willingly give their lives for him. The Nazis screened the film for tens of thousands of members of the Hitler youth for “educational purposes,” teaching them the ideal of sacrificing their lives for their own leader’s dedication to the fatherland. Finally, Our Daily Bread (1934), an independent film directed by King Vidor, takes up the issues of poverty and unemployment through its portrayal of a collection of dispossessed men who work on a struggling farm. Although Vidor seemed to view the film as a slap at capitalism, Nazi reviewers focused on the film’s main character, who is the “boss” of the men, claiming the film admirably upheld their “leader principle.”

Chapter Four: “Bad”: In 1934, the Nazis passed a new film law, expanding the reasons for banning films to include films that “endangered the vital interests of the state” or “harmed National Socialist...ethical or artistic
sensibilities.” Under these criteria, the Propaganda Ministry banned *Tarzan the Ape Man* because Jane’s love for Tarzan endangered the Nazi efforts to teach the responsibility of “genetic biology” to women of marriageable age. Expanding on their idea of what might offend National Socialist sensibilities, the Nazis banned *The Prizefighter and the Lady* because it starred the Jewish boxer Max Baer, who had famously defeated the German Max Schmeling in a 1933 fight in Yankee Stadium. Baer wore a prominent Star of David on his boxing trunks. The Hollywood studios continued to pander to Nazi tastes despite the creation of a blacklist of Jewish actors, directors, and writers. Ironically, as censors paid more attention to the racial origins of the actors, a few films that featured inter-racial love stories slipped through and were screened in Germany.

**Chapter Five: “Switched Off”:** MGM cancelled the production of a film version of Sinclair Lewis’s anti-fascist novel *It Can’t Happen Here* twice—once in 1936 and then again in 1939. Urwand argues that in both cases MGM studio head Louis B. Mayer was swayed by his fear of going against the wishes of both the Hays Office and George Gyssling, the German consul in Los Angeles. The novel portrays an American dictatorship that bears many resemblances to fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. MGM bought the rights to the novel and initially invested heavily in the film. However, the Hays Office asked Mayer to cancel the film, claiming it would damage Hollywood’s chances in foreign markets. Although no foreign government had complained, MGM cancelled the film, initiating a new kind of self-censorship. George Gyssling, the German consul, maintained close ties to the Hays Office, but also began using more direct methods of pressure, including sending threatening letters to actors and directors. When MGM revived its interest in *It Can’t Happen Here* in 1939, Gyssling’s objections seem to have led them to abandon the film a second time.

**Chapter Six: “Switched On”:** By 1939, Germany’s system of collaboration with Hollywood began to break down. Studios not invested in the German market began to make anti-Nazi films (including *The Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin’s devastating satire of Hitler), and the Second World War began in September of that year when German troops invaded Poland. However, Hollywood continued to skirt the issue of European Jewry. Urwand argues, the studios’s “timidity…was not inherent; it derived from their years of collaboration with Nazi Germany.” In 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI) as a propaganda agency, which quickly began to examine Hollywood scripts to determine “Will this picture help win the war?” Urwand claims the OWI encouraged the studios to expose the persecution of the Jews to little avail. Hollywood scriptwriter Ben Hecht was so outraged he joined the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe and relentlessly called on studio heads to stand up for European Jewry with little success.
**Epilogue:** After the war ended in 1945, a group of studio heads toured Germany, even cruising the Rhine on Hitler’s yacht and visiting Dachau. Urwand underscores that none of the horror they encountered at the concentration camp made it on to the screen. Instead, the studio heads worked to undermine the recovery of the German film industry, opening up the German market to even more Hollywood films. Urwand’s book is a devastating indictment of Hollywood’s greed and self-serving behavior in the face a great human tragedy. Hollywood studio heads consistently put profit over principle and humanity, even when the ethnic group being persecuted was their own.

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**Notes**

2 Ibid., 26.
3 Ibid., 48.
4 Ibid., 48.
5 Ibid., 120.
6 Ibid., 129.
7 Ibid., 218.
8 Ibid., 225.
Book Review


C. H. Knoblauch has devoted his career to scholarship on the rhetorical tradition, composition studies, and critical pedagogy. In his most recent study, he cogently examines the ways in which rhetoric can be understood as a collection of narratives, competing ideological traditions that exhibit less of a coherent overall theory than is often portrayed. He readily admits that his presentation of six approaches to the meaning of discourse—“an anthology of Western rhetorical theory”—represents what he calls a “speculative fiction, my story about the variety of those stories.” As such, the book makes for engaging reading, with new twists and turns in the plot of an old tale.

In his chapter “The Meaning of Meaning,” Knoblauch makes two important assertions: first, that our beliefs concerning language shape how we do the business of life; and second, that our efforts to reflectively consider the nature and function of language can actually benefit our lives. If rhetoric is the study of discourse, then contrasting discourses represent “different worlds of words.” These alternative orientations to reality reflect the ways in which individuals, working out of the social matrices of which they are a part, make sense of human experience. Fundamental to our respective orientations toward the world is the activity of “naming” or representing reality by particular words: “How someone or something is named determines what the person or the thing is, and participants in the debate understand that the outcome has public consequences for how people are going to be treated, how people will act, and how the world is going to be understood.” Naming can promote the supernatural, ontological, empirical, imaginative, political or deconstructive agendas of those acting as agents of any given constituency. Similarly, the work of making sense of texts, and what writers supposedly mean by them, involves ideological conviction regarding discursive practices. For example, is the Bible supposed to be read as any other book or as a revelation from God? One’s beliefs (or lack thereof) will shape one’s reading practices. “The question is not, do readers come to different conclusions about the meaning of a text? The question is, what accounts for the differences?” Knoblauch proposes that
a careful consideration of competing approaches to discourse can promote more intentional reflection and behavior.

“Magical Rhetoric,” the subject of the second chapter, does not often get proper attention in the history of Western discourse, according to Knoblauch, in part because it is overshadowed by the originary foundations of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the pervasive rationalism of post-enlightenment thought. Magical rhetoric addresses matters of the sacred, whether construed by traditional religious practices or not, involving the transcendent powers that are perceived by a given believer. According to the story of rhetoric that is magical, the physical and spiritual realms are linked, and words are used in prayers, rites, and prophecies, to name a few, in order to invoke a mythic reality ascribed beyond what is apparent. Knoblauch devotes a considerable space the Judeo-Christian narrative of magical rhetoric, perceptively probing how it functions in naming and reading: “a consistent theme from the Old Testament through the New is the intrinsic power of utterance to affect the world, speak to God in supplication, and convey God’s teachings to the chosen.” Additionally, he offers a fascinating vignette of Teresa of Avila and her preoccupation with prayer, as well as a brief consideration of Ernst Cassirer’s insights on mythic thinking. And he closes the chapter by acknowledging the lasting secular demonstration of magical thinking in the aesthetic practices pertaining to poetry—both its production and its interpretation.

The antithesis of magical rhetoric is ontological rhetoric—“the belief that the reality named by language is intrinsically coherent independent of verbal mediation”—and the subject of the next chapter. To illustrate this orientation to the world through discourse, Knoblauch examines three prominent thinkers: Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine. For Plato, and his mouthpiece Socrates, the realm of Being (what is ideal) is not to be equated with the realm of Becoming (what is real). Citing Plato’s cave analogy from the Republic, Knoblauch suggests that based on this view, “Most human beings inhabit the cave either as prisoners chained to illusion or as prisoners tyrannized by a dependence on belief rather than knowledge.” Discourse remains imperfect and limited, relative to true things. For Socrates, “rhetoric is a mere ‘habitude,’ a routine behavior like cooking or hair dressing, whose aim is ‘flattery.’” Rhetoric persuades people; it does not inform them. Although strikingly different than Plato’s philosophy, Aristotle’s construct shares the belief in an ontological priority, relative to words. For Aristotle, facts become compelling not due to language and its function in persuasion; rather, data emerge through rational dispute. Similarly, for St. Augustine, “Truths exist independent of discourse and determine, therefore, the reliability of statements.” Finally, with a somewhat playful flourish, Knoblauch compellingly offers two examples of ontological rhetoricians in the twentieth century, whose essentialism, though
put to very different purposes, affirm the world’s “deep structure”: Antonin Scalia and Helene Cixous.

Objectivist rhetoric, the subject of the next section, does not presume a “bedrock of ontological certainty.” Examining Rene Descartes, Knoblauch sees a thinker preoccupied with observation, and a man possessed by a clear set of intellectual commitments: first, skepticism of all things that appear obvious; second, analysis of all things and their relative parts; third, methodical practice to gain efficiency of ordered thinking; and fourth, completeness of explanation and recordkeeping. “Objectivist rhetoric is comprised of empirical inquiry, driven by a cycle of hypothesis and experiment, which leads to defensible assertions linked to previous, similarly tested assertions in a temporally evolving pattern of data-driven argument.” Furthermore, Knoblauch considers John Locke, who challenges Descartes’ rational method, instead making a claim for the primacy of language in the practice of empirical investigation. For Locke, what we can know is always predicated on language constructions; therefore, he calls for greater precision in the communication of scientific discovery. Even more, Karl Popper demonstrates that science is limited in what it can actually do; although it cannot conclusively affirm truths about the material world or scientific theories, it can falsify them, showing contradictions. And Stephen Toulmin, a logical theorist and pragmatist, reveals the tautological nature of analytic argumentation in scientific inquiry, given that a conclusion is implied in the very premise; thus, he asserts that there is a need to consider alternate kinds of arguments. Lastly, Knoblauch notes that in true objectivist style, the authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Mary Belenky et al) “embrace the fictiveness of the fiction of the distanced observer,” when actually they bring values of female liberation and empowerment to their pseudo-objectivist study: “They recognize that stories (from their qualitative study) cannot be falsified.”

The sophists begin as the focus of the next chapter on “Expressivist Rhetoric,” for they are portrayed as the first group of thinkers to practice a self-styled form of discourse and its theoretical presentation. “Sophistic rhetoric offers an early rendering of the expressivist story, which conveys the view that discursive knowledge is subjective in origin, comprised of verbal and other representations whose meanings derive from autonomous acts of mind.” Though marginalized throughout intellectual history, beginning with Plato, the sophists adhered to a conviction that language held the keys to unlock knowledge. Instruction on how to use words well served, in its own right, as a form of rhetorical persuasion that reinforced human habits—from grammar to virtue—that were vital to social life. Such practices were not based upon otherworldly truths but mere human conventions. The sophistical emphasis on the individual becomes magnified in the Renaissance by a writer like Michel de Montaigne, who reinforces the relativity of self experience and expression, where the “soul treats a matter...according to herself,” and a
universal human experience such as death can elicit variable responses, from Cicero’s fear to Cato’s desire. Knoblauch reminds his readers that if objectivist rhetoric is the practice of scientists, expressivist rhetoric is the work of poets, heralding Samuel Coleridge as an exemplar, and skillfully expounding on his principles of discourse theory from his *Biographia Literaria*. For this English Romantic, that which is objective coalesces with the subjective through the power of the creative mind in the activities of primary and secondary imagination—reconstituting experience into discursive expression. Likewise, Knoblauch puts the philosophical theories of Susan Langer in the expressivist camp, given her delineation of the self and its creative capacities to symbolize the world, even prior to language development, revealing a human desire to construe the world as intelligible. Richard Rorty, too, adheres to a philosophical discursive practice that valorizes the word-using self while eschewing any idealized categorization of “human being.” Contingency prevails in all human discursive interactions, irony provides the antidote to singularizing expressions of existence, and solidarity ensures that a collective of individuals can maintain their self-creation. In all of these instances of expressive rhetorical inclination, the function of the subject remains privileged.

“Sociological Rhetoric” is a chapter that explores the foregrounding of what is social as the basis for understanding discursive practices: “the social consciousness that groups of people compose through verbal and other signs in the ceaseless production of human reality.” Thomas Kuhn challenges the claims of normal science. Intersubjective practices within a community of scientists in a given time always supports a paradigm—a model of regulated and accepted scientific behavior. Students study the established paradigms to become initiated into the community; and new ideas erupt in the displacement of one paradigm for another, whether it be that of Copernicus or Newton. Kenneth Burke, also, exhibits a theory or rhetorical practice that is sociological. Why? Knoblauch explains, because of “his emphasis on the drama of human relations, the web of motives, and the social structures within which individuals forge (and are forged by) relationships through shared engagement in discursive practice.” For Burke, dramatistic theory is based upon the dialectical, the engagement of opposing social perspectives in all aspects of human relationships. Most central to the story of sociological rhetoric is Karl Marx, whose emphasis on materiality and social practice is a rhetoric that has had profound historical impact. Thinking employs language, and it has an undeniable expression as a kind of labor and production. Marx privileges the social over the individual, the material over the ideal. As Knoblauch renders Marx, “Human beings know their world in the same way that a shoemaker knows a shoe: as the intimate product of their own labor.” The Marxist aim is rising above individualistic capital gain, toward collective consciousness and social change. Valentin Volosinov, a member of Mikhail Bakhtin’s social sphere, receives some attention, and he reflects ideas about
language consistent with his good friend. Knoblauch describes Volosinov’s central conviction: “language always preexists the specific user and is only meaningful because its meanings are already collectively shared.” And just as Volosinov makes sense of language from a Marxist perspective, Raymond Williams applies the tenets of Marx’s beliefs to culture, especially as manifest in literature; however, his view of ideology is more tempered and nuanced: a movement away from reductive analysis to complexity and comprehension. According to Williams, “To write in different ways is to live in different ways.”

The final chapter, “Deconstructive Rhetoric,” presents texts as mirrors held up to other mirrors. In a poststructuralist context, “The process of signifying has no starting point, no termination, no textual boundaries, and most important, no exit from the network of significations that sprawls from any and every point.” Ferdinand de Saussure establishes a baseline for discursive understanding: “in language there are only differences.” And Jacques Derrida moves out from this premise, as Knoblauch observes: “By installing the signified inside the sign, he identifies reference as a feature within language, not a connection between language and something beyond it.” Thus, he shows the unstable nature of meaning, of textual structures of expression; texts reveal their own undoing. Moreover, Jean-Francois Lyotard is the first to name and describe the “postmodern condition” in which knowledge is validated by institutions of power that appeal to metanarratives. In this context, there is a crisis of legitimation—traditional knowledge competes with scientific knowledge, and the two are incommensurate. This contest of knowledge opens a space for critical intervention by alternate voices, however, bringing cultural critique, such as that of postmodern feminist Trinh Minh-ha, who challenges the history of Western rhetoric as indicative of patriarchal reason and combative argumentation. Her response is to tell her own story, which is also that of her grand-matriarch, uncharacteristic of the supposedly civilized conventions of rhetoric.

Knoblauch concludes his anthology by emphasizing that most histories of rhetoric do not examine discursive practices rooted in ideology. “Ideologies articulate ways of being in the world,” he concludes. His presentation of the six dominant, competing ideological narratives of European rhetoric demonstrates both his inventive insights and expository skills, which make the book worth the investment.

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Notes

1 Knowblauch, C. H. Discursive Ideologies: Reading Western Rhetoric (Boulder: University of Utah Press, 2014), 15.
2 Ibid., 1.
3 Ibid., 11.
4 Ibid., 19.
5 Ibid., 37.
6 Ibid., 49.
7 Ibid., 50.
8 Ibid., 53.
9 Ibid., 70.
10 Ibid., 79.
11 Ibid., 98.
12 Ibid., 102.
13 Ibid., 104.
14 Ibid., 109.
15 Ibid., 132.
16 Ibid., 137.
17 Ibid., 146.
18 Ibid., 151.
19 Ibid., 162.
20 Ibid., 163.
21 Ibid., 167.
22 Ibid., 196.
Book Review


"Atlantic History" made its formal debut in the 1970s, but it was in the late 1980s and 1990s when this field became branded in academic journals, university presses, and PhD programs. Focused primarily on the early modern period, this research area is transnational in its approach, going beyond the field of a single national history: Atlantic researchers have endeavored to place the period covering the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries on its own terms, without present-day understanding of national boundaries clouding the historical analysis. Thus, colonial historians, more-often-than not, are no longer satisfied with confining their research to the thirteen mainland colonies, nor are they guided by dates considered important to the U.S. national narrative, such as 1776. Instead, they endeavor to flesh-out the interconnectedness between regions and to show how a variety of exogenous and endogenous forces shaped social change in various parts of the Atlantic basin. Atlantic history lends itself quite naturally to comparative history and encourages us to ponder the most salient factors in social development in the colonies.

The great challenge in the production of truly comparative Atlantic history is maintaining authorial mastery of multiple regional histories. By combining forces in this comparative study of Jamaica and St. Domingue (Haiti), Burnard and Garrigus have produced a work that shifts the focus for the c.1760-c.1790 period away from events in Quebec, Boston, and Yorktown and toward the two most important colonies held by Britain and France. The result is a compelling proposal for readers to re-think how (1) the concept of race was constructed in colonies; (2) empires were managed, and (3) short-run political successes led to the ultimate demise of planter class. Those familiar with the Caribbean literature will recognize that the authors simultaneously address old and new historical debates while fashioning a new framework for
understanding this important period in imperial and Atlantic history. In piecing together this new comparative analysis, Burnard and Garrigus follow the interdisciplinary approach urged by Games, putting forth a social, cultural, and political history of the white colonial misrule over hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans and creoles (locally-born enslaved people).

*The Plantation Machine* begins from a descriptive and analytical starting point, devoting the first chapters to establishing the physical, cultural, economic, and social milieu of both Jamaica and St. Domingue. Separated by approximately 100 nautical miles, the two colonies share a great deal in common. Both were advanced sugar colonies, thereby producing enormous wealth for the planters who worked Africans and their descendants in the cane fields, sugar mills, and boiling houses. Burnard and Garrigus also show us the subtle differences between each colony's business model, such as Jamaica's heavy reliance upon the brutally efficient transatlantic slave trade and St. Domingue's construction of complex irrigation systems. Taking a broad view, however, one can generalize that both colonies represent the contours of any eighteenth century integrated sugar plantation colony, with annual slave deaths consistently outstripping slave births. The underfeeding and overworking of the enslaved population was morally bankrupt, but it made business sense, so long as the slave trade delivered new victims to these tropical "charnel houses."

Building on the work by Vincent Brown, and earlier research by Burnard, *The Plantation Machine* underscores how high mortality (among all people) and the constant threat of slave rebellion engendered a "levity toward death" among the master class.3 Male and sometimes female slave owners engineered horrific punishments and gruesome executions. Brutality was a constant throughout the history of sugar and slavery in the greater Caribbean, but according to Burnard and Garrigus, one can detect a shift towards more intensive punishment in St. Domingue and Jamaica, starting in the 1760s. The harsher regime was effective in serving the planter class in the short run, but Burnard and Garrigus argue that this collective strategy sowed the seeds of each slave society's destruction.

Departing from traditional periodization that commonly invokes the importance of the American Revolution's impact on the Caribbean, *The Plantation Machine* describes the Seven Years' War as the watershed moment for the West Indian economy. It was during this so-called Great War for Empire that planter confidence in their ability to manage their slave populations was shaken. Ultimately, the response to this challenge was similar in both colonies. In the case of St. Domingue, we learn that during the British blockade of the colony, planters became increasingly paranoid that there was a slave conspiracy to poison whites, free people of color, and even other slaves. Burnard and Garrigus explain that the likely cause of the mysterious deaths was spoiled food, forced by war to take circuitous routes into the colony, but the widespread notion that mass poisonings were taking place led colonial judges
and administrators to give "nearly complete control of slave interrogations and punishments to the planters." In addition to this enhancement of the planter's personal power, the war also worked to strengthen white prestige, in general, as the metropolitan arm of government found it necessary to court colonial loyalty: fearing that the wealthiest settlers were far more faithful to their capitalist interest than to the empire, the Naval Ministry condoned and supported the rapid introduction of a formalized racial hierarchy, which made all whites part of the elite and humiliated even the most wealthy free people of color.

The challenges facing the planter class in Jamaica during the Seven Years' War were similar to those facing St. Domingue and the social consequence was nearly the same. What Burnard and Garrigus focus upon is the massive, but failed, uprising known as Tacky's Revolt (1760). This nearly successful uprising—which was likely triggered by white preoccupation with the threat of French invasion—generated both fear and self-doubt. The white response to this challenge was to make slave owners de facto police, judge, and jury when it came to controlling the enslaved. Jamaican society further walked in-step with St. Domingue by stripping rights and privileges of free people of color. As Burnard and Garrigus summarize, "after the near disaster of Tacky's Revolt . . . white Jamaicans came to believe that their only protection against a massive black population was to enshrine in law white supremacy."5

Thus, this book sees the Seven Years' War as a pivot point for these two important colonies. In the wake of real and perceived slave conspiracies, whites embraced an ideology that stressed racial purity, apartheid, and unrestrained planter power. Intellectual currents in Europe about race and social control had little to do with the emergence of Jamaican and St. Dominguan racialized politics. Rather, it was political expediency and existential threats that led colonists to jettison a race-and-class hierarchy for one that was firmly based on racial stratification. In the short run, we are told, this strategy benefitted planters by producing a compliant and profitable workforce. In the long run, however, these hyper-Hobbesian social changes would ultimately dismantle the plantation machine. In the case of St. Domingue, it was the denial of full civil rights to wealthy people of color that sparked the civil war that would ultimately end in the creation of the free black republic of Haiti. In Jamaica, the liberty given to planters to act as petty tyrants, unrestrained by the rule-of-law, created a public relations nightmare back in England during the 1780s, giving those who fought slavery solid ground upon which to rip down the British slave trade (1807) and slavery (1834).

In constructing a deeply comparative history of St. Domingue and Jamaica, Burnard and Garrigus have produced a novel argument that forces us to reflect on how we periodize Caribbean history and understand the demise
of the planter class. They show us how two separate slave societies were shaped by geography, imperial politics, demography, and economics. It is striking, however, how little relevance culture had in creating social differences between the two colonies. Eighteenth-century white planters, whether based in Jamaica or St. Domingue, were driven primarily by the lure of profits and molded by the fear of rebellion.

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5 Ibid., 147.
Myria Georgiou’s book is a creative and stimulating contribution to a wide-ranging body of literature addressing the ways media and the city interrelate. As major metropolises such as New York, London or Tokyo are increasingly linked to networks of globalization—"global cities," in the words of S. Sassen¹—the relationship between media and the city “is becoming more and more one of interdependence,” Georgiou explains.² Contrary to recent authors such as Steve Macek who mostly examine the mediated city as a vector of “moral panics” and fear of otherness (Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, and The Moral Panic Over the City, 2006), Georgiou emphasizes the potentialities of the media and city synergies rather than their limitations. Driven by capitalistic and neoliberal imperatives, global cities are characterized by intense urbanization, rising transnational migration and increasing mediation, as evidenced by the ubiquity of corporate media and the growth of social and personal means of communication. In this global and highly mediated context, Georgiou argues, urban dwellers are continually exposed to difference. Urban subjects thus have to negotiate “close encounters with difference,”³ a process that is not without paradoxes and contradictions.

The core of the book consists of five chapters, each chapter subdivided into titled sections. In the introduction, Georgiou carefully delineates the rich conceptual and theoretical framework that informs her work as well as her methodological approach. She explains that the best way to examine the dialogical relationship between media and the city is at the street level, “beyond the glass buildings” of corporate media headquarters⁴ that traditionally concentrate the symbolic power of the city. Choosing the streets of London as her empirical terrain, her bottom-up perspective on the mediated global city offers fresh insights into what she calls “messy and uneven spaces of creativity”⁵ namely the urban everyday life. Relying upon a definition of cosmopolitanization as a process⁶ and interpretations of cosmopolitanism as
both anchored in social experience and lived, Georgiou examines the unpredictable and sometimes paradoxical outcomes of exposure to difference in the mediated global city. In order to highlight the complexity of the media and city synergies as well as the “unresolved condition of cosmopolitanization,” Georgiou elaborated an analytical matrix consisting of four thematic interfaces—consumption, identity, community and action—which are discussed respectively in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Chapter 2—the first main chapter—is titled “Media and the City: Synergies of Power.” It acknowledges the hegemonic status of London as the quintessential global city in terms of finance, consumption, and a corporate celebration of cosmopolitan culture that contributes to the city’s symbolic power. However, symbolic power is not the sole preserve of elite (corporate and government) cosmopolitanism. As the author states, “symbolic power is often generated at the street level” in the context of a vernacular cosmopolitanism that is “messy, contradictory, and comes out of cultural meetings and hybridity.” This theoretical chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the book that largely relies on empirical analysis.

Chapter 3—“Consumption: The Hegemonic and The Vernacular”—deals with “close encounters with difference” in two shopping areas in London’s East End: the Westfield Stratford City mega-mall built as part of the 2012 Olympics regeneration projects, and Shoreditch, a culturally diverse and bohemian destination. Here Georgiou nuances what may seem as binary oppositions between elite (Westfield, the global corporate brand) and vernacular cosmopolitanism (the local, street-level consumption of Shoreditch). Indeed, she points out the complexity of consumer cultures and the instability of cosmopolitan narratives. Westfield Stratford City’s top-down cosmopolitanism celebrates cultural difference regardless of class as long as customers have enough purchasing power to be part of the global cosmopolitan experience of the mall. Yet this sanitized “non-place” is also a place where people can turn consumption of global brands into a unique experience and where close encounters with difference become possible. Conversely, Shoreditch is a site of tensions between vernacular cosmopolitanism, the liberal vision of togetherness and elite consumption practices in a “hip” locale from which many are excluded. In this chapter, Georgiou’s approach offers an interesting counterpoint to rigid Marxist perspectives for which cosmopolitanism is entirely complicit with the homogenizing forces of neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, the case of Shoreditch proves that the uniqueness of a place is always subjected to (corporate) media representations.

In chapter 4, titled “Identity: Popular Culture and Self-Making,” Georgiou analyzes the complexity of cosmopolitanism and the tensions of cosmopolitanization through the lens of creativity in urban cultures of communication. Taking Hackney, one of London’s inner-city areas, as her
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empirical case study, Georgiou claims that popular culture—especially music and graffiti—“becomes cultural capital for marginalized urban dwellers.”

From that perspective, the marginalized inner city becomes a place of identity, agency, and symbolic power. Yet Georgiou’s point is not to hammer home that culture from the margins depends on mainstream cultural forms, and that mainstream culture tends to turn inner-city “authenticity” into consumer products. As in the previous chapter, she is concerned with the subtle interplay between local and global consumption practices through mediation. While serving neoliberal economic interests through the commodification of difference, mainstream celebration of marginalized urban culture can promote “some alternative narratives of identity,” including “aspiration and hope for change.” The global city is thus more a dialectical space than a rigidly polarized place opposing the mainstream to the margins.

In chapter 5, “Community: Transnational Solidarities,” Georgiou explains that the global city, as a magnet for migration, is a “transnational city” marked by what R. Robertson calls a “universalism-particularism continuum.” This continuum, she affirms, is made prominent through mediation. Since advanced means of communication enable to create or maintain transnational networks, cosmopolitanism no longer implies physical movement from one city to another. The result is that transnational actors are constantly exposed to difference and particularism in a global urban context, which tends to challenge majoritarian (and often parochial) ideological frameworks. To support her argument, Georgiou relies on the experience of three transnational communities: diasporic Arab audiences of transnational television, a group of young television viewers from London’s inner city, and unspecified “urban nomads.” While the first two examples could have been more documented—what was the exact number of respondents to the surveys? Is empathy towards distant sufferers seen on television enough to disrupt parochialism?—the case of urban nomads, which paradoxically contradicts the idea that exposure to difference can challenge majoritarianism, is the most interesting. Indeed, it perfectly reflects the ambivalence of transnationality: caught between individualism and cosmopolitanism, self-interest and solidarity, the global city is not always a “city of refuge.”

In the last chapter of the book, “Action: Presence and Marginality,” Georgiou turns her attention to the mediation of social unrest and revolt in the global city. Relying on two practical examples—the urban riots and the Occupy movement that unfolded in London in 2011—she shows that the intense mediation of both events enabled marginalized groups usually deprived of symbolic power to become hyper-visible. Drawing on Sassen’s concept of “politics of presence,” she claims that hyper-visibility can be a powerful political tool to challenge the dominant order. However, Georgiou argues,
the intense mediation of these events did not mark a clear opposition between mainstream media and social networks. Rather, it demonstrated a complex interplay between corporate media that made the marginalized globally visible and protesters/rioters who produced their own self-image through personal means of communication at the local level. However, this form of “liberatory cosmopolitanism”\(^{20}\) has its limits. As Georgiou insightfully remarks in her epilogue (“Cosmopolitan Contradictions”), “diversity is about struggles that take place in the context of neoliberal capitalism’s aggressive grip on the global city.”\(^{21}\) When mainstream media generally embraced the humanistic values defended by Occupy—a largely white, middle-class movement—inner-city rioters were often stigmatized as threatening members of the “underclass.” Yet it is less a lack of “political intentionality” on the part of the rioters, as Georgiou suggests,\(^ {22}\) than corporate media’s neoliberal worldview that explains such discrepancy. In the global city, exposure to difference—in terms of both class and race—is tolerated as long it serves neoliberal imperatives.

*Media and the City* is elegantly written, intelligently organized and well conceptualized. Transcending binary oppositions between the mainstream and the marginal, “"we-ness” and “"other-ness,”\(^ {23}\) its empirical cases show that cosmopolitanization at the street level opens up spaces in the mediated global city where close encounters with difference and political actions become possible. In a world where the media tend to reinforce the neoliberal paradigm through narrow views of cosmopolitanism, Georgiou’s book offers a glimpse of hope for counter-hegemonic resistance and transnational solidarity in the global city. Whether these forms of resistance will endure remains an open question that calls for future analyses of the complex relationship between media and the city.

~Nadège Rolland

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**Notes**

2 Myria Georgiou, *Media and the City*, 3.
3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid., 4.
5 Ibid, 7.
10 Ibid., 34.
12 Georgiou, *Media and the City*, 76.
13 Ibid., 85.
14 Ibid., 89.
16 Georgiou, *Media and the City*, 97.
17 Ibid., 112.
19 Georgiou, *Media and the City*, 122.
20 Ibid., 145.
21 Ibid., 146.
22 Ibid., 150.
23 Ibid., 151.
Book Review

The HyperCities project is very heterogeneous, as is the book that resulted from it. The project started at UCLA’s Center for Digital Humanities in year 2000 and has been developed for a decade. The final product is located on the web, but Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano published a book with the same title as their mapping project in order to explain it. The reader will find, both in the website and in the book, a multiplicity of voices, authors, and contributors that is closely related to the project’s nature and purpose.

Presner explicated the HyperCity concept in the “Preface”: A HyperCity is multi-layered, not only in time—it entails a past and a present and is projected into the future—but with information networks. These convey meanings and become “thick” insofar as they build new meanings into the previous layers. Hence, the authors name their method as “thick mapping.” In order to incorporate such diverse data, the participation of different agents is required: academics, members of the community, and local organizations. The book, therefore, utilizes a very similar method: it features three authors who use three different voices to approach specific topics, but it also contains many “windows” by other contributors: Phil Ethington, Mike Blockstein and Reanne Estrada, Diane Favro and Chris Johanson, and Xárene Eskandar. These windows are firsthand examples of the practical applications of thick mapping in HyperCities. Sometimes the authors use a more subjective voice (zoom in) and other times an academic voice (zoom out); sometimes two different authors occupy the same page divided by a line or they alternate their narrations. For this reason, this is not a traditional academic book, but it reflects the essence of their endeavor: it is participatory, multi-voiced, and multi-layered.

In the first chapter, Presner puts forward the idea that cities participate simultaneously in multiple times by means of the media that represent them: books, photographs, cinema, geo-browsers such as Google Earth, etc. Media transform spaces and the way the spectator perceives them: a photograph
usually reproduces an on-earth perspective, cinema assembles sundry times and spaces and creates a linear narrative, and Google Earth has made the aerial view to seem natural. After these assumptions, Presner renders a history of the project while Shepard explains the technical aspects of HyperCities’ development on the lower bottom of the page on which Presner writes. It is a very interactive writing in which both authors create a parallel dialogue in the reader’s mind, but it may be difficult to follow at times, for the reader must split his or her attention and choose what author to read and in what order. Presner and Shepard use technological advancements to yield a tool that enables the public to navigate through multiple layers of time and narrations of all sorts and to participate in the construction and development of that very tool. Presner stresses that the maps of our time (and the HyperCities project itself) are no better or more accurate than the previous ones; they are the representation of our understanding of spatial relations embedded in an ideology. Therefore, HyperCities allows the user to explore other ways to understand these phenomena and the traits that were salient to the multiple creators and their epochs. Users can add layers to or remove them from the Google Earth’s map and therefore there is no point in time that is privileged; instead multiple points make sense in themselves through the gaze of the spectator, the screen, and the medium.

Since Google Earth is not a perfect way of mapping, but a reflection of our understanding of spatial relations, it is subject to an archaeology of its epistemology. Presner proposes in the second chapter that Google Earth reproduces the Enlightenment’s vision of a disembodied earth seen from above; nonetheless, since it is an open medium, it also allows participation, which makes it a very democratic platform. According to Presner, it is important to bear in mind that the totalizing gaze that seems so natural to Google Earth’s users is a remnant of 19th century imperialism; moreover, it was developed from military technology used to locate enemy targets and drop bombs accurately. He also makes the reader ponder the platform’s imprecisionness: Google Earth pictures a perfect world when seen from above, one with no clouds, smog, or people. Furthermore, Google Earth’s world is perfectly circular due to the projection they used, which sacrificed accuracy at the global level in order to provide it at the local one. The platform makes the lack of social friction, weather patterns, and a perfectly round earth to seem natural, but Shepard, whose writing alternates with Presner’s in this chapter, emphasizes that it is just the way our time understands spatial relations and therefore needs to give up multiple dimensions of the world in order to be accurate on others. HyperCities builds on these issues and invites users to participate so that many of these historical erasures obtain a voice in a cartographical space. Google Earth’s imperfection is a reminder of what other media have not taken into account and how “thick mapping” can bring it back...
to the media of our time. HyperCities is, then, a collection of maps and media that can be compared and contrasted with other maps and media contained in it; it is not reality, but an accumulation of maps, images, sounds, etc. for the user to delve into in order to find their ideological traits, their political assumptions, their social clashes, and their shared values. HyperCities exposes the ideologies and epistemologies contained in its media and their spatial and temporal relations.

The third and last “traditional” chapter explains how historic events, social media, and mapping interact. Since social media have enabled the democratic participation of most individuals in the public sphere, mapping it will result in a non-hierarchical collection of voices and opinions. Therefore, digital humanities defy traditional forms of scholarship and overlap the public sphere and academia. Social media are usually ephemeral and digital humanities seek to save and archive the voices that speak about certain events happening in a given location. Egypt, Libya, and Japan have been the sites of very important incidents during the last decade: the overthrow of Mubarak and Gaddafi and Japan’s tsunami and nuclear leak. Social media and thick mapping proved to be very useful during these events as they were used to communicate the sentiments, fears, and desires that the Egyptian and Libyan peoples were not allowed to convey to the people abroad. In Japan’s case, social media and global positioning satellites allowed people in California to orchestrate disaster relief and provide those in the disaster zones with accurate information about the victims. Furthermore, academics analyzed data from the tweets sent from Japan and came up with a graphic that shows how the Japanese people’s sentiments evolved throughout the tragedies.

In addition to these three chapters that can be read in any order or individually, there are many “windows” and a “gallery” by Yoh Kawano. The first two windows deal with Los Angeles as a city with a past and a future that exist in the contemporary city. The first one explores the past of the city, its cartography, its social and ethnographic composition, and its imagery—by means of mosaics of photographic stills. The second window explains how thick mapping has allowed Filipino immigrants to create their own maps and tourist guides for the public with the information they regard as relevant to their own community. The third window depicts the virtual recreation of the monuments and the city of Rome; the user can navigate Rome as it looked in the fifth century CE. The fourth window expounds how social media and technology helped to document the abuses against protesters during the 2009 election in Tehran. The gallery by Yoh Kawano is a personal account of the author’s trip to Fukushima after he helped the rescue teams by means of thick mapping.

HyperCities is a collective work that evinces the nature of digital humanities and thick mapping. It explains, with the aid of practical cases in the windows, the effort, the theoretical frame, the technology, and the ethical reflections that
produced the online HyperCities project. Those who work with geocriticism, sociology, geopolitics, and political science will find in the HyperCities project—both online and the printed book—a wondrous tool to incorporate into their research. HyperCities itself is a proof of how participatory and heterodox digital humanities can be in the best possible way.

~Rodrigo Figueroa Obregón
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Notes

1 http://hypercities.ats.ucla.edu.
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