American Cinematic Novels and their Media Environments, 1925 – 2000

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

*Cinematic American Novels and their Media Environments, 1925-2000* shows that a famous group of twentieth-century American novels asserted their cultural relevance through their responses to transitional moments in Hollywood film history. I select five well-known novels that engage with different transitional moments, including Hollywood’s transition to sound cinema and its response to New Hollywood: *The Great Gatsby, The Day of the Locust, Lolita, Gravity’s Rainbow,* and *Underworld.* By using narrative theory to analyze the content and form of such cinematic novels and by attending to the evolution of Hollywood cinema itself, I reveal the synergistic relations between film history, media history, and narrative techniques. Because I also grant considerable attention to how the larger “media environment” (including such forms as radio, television, video recorders, and the internet) afforded routes of exchange between cinema and the novel, my dissertation takes a new approach to the task of combining American media history with literary criticism and film history. Based on this evidence, I also intervene in recent debates about the fate of the American novel in new media environments. I argue that even if aggregate sales of print novels continue to fall in the future, influential American novelists will win both readers and cultural prestige by shaping our understanding of new media environments and the novel’s evolving positions in them.
Dedication

To Heather, with gratitude for your sacrifices, support, and love. And to baby McCormick, sight unseen.
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Under the auspices of Ohio State’s English Department, Project Narrative regularly hosted invited talks by narrative theorists of international renown and provided me several opportunities to present various forms of my work. Project Narrative also hosted visiting scholars who helped my research in various ways: Henrik Nielsen, Jan Alber, and Sarah Copland. I feel fortunate to have been a part of this vibrant community, and I enjoyed some terrific discussions and arguments with my fellow graduate students, including Aaron McKain, Danielle Dadras, Anne Langendorfer, Julie Green, John Nees, Brian Hauser, Matt Bolton, and many others. I owe special thanks to Suhaan Mehta for his friendship and for our many conversations over the years.

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Introduction: American Cinematic Novels and their Media Environments, 1925 – 2000

In 1899, early forms of American cinema were beginning to appear in the form of one-person viewings at kinetoscope parlors or group viewings as one act within a variety show. The year 1899 also marked the publication of Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, an American novel which briefly represents the latter kind of cinematic exhibition. In the novel’s sixth chapter, the protagonist McTeague decides to take his girlfriend, Trina Stieppe, along with her mother and young brother, Auguste, to the variety show at the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco. At the show, McTeague and the Stieppes will see several acts, including an overture by the orchestra, a minstrel performance, acrobatics, ventriloquism, and a series of film shorts projected on a screen.

Even before McTeague enters the theater, his actions demonstrate his inchoate desires for Culture, which he unconsciously recognizes as his portal to improved social status. When McTeague first tries to buy tickets to the variety show, he stammers “I want—I want”; when pressed by the clerk for his order, he responds “I don’ know, I don’ know”; and when finally insulted by the clerk he shakes his fist and tries to threaten him, but can’t spit out any words but “I will—I will—I will—yes, I will” (56 – 57). McTeague’s stammerings exemplify the narrator’s previous explanation that “No people have a keener eye for the amenities than those whose social position is not assured” (55). McTeague vaguely feels that he “wants” Culture, but soon discovers he “don’ know” what it is. The very scorn of what he perceives as culture’s gatekeepers makes him that much more
determined to consume it, whatever “it” is. Norris uses this scene as a preface to explain why McTeague and the Stieppes will gain tremendous pleasure from the variety show once they see it: their cultural inexperience and bourgeois desires motivate their poor aesthetic judgments.

Once the show begins, Norris sharply contrasts the prosaic quality of its various acts with McTeague’s erroneously high evaluations of their aesthetic and cultural worth. For example, the narrator describes “two men extravagantly made up as negro minstrels, with immense shoes and plaid vests. They seemed to be able to wrestle a tune out of almost anything—glass bottles, cigar-box fiddles, strings of sleigh-bells, even graduated brass tubes, which they rubbed with resined fingers” (60). After his spoken dialogue, McTeague’s over-evaluation of their performance quickly follows: “ ‘That’s what you call musicians,’ ” he announced gravely. ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ played on a trombone. Think of that! Art could go no farther” (60). I suggest that if we recognize the obvious in this passage—that Norris and McTeague have wildly different judgments of what constitutes good “Art”—this is partly due to our conscious recognition that we are reading Norris’s novel. To enjoy the irony as Norris intends, contemporary readers must do more than just repress the racist intimations of the minstrel scene. We also have to recognize Norris’s self-referential gesture, to provisionally agree that McTeague has some legitimate claim to art or craftsmanship that the trombone tune does not. As this scene suggests, aesthetic judgments in novels are particularly amenable to self-referential gestures about novels, particularly about the novel one is currently reading.

When McTeague and the Stieppes finally see a version of early American cinema, what the show grandiloquently advertises as a “crowning achievement of the nineteenth
“century” turns out to be a series of film shorts from daily life, like people crossing a street and a horse shaking its head. Despite the simplicity of these scenes, McTeague and the Stieppes are so impressed by their cinematic realism that they momentarily believe the scenes are actually happening. Although Norris comically exaggerates his characters’ reactions, their fictional reactions actually resemble historical reports of the earliest film audiences. The legend is that the first cinema audiences in 1895 found a train in a film short to be so realistic that they momentarily believed it was going to run them over (Gunning).

It is difficult to confirm such historical reports, but I argue that this passage in McTeague does confirm one literary response to early cinema and the American moviegoers who enjoyed it. Because McTeague previously made aesthetic evaluations so untenable as to be funny, his positive evaluation of cinema is also made laughable. Just as McTeague is represented as the kind of person who believes that early film shorts are real, Norris represents early film shorts as the kind of art that people like McTeague appreciates. Further, Norris denies early cinema its most compelling feature, its verisimilitude, by summarizing its simple images with a few words. Once early film shorts are reincarnated in the medium of the print novel, “remediated” as a small passage in McTeague (Bolter and Grusin), they help Norris indirectly underscore his own artistic achievement. In comparison to early film shorts, this novel is superior because it represents many people and actions, offers a narrative and even a plot, details characters’ motivations, and reveals thought representations that provide a richer imitation of contemporary life than film shorts—or so Norris indirectly suggests.¹

Now, fast-forward to the present. It is the time of smart phones, Facebook, and e-readers like Nook and Kindle. How will the American novel respond to contemporary
electronic media, defined broadly, and will that response even matter in American culture? For many, the answers are already evident, and they are not good for print culture or literary critics. For example, in 2004, a report issued by the National Endowment for the Arts noted that Americans are reading substantially less drama, poetry, and literary fiction than they did previously. That decline, according to the authors, is directly attributable to the contrasting popularity of emerging technologies: “Reading at Risk merely documents and quantifies a huge cultural transformation that most Americans have already noted—our society’s massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information.” Famous American novelists like Jonathan Franzen (“Why Bother?” 1996) and Don DeLillo (“Power of History” 1997) have been writing about the novel’s cultural irrelevance and the cultural rise of electronic media for years. More recently, critics like Sven Birkerts and Neil Postman very carefully, very thoughtfully, bemoan the novel’s obsolescence as a fait accompli, even as books of fiction continue to sell.

Novels like *McTeague* remind us, or should remind us, that different forms of entertainment media converge and interpenetrate, that there is no zero-sum competition between different forms of entertainment media. Novelists will use their representations of emerging media to successfully assert their own cultural relevance. Like the “death of the author,” the “death of the novel” is a common refrain by those who choose to forget both media history and the novel’s history. Right? But how then can we explain the recent and not-so-recent anxiety implicit in the writings of American novelists like Franzen and DeLillo? Shouldn’t they, in particular, know better?

In her recent critical book, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick explains that famous white, male novelists like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and perhaps to a
lesser extent, contemporary novelists like Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace, keep on complaining about the novel’s obsolescence because they have a hidden agenda. They use their fears about the novel’s obsolescence at the hands of electronic media to disguise their real anxiety: their loss of cultural privilege as white male novelists at a time in which minority and women novelists are gaining cultural ascendency: the age of television widely defined. Her explanation can fit onto Norris’s use of cinema, too. Norris dismisses cinema as lowbrow, and implicitly associates it with the racialized Other through the minstrel scene. It may be that white, male novelists often implicitly connect emerging forms of media to other anxieties, including race, economics, and gender. But will American novelists always respond as dismissively to emerging electronic media as Norris does to cinema? A glance at the history of American novels that engage cinema suggests no.

This is to argue that if we want the best predictive model for how American novelists engage emerging electronic media over the twenty-first century, then we need to understand how American novelists engaged the dominant entertainment medium of the twentieth century. Without question, that medium was Hollywood cinema. By looking at the long-term response of formally-ambitious American novelists to Hollywood cinema, we can better understand how it responded to a competitor over the long haul. In 2008, Stephen Bottomore writes in his call for more scholarship on what he calls “moving picture fiction”: “If therefore one of our aims as historians is to try and recapture the thinking of people in the past, we could do worse than examine—critically—these distilled artistic reflections on the phenomenon (here being movies) which interests us” (123). Such a critical examination is particularly necessary, I argue, if we wish to make informed predictions about the contemporary American novel’s future in new media environments.
Returning to 1899 now, as a case study McTeague’s sixth chapter reflects the attitude of a certain kind of American novelist toward the earliest forms of cinema around the turn of the twentieth-century. Indeed, the very brevity of the novel’s engagement with cinema is representative. American cinema in 1899 was marketed toward the vast majority of American consumers, those who had relatively little money, leisure time, or education compared to the rich. So, novelists I will call “formally-ambitious”—those novelists seeking cultural prestige among a select group of relatively experienced, educated, and wealthy readers—found little interest in engaging cinema as a primary subject of thematic representation, and even less interest in adapting cinematic forms as a source of formal innovation before the 1920s. Engaging directly with cinema at the turn of the century would not make sense for most formally-ambitious American novelists: it was a medium with which their target audience was not particularly familiar; early cinema was not always even narrative and had few similarities to the novel; and most authors would have risked damaging their authorial brand if they engaged with cinema. Notable exceptions include American authors like H.D. and Gertrude Stein, who were influenced by the earliest forms of cinema around the turn of the century. But such authors were generally more interested in the theoretical potential of cinema than its present actuality in mainstream American culture.

However, another kind of early twentieth-century American novelist did use cinematic themes and motifs immediately. In contrast to Norris’s dismissive treatment of cinema in McTeague, hundreds of American popular novels represented cinema, often in interesting and complimentary ways, novels like They Shoot Horses, Don’t They? and Merton of the Movies (Brooker-Bowers; Rhodes; Springer). This novelistic genre is called the Hollywood Novel, and it has been the focus of a few recent critical monographs (e.g., Springer, Rhodes).
But as John Parris Springer has recently insisted, the Hollywood novel is a persistently popular genre “in its appeals and orientation” (Politics). It is precisely because of the Hollywood novel’s appeals and orientation to popular culture, I argue, that it needs to be categorically distinguished from what I will call cinematic novels, my dissertation’s subject.

I define cinematic novels as formally-ambitious novels that substantively engage cinema at both the level of thematic representation and narrative technique. *McTeague* is not a cinematic novel because it offers a quick, dismissive representation of cinema and does not try to adapt any techniques used in cinema. *Merton of the Movies* is not a cinematic novel because it makes few implicit claims to formal innovation or high-brow cultural relevance.

Direct adaptations, novels based on a particular film, also deserve their own separate category and critical discussion; and the subject of Hollywood’s changing relations to the American novel would require a book-length discussion of its own. I do not pretend that my categories or examples of “formally-ambitious novels” or “cinematic novels” are based on objective definitions; they are merely analytical distinctions I employ for a particular task. By distinguishing cinematic novels from these other genres, I mean to demonstrate that some of the most famous, highly regarded American novels of the twentieth-century engaged with Hollywood cinema in substantial ways that still have yet to be recognized. In fact, I will argue that once some formally-ambitious American novelists actually began to engage with cinema quite late in the game, the history of novel was significantly altered by their individual responses to the historical changes of Hollywood cinema as an industry, art form, and form of popular entertainment.

Like Norris, most formally-ambitious American novelists took a dismissive attitude toward American cinema (or more often, ignored it all together) before the emergence of
“Classical Hollywood Cinema,” film historian David Bordwell’s influential term for the American studio system as it existed from 1918 – 1960 (Bordwell). It was around 1918 that the American film studios solidified their financial standing, popular appeal, and aesthetic norms. The emergence of Classical Hollywood Cinema was a significant change in American culture, and by around 1920 it was well on its way to becoming the dominant entertainment medium of the twentieth century. Consequently, even formally-ambitious American novelists found it more difficult to dismiss cinema as Norris did in 1899, for they were beginning to compete with Hollywood cinema for American consumers. This realization of potential competition on several fronts may have come to Hollywood cinema first; Bordwell suggests that, “By about 1915 the industry began to realize that it was competing with the popular fiction magazines for good stories” (166). In any regard, the American cinematic novel represents a series of literary responses to the emergence and continued development of Hollywood cinema over time.

Another 1915 touchstone deserves mention, for it represents Hollywood’s first influential claim to formal ambition and high-brow cultural relevance: the prologue to D.W. Griffith’s notorious film, The Birth of a Nation (1915). In that prologue, Griffith defends his racist material and innovative techniques by explicitly asking for the same artistic liberties given to the novel, and in this way suggesting that his film was similar to a formally-ambitious novel, and that he was similar to an author. The Birth of a Nation was revolutionary for its feature-length duration, its use of new cinematic techniques like parallel editing, and for its persuasive declaration of artistic kinship to the novel. The box office popularity and the critical success of The Birth of a Nation suggests that American consumers agreed with Griffith, that for the first time they were willing to accept some films with high cultural and
formal ambitions. For the first time, film could be “literary,” if by that word we mean formally-ambitious media marketed as an art form and targeted for a select audience. The work of D.W. Griffith and a few other directors would continue to make implicit claims for Hollywood cinema as middle-brow American art in later years. American cinematic novels would follow shortly, including an explicitly cinematic novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), written by a formally-ambitious young novelist called F. Scott Fitzgerald. I begin my study of the twentieth-century American cinematic novel in 1925, at which time Classical Hollywood Cinema was well established in American culture.

Literary critics and narrative theorists have long been interested in the question of “cinematic influence” on the American novel, but in 1987 Steven G. Kellman clarified a central problem with many of these classic studies. Notice the tendency of literary critics to treat cinematic influence in an essentialized, dehistoricized way, he writes:

> A thorough attempt to disentangle the two terms of the analogy [i.e., film and novel] would end up cross-cutting the history of the novel with the history of the cinema. Obviously, “cinematic” does not mean the same thing in 1987 as it did in 1950, before wide-screen technology, as it did in 1940, before color became commonplace, as it did in 1925, before movies could talk... (471)

To this excellent point, I would only add that “cinematic” does not mean the same thing after Hollywood responds to radio, television, or the internet either: Hollywood cinema changed, but so did the American media environment. In *American Cinematic Novels in their Media Environments, 1925 – 2000*, I cross-cut the history of the novel with the history of
cinema and the history of the American media environment, that is, the emergence, growth, and changes that came with radio, television, the internet, and other media.

I explain how American cinematic novelists engaged cinema at particular times and for particular purposes by drawing upon histories of Hollywood cinema and film style that were not available to earlier literary scholars, especially influential works about Hollywood cinema from David Bordwell, Tino Balio, and other film historians. While there are just as many unresolved questions in film history as there are in literary history, there is also just as much critical consensus. Moreover, my interest in film history lies not in esoteric problems, but in the basic changes in the history of Hollywood cinema that are well-known to film and media historians. Unlike such historians, but like several literary and media theorists, some film theorists have argued for various transhistorical, essentialist views of cinema, offering theses to answer Andre Bazin’s famous question, “What is Cinema?” But I do not draw upon this eclectic body of research because I am only interested in what cinema was at particular times according to a particular implied author, and why such authors may have represented it that way. By pairing the formal tools of contemporary narrative theory with the historical tools of film and media history, I attempt to explain how, as a group, certain American cinematic novelists changed the ways in which they engaged Hollywood cinema.

I bring this analytical framework to bear on five case studies of individual novels published between 1925 – 2000. I select my cases so that I can show how changes in the production of Hollywood cinema afforded American novelists particular opportunities for literary representation and formal innovation during this time. Throughout American Cinematic Novels, I use “affordance” to indicate the “productive possibilities of interaction” (Serpell 227) between Hollywood cinema and American novelists. Each of my selected
cinematic novels responds to a key moment in Hollywood history that offered them particular affordances: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) responds to early Hollywood celebrity culture; Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939) reacts to Hollywood’s transition to talkies and to the dominance of radio; Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) responds to Hollywood’s post-war popularity; Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) reacts to the emergence of New Hollywood; and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) responds to contemporary cinema in the midst of synergistic media environments. I have chosen the novels both because of their individual significance within current understandings of the history of the American novel and because, cumulatively, they show how transitional moments in Hollywood film history afforded especially rich opportunities for a certain group of American novels to assert their cultural relevance.

Certainly I could have chosen other American cinematic novels as my case studies, including any of the novels in John Dos Passo’s *U.S.A.* trilogy, Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Don DeLillo’s *Americana* or *Running Dog*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender is the Night*, or *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*, Gore Vidal’s *Hollywood: A Novel*, to name just a few. However, I have tried to choose novels that continue to resonate in present-day discussions of formally-ambitious twentieth-century American literature. I have no doubt that close readings of other American cinematic novels would refine my argument about the importance of transitional moments in the history of Hollywood cinema in valuable ways. However, my inductive approach to media history provides nuance and specificity to a field not particularly known for either attribute, and a complete account of the American cinematic novel will take time. Literary historians know
more about this subject than in previous years, and my hope is that future research will build and improve upon my contribution here.

I also believe that additional research would confirm the pattern of “belatedness” I find in the progression of my five case studies. In his recent study of film style in contemporary Hollywood films, David Bordwell uses the term “belatedness” to describe a “pervasive pattern” he sees in many Hollywood films after 1960, the tendency to reveal self-conscious awareness about the act of making film. For example, obvious examples would include Fight Club or Kill Bill, which respectively suggest the possibility of sneaking images into specific film shots and the influence of previous film genres. Bordwell suggests that these gestures were less prevalent in Hollywood films before 1960, which tended to avoid showing the fifth wall by staying within the fictive universe. It is easy to think of exceptions, Bordwell would suggest, but the pattern remains.

Similarly, I find a more gradual pattern toward belatedness—toward Hollywood film—in the American cinematic novels published from 1925 – 2000 that I discuss: The Great Gatsby (1925), The Day of the Locust (1939), Lolita (1955), Gravity’s Rainbow, and Underworld (1997). If McTeague represents the novelistic dismissal of early cinema, then The Great Gatsby represents a more sustained thematic engagement with Hollywood film culture, even as Fitzgerald sneakily adapts some of the formal affordances that helped make Hollywood stars so popular. By 1939, American cinematic novelists engage Hollywood cinema explicitly and harshly, as evidenced by the classic cinematic novel, The Day of the Locust. Like Dos Passos in his U.S.A. trilogy, West connects the glamorous Classical Hollywood Cinema to some of its humble roots in vaudeville theatre, but his primary focus is still on those versions of Hollywood cinema contemporary to him and his readers.
In the postwar American culture of 1955, Hollywood cinema had been a fact of modern life in many facets and for generations, and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* reflects that fact. In *Lolita*, Nabokov represents Hollywood cinema as just one aspect of American popular culture, but he suggests that if we really wish to know his teenage protagonist, we need to understand how and why she immerses herself in Hollywood’s fictions. Nabokov takes a much more generous and circumspect approach to Hollywood cinema than Fitzgerald and West, and one reason for that difference is the familiarity of Hollywood to his readers and its declining status in the American media environment, partly due to television’s emergence.

Published in 1973, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* exemplifies the belatedness salient in American cinematic novels, as well as American cinema, after 1960. This historical co-incidence is no coincidence. By 1973 Hollywood was inventing itself as “New Hollywood,” and innovative film directors were more familiar than their predecessors with cinema’s international past and present—a fact that showed in their films. Meanwhile, film classes were taught regularly at American universities, and film archives were established. As if in answer, Pynchon also represents a version of Hollywood’s past, which he sets in postwar Nazi Germany. He draws upon film criticism, as well as “classic” Hollywood movies that were regularly shown on television, to contest the glory of Hollywood’s past through his allusions to dozens of Hollywood and German films in the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time, Pynchon indirectly contests the social significance of New Hollywood directors in 1973 America through his fictional representation of German independent director Gerhardt von Göll. After Hollywood films begin their pattern of belatedness, Pynchon contests both the present and past of Hollywood cinema.
Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel, *Underworld* suggests the tremendous changes in the American cinematic novel over the past seventy-five years. In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald suppressed his formal adaptations of cinema to present himself as a formally-ambitious novelist, but by 1997 Don DeLillo depends upon similar adaptations of cinema. Even as DeLillo maintains the productive antagonism toward cinema that defines American cinematic novelists of the twentieth-century, he draws attention to his imitation of cinematic technique and names his novel after a fictional film. This turn of events, I argue, is both a symptom and a result of the dynamic relationships between individual American cinematic authors and transitional moments in the history of Hollywood cinema within the wider frame of the changing American media environments of the twentieth century. And in this context—as the last in a series of twentieth-century American cinematic novels—that *Underworld* exemplifies why American novels will continue to thrive in changing media environments of the future.

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1 See Paul Young for an alternate reading of *McTeague’s* sixth chapter as it relates to cinema.

Norris’s critics have pointed out that the author mistakes a kinetoscope for what is actually a vitagraph (58).

2 David Seed writes, “The emergence of the cinema and Modernism in the same period enabled experimental writers to use film as the sign of contemporaneity. Indeed, from the 1920s onwards an increasing number of novelists—figures as diverse as Gertrude Stein, Evelyn Waugh, and John Dos Passos—wove into their works cinematic techniques like montage and there became evident a professional involvement of novelists in screenwriting” (xi).

3 For classic studies of the cinematic novel, see e.g., Magny, Spiegel, Cohen. For more recent studies of cinematic form, see e.g. Trotter and Dibattista, who offer much later versions of Killman’s critique. For the classical narratological view of “camera-eye narration,” see Friedman.

4 I borrow “affordance” from C. Namwali Serpell to suggest opportunity rather than causality between Hollywood cinema and American novels. See Serpell and Ryan for discussion of the term’s critical history.
Chapter 1: Hollywood Celebrity Culture and “Ocular Confusions” in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s

_The Great Gatsby_

When F. Scott Fitzgerald drafted _The Great Gatsby_ in the summer of 1924, he faced two artistic problems trying enough to distress the most self-confident young writer, problems which he had already represented in his previous novel, _The Beautiful and Damned_. There he has the novelist Dick Carmel discuss the problems that come with early literary success: “You mean write trash?” He considered. ‘If you mean deliberately injecting a slushy fade-out into each one, I’m not. But I don’t suppose I’m being so careful. I’m certainly writing faster and I don’t seem be thinking as much as I used to” (188). In retrospect, Carmel’s words must have seemed self-prophetic to the biographical Fitzgerald in 1924, since he too had a pressing need to build on the financial and popular success of his first novel, _This Side of Paradise_. (Of course, he also wanted to write a better and more critically-acclaimed novel than _The Beautiful and Damned_, which was his second novel.) And like Carmel, Fitzgerald was already interested in—and quite possibly troubled by—the emergence of Classical Hollywood Cinema very early in his career, a problem for American novelists in the early 1920s which is echoed by Dick’s reference to “slushy fade-outs” and its implied connections to popular writing, lousy writing, and Hollywood cinema. But by 1924 Fitzgerald’s _The Beautiful and Damned_ was rather unsuccessful, both commercially and critically, while Hollywood cinema continued to gain popularity and cultural significance. (Brucoli; Bordwell; Balio). It is tempting to imagine Fitzgerald contemplating how he might
engage with this upstart medium once again, hopefully this time with more success, considering that writing about Hollywood cinema was hardly fresh artistic material for a literary writer by 1924.\(^3\)

What Fitzgerald discovered as he sought to build on his early literary success while dealing with Hollywood cinema’s rising popularity, I argue, was an opportunity to adapt some of the techniques of Hollywood cinema both as part of his case for the superiority of his medium and as a way to link his novel with the roots of modernism. In this essay I will support these bold claims by showing what Fitzgerald’s competitive response to Hollywood means for three key components of the novel. In part one, I explore an aspect of *The Great Gatsby* that has not been given proper attention before, Myrtle Wilson’s association with Hollywood celebrity culture. In part two, I consider how Fitzgerald represents the subsidiary media like newspapers and magazines that feed into this culture. In part three, I focus on what I will call Nick Carraway’s soft-focus unreliability: the connections between his flawed perception and the kinds of perceptions encouraged by Hollywood celebrity culture. Taken together, these components reveal how Fitzgerald adapted Hollywood’s aura of celebrity to enrich his famous novel, even as he used that adaption to argue for his novel’s relevance in the early years of what film historians call Classical Hollywood Cinema, the studio system as it existed from 1918 to 1960 (Bordwell).

1. **Why Myrtle Wilson Dies from “Occular Confusion”**

   The decade or so prior to *The Great Gatsby*’s 1925 publication saw the emerging prominence of what I will call *Hollywood celebrity culture*, the American media’s promotion of all things Hollywood in the early years of Classical Hollywood Cinema, especially the glamorous lives of its stars on-screen and off-screen.\(^4\) While the film industry
continued to draw heavily upon literary sources for its plots and prestige, starting in the 1910s it increasingly sold movies through its promotion of movie stars including William “King” Baggot, Rudolph Valentino, and the Gish sisters. Such stars offered carefully crafted auras of fame and beauty, sex and glamour. These auras were carefully crafted by Hollywood cinema proper, but also by film magazines, industry publications, glamour stills, sensational journalism, novels, gossip rags, and the like (Belton; Bordwell; Ellis). Indeed, as John Ellis explains, “The basic definition of a star is that of a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances” (598). In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald represents how these subsidiary forms of circulation also nurtured Hollywood celebrity culture, which in turn distorted the perceptions and ideologies of American consumers. This can be most easily seen through his treatment of minor characters including Ella Kaye, Chester McKee, and especially Myrtle Wilson.

Myrtle Wilson appears as a minor character in *The Great Gatsby*, but her violent death curiously occupies a signal role in the novel’s plot that will eventually signal the author’s stern judgment of the Hollywood celebrity culture with which she is associated. The facts involving her death are temporarily withheld, making their eventual revelation and central role in the plot even more startling. Long ago, Wolfgang Iser described such moments in fiction as “gaps,” an essential aspect of reading in which readers are constantly seeking answers to questions posed by the narration (see also Barthes’ *S/Z*). Implied authors can use gaps to guide the judgments that the authorial audience makes through the narrative progression (Phelan, *Experiencing*). An important example of this reading process begins in chapter seven of *The Great Gatsby*, when Fitzgerald emphasizes the mystery of Myrtle’s death
by using a literal gap—a line break—to mimic the hermeneutic gap created by his temporal ordering:

So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight.

The young Greek, Michaelis, who ran the coffee joint beside the ashheaps was the principle witness at the inquest. (143)

The passage’s temporal ordering creates a hermeneutic gap starting in the first sentence quoted because the “death” in the first sentence is unspecified. This unequal knowledge between the narrator and authorial audience creates a story “instability” that is then increased with Nick’s subsequent reference to the equally mysterious inquest after the line break (Phelan, *Experiencing*). Grammatically speaking, the definitive article “the” has no antecedent; narratologically speaking, discourse time is ordered ahead of story time (Genette 33 - 85). In this way, the implied Fitzgerald makes Myrtle’s death a mystery that must be solved, a gap that must be filled, and thus imbues the eventual answer with special significance, like a mysterious murder which begins a detective story.

Only later in the narration do we fill the gap in the narrative discourse by reconstructing the fabula. What we learn has occurred in the empty space represented by the line break is that Myrtle Wilson saw Gatsby’s beautiful car driving on the street adjacent to her husband’s garage, and believed that the car belonged to her lover Tom Buchanan. Upset, Myrtle ran in front of the car, believing that Tom would recognize her and stop the car in time. But it was Daisy who was driving Gatsby’s car, and she ran over Myrtle Wilson, whose resulting death was the subject of the inquest. Myrtle has died because it was Daisy, not Tom, who was driving the car, and this was a fact that Myrtle failed to see.
The sudden violence and the simplest explanation of Myrtle’s death—her failed vision—is intriguing in a novel filled with dim perceptions, or what one critic has recently called “the novel’s central theme of occluded, distorted vision” (Dekoven 361). Leaving for later the related question of Nick’s romantic perception of Gatsby or Gatsby’s idealizing perception of Daisy, it is useful here to recall the similarly “dimmed” eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the image on a roadside poster-board advertisement, which looks down upon the ashheaps where Myrtle Wilson dies because her own vision was dim. The motif of failed vision appears again when we learn that the advertisement is for the only oculist in town, who may have gone blind himself, and that even Myrtle’s dog has dim vision (Dekoven)! As Wheeler Winston Dixon has correctly suggested, then, Myrtle’s death is only one of many cases of distorted vision or “ocular confusions” in the novel (29 - 32). However, Myrtle is the only character to die from egregious ocular confusion. And if we ask why Fitzgerald causes Myrtle Wilson to die in this particular manner, we will find that her life and death provocatively connect Fitzgerald’s representations of Hollywood celebrity culture to his theme of distorted vision.

Searching for clues about Myrtle’s death takes us back to chapter two, where Nick Carraway describes Myrtle’s apartment as he meets Myrtle’s sister, Tom Buchanan, and Mr. and Mrs. McKee. Nick describes Mr. McKee as a “pale feminine man” who “informed me that he was in the ‘artistic game’ and I learned later that he was a photographer and had made the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson’s mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall” (34). This blurry image hangs in Myrtle’s apartment. And if Mrs. McKee has her way, there will be yet another, for as Myrtle walks around the apartment displaying “impressive hauteur” and as “her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment,” Mrs.
McKee advertises her husband’s work to Myrtle, telling her, “If Chester could only get you in that pose I think he could make something of it” (35). Mr. McKee considers his wife’s suggestion, and responds, “I should change the light . . . And I’d try to get hold of all the back hair” (36). What Mr. McKee is saying is that, by increasing the backlighting in a 3-point lighting system, he can create a softened and slightly blurry image of Myrtle Wilson to make her look glamorous. If he does this, Myrtle will have a glamorous and slightly-blurry image to match her affected movie-star hauteur.

To my knowledge no critic has remarked upon the considerable significance of Mr. McKee’s remark. It associates his photographic technique with soft-focus photography, a technique associated with the Pictorialist movement, but also with Hollywood celebrity culture. While soft-focus photography had been around for decades, in the 1920s it would have been strongly associated with the mystery and glamour of Hollywood and its movie stars (Bordwell 287 – 93). Movie stars like Mary Pickford were promoted in photography stills that were often shot in soft-focus (Henderson). Movie picture magazines—like the one Myrtle keeps in her apartment—regularly featured a glamorous image of an actress on their covers. Amy Henderson has argued, “In the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood celebrities came to represent the quintessence of glamour. Packaging star imagery became a major component of the Hollywood dream machine: the enduring images of stars, rather than their evanescent shadows on the silver screen, were the portraits made by each studio for publicity purposes.” Fitzgerald anticipates the insight in this scene by mocking glamour photography’s role in promoting Hollywood celebrity culture, as Chester McKee plays the not-so-glamorous photographer to Myrtle Wilson’s not-so-glamourous star. Henderson states her claim too
strongly, however, for of course the ways that movie stars appeared on the silver screen did contribute to their star power and build their brand.

It is just as significant, therefore, that McKee’s soft-focus photography additionally evokes the practice of soft-focus cinematography, which entered its vogue around 1920: “During the late teens and especially the 1920s, many Hollywood filmmakers experimented with and gradually adopted a soft style of cinematography” (Bordwell 287). Film historian David Bordwell uses his term soft-focus cinematography to define the purposeful creation of a blurred or soft image appearance onscreen. Soft-focus cinematography is typically employed to imbue a particular long or medium landscape shot with mystery, or to impart an aura of glamour or romance to a star. Specific techniques to create these effects vary, but they could include shooting through an artificial fog, extra side or back lighting and less key lighting in the 3-point lighting system, or a material like gauze put over the camera lens (Bordwell 287 – 92). Interestingly, Bordwell identifies the famous filmmaker D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* as an influential example of soft-focus cinematography, and the biographical Fitzgerald strongly admired Griffith’s work (Margolies). In an underappreciated contribution to Fitzgerald scholarship, Dixon has suggested, “Whatever reading we wish to impose, it is clear that Fitzgerald specifically intended to give Gatsby a ‘soft focus’ quality” (32). I will argue that this conversation in Myrtle’s apartment in chapter two—which depends upon Hollywood celebrity culture for its significance—helps us to understand the reading that Fitzgerald wanted to suggest.

It is a striking coincidence that Mr. McKee wants to photograph Myrtle Wilson as if she was a movie star, for it would seem that is exactly what she wants to be. Myrtle’s copy of *Town Tattle* would provide gossip about local celebrities, and her movie picture magazine
would provide information about movie stars. More than any other character in the novel, Myrtle’s lifestyle exemplifies the sort of Jazz Age moral looseness that many Americans blamed on Hollywood and its stars in the 1920s. Film historian Tino Balio notes,

A significant and vocal segment of the public blamed the [movie] industry as the perpetrator [for the loosening of moral bonds]. And when a series of scandals involving well-known movie personalities rocked Hollywood in the early twenties, a host of civic, patriotic, and religious organizations cried out for censorship of some kind. In 1921 alone, censorship bills were introduced in thirty-seven state legislature. (125)

Certainly the most publicized Hollywood scandal of the time was the 1920 high-profile marriage of film stars Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Their eventual marriage was scandalous because before they married each other they were having an affair while each was married to another person, and they divorced their former partners to marry each other. Interestingly, the famous Pickford affair anticipates the result that Myrtle hopes will happen between Tom and herself, despite Tom’s “elaborate lie” that he cannot divorce because Daisy is Catholic and she doesn’t believe in divorce. Myrtle looks forward to the day that she can divorce George after Tom divorces Daisy, and the new couple can move out west, presumably someplace where moral strictures are not too tight—some place very much like Hollywood as imagined in the 1920s. Guatam Kundu has suggested that Fitzgerald intended Myrtle Wilson’s apartment “love nest” to resemble a “film magazine notion of romance,” (76) and by all appearances Myrtle plans to move closer to her Hollywood dreams in the future.
Myrtle Wilson is one of many female characters to be connected to the dark side of Hollywood celebrity culture in Fitzgerald’s novels. In *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), Gloria is forced by her financial circumstances to try out as a cheap flapper actress for Joseph Bloeckman, VP of Films Par Excellence, until he rejects her because she’s too old. The movie executive Bloeckman stares at Gloria, a married woman, and pointedly notes that the movies want plots, but they also need sex. And Gloria’s husband, Anthony, begins his affair with Dot by meeting her at the Bijou Moving Picture Theatre (302). In *Tender is the Night*, it is film actress Rosemary Hoyt who is the “other woman” hurting the Diver’s marriage. And even in chapter three of *The Great Gatsby*, a married man flirts with a theatre actress to his wife’s disgust, despite having previously promised his wife that he would not. Myrtle’s status as a kept woman, her purchase of gossip rags and film magazines, her ideology of conspicuous consumption, and the deception she practices on her husband, associate her with Hollywood celebrity culture not just in the vernacular of 1920s America, but also in that of Fitzgerald’s own novels.

This is to say, Myrtle Wilson’s eyes don’t go blurry from reading novels like *The Great Gatsby*. By linking Myrtle to film magazines and shoddily-written, immoral novels, Fitzgerald adapts the literary commonplace of authors associating particular characters with certain genres of texts. Conventionally, such associations help authors to signal judgment of their characters and to suggest how these characters perceive their world ethically and ideologically. For example, Don Quixote’s entire worldview and narrative perspective is conditioned by the fact that he reads too many chivalric romances. Emma Bovary’s deteriorating relationship with Charles is partly driven by her expectations from cheap romance novels, and those fictional expectations explain why Rudolphe Boulanger’s
ridiculous seduction of her succeeds so well. In Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, Edward Ashburnham wishes for his marriage to resemble the romances he read as a child. And Joseph Conrad, whom Fitzgerald deeply admired, uses the device frequently: in *Lord Jim*, the eponymous protagonist’s early love of adventure novels tells us much about his later hopes and perceptions, and the same is true of Charles Gould in *Nostromo* or the seafaring tales of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Fitzgerald uses Myrtle Wilson’s interest in film magazines similarly: to suggest her modes of perceptions, and their origins, intertextually. And like Flaubert and Ford and Conrad, Fitzgerald uses this strategy to distinguish his formally ambitious novel from the singular ideologies of quickly-made genre fiction. But while Conrad sought to enhance the prestige of his brand beyond those of adventure writers, Fitzgerald worked to distinguish his carefully crafted novels from Hollywood fictions and cheap, immoral novels.

When Fitzgerald’s authorial audience finally learns how Myrtle dies in chapter seven, then, we are meant to understand that her life and death serves as Fitzgerald’s judgment of Hollywood celebrity culture and its deleterious effects on its fans. But there are additional technical reasons why Myrtle died as she did. From the perspective of emplotment, Fitzgerald simply needed the death of a minor character to drive the plot forward and to solidify his authorial audience’s judgments of his novel’s primary characters. In broad strokes, Myrtle’s death provides a way for Gatsby to show loyalty to Daisy and a way for her to betray him. It ultimately leads to Gatsby’s death, a death that places him in a tragic and sympathetic light because his death has nothing to do with his illegal business but is a result of Tom’s malevolent lie to George Wilson. It finally also leads to Gatsby’s funeral, where only Nick is loyal to Gatsby’s memory. So there are good reasons relating to narrative
emplotment for why a minor character had to die at that point, and why it was Gatsby and Daisy in the car that killed Myrtle. Myrtle’s death is what Seymour Chatman would call a “kernel” event: it is an essential part of the plot from which many other events naturally follow (Chatman 14 – 19). But it is Myrtle’s particular kind of distorted vision—and its fatal consequence—that explains the thematic importance of the kernel, the reasons why Fitzgerald motivated his technical requirements as he did. Myrtle’s momentary failure to recognize who was driving the death-car is a synecdoche for her habitual failure to see realistically, and more specifically for her distorted vision regarding Tom Buchanan. She dies like she lived, looking with a consumerist eye that glamorizes the cold, hard truth that she is a kept woman, and a decidedly unglamorous one at that, for whom Tom would never leave his wife. In the story world, Myrtle’s confusion at the time of her death can be explained by the simple fact that Tom lied to George Wilson in a previous conversation with his falsehood that he owned Gatsby’s beautiful car. But all the accumulated details of Myrtle’s life suggest that she has been learning to step in front of that car for a long time; she foolishly believed that Tom would help her escape from her husband, marry her, and take her out west to live the glamorous lifestyle she’s always dreamed about. It is Myrtle’s curious combination of desperation and faith that allows her to stand in the middle of the highway in front of a speeding car; it is her distorted vision that causes her death; and it is Hollywood celebrity culture that primarily causes that distorted perspective. In short, Myrtle Wilson died because she desperately wanted to see her present and future life the way that Mr. McKee wanted to represent her: with glamour—and in soft-focus.

Myrtle and her Hollywood celebrity culture ambitions have a special role in this novel which is concerned with class tensions and money; she’s a clear example of one of
those people that “hasn’t had all the advantages” that Nick has had. As is well known, Gatsby symbolizes the nouveau riche: he tries to impress Daisy with his shiny house and his English-tailored shirts thrown gloriously on the bed. Tom and Daisy Buchanan symbolize the carelessness of old money, as indicated by Tom’s expensive wedding gift to Daisy and the stables of horses that he has transported to his house. But Myrtle Wilson is also an aspirant to a particular version of the American Dream which Fitzgerald saw gaining popularity in the 1920s along with the rise of Hollywood celebrity culture (Marsh). Myrtle’s glamorous dreams violently clash with her shabby gas-station existence in the Valley of Ashes, just like the glamorous car violently crashes into her body.

When we see that Myrtle’s life and death can be explained as a literary representation of early 1920s Hollywood celebrity culture, it follows that the implied Fitzgerald has a strong interest in showing just how insidious that cultural phenomenon could be. If Nick’s jokes about Mr. McKee resembling a “man of action” also represent Fitzgerald’s judgment of the artistic “pretensions” of glamour photography, then the life and death of Myrtle Wilson just as clearly represent Fitzgerald’s judgment of Hollywood celebrity culture. Myrtle lives and dies for the glamour that Hollywood implicitly promises but never delivers to her, for the serious and consequential acts of misperception caused by the Hollywood version of the American dream. *The Great Gatsby* suggests that she learns to dream and perceive from Hollywood, and that is why Myrtle Wilson has to die as a symbol of Hollywood celebrity culture, now permanently blind, with the amoral, and commercial eyes of Dr. Eckleburg gazing dimly upon her. It is also why her death is first ironically represented in *The Great Gatsby* with a line break, as if Myrtle’s death, caused by her distorted vision, was most accurately and charitably represented by blank space.
2. Subsidiary Media and Hollywood celebrity culture

Seen in this way, Myrtle Wilson’s ocular confusion is not a singular and minor example of the many ocular confusions in the novel, but rather a key to understanding the pattern. It is also a key to better understanding how Fitzgerald engaged Hollywood celebrity culture in *The Great Gatsby*. Today we may think of American “convergence culture” as something that emerged only in the 1980s and 1990s, the marketing of entertainment products across multiple media platforms that was a consequence of massive media mergers at the end of the twentieth-century (Jenkins). But as in the specific case of Myrtle Wilson, Fitzgerald reveals throughout his narrative discourse how many popular media worked together to encourage faulty visions like Myrtle’s.

Fitzgerald was not the only prominent artist who represented Hollywood celebrity culture for his own purposes, of course. Consider the closing scenes of Charlie Chaplin’s famous silent movie, *The Gold Rush* (1925), exhibited the same year *The Great Gatsby* was published. At the movie’s end, the tramp has become a millionaire through the Alaska gold rush and travels back to the mainland via boat. Learning the Tramp’s remarkable rags-to-riches story, a newspaper journalist interviews him and asks him to put on his old clothes for a newspaper photograph. Confusion soon ensues regarding the Tramp’s identity as a poor man or a rich man who has paid to be on the boat, and the Tramp is almost arrested. But only when the Tramp is properly identified as a millionaire wearing a Tramp outfit is it evident that the movie is cleverly retelling Charlie Chaplin’s story to his knowing and admiring fans. In other words, the closing scenes of *The Gold Rush* play on how the star’s image comes to represent his or her personal identity through the work of journalism and photography, and they depend for their humor on the audience’s awareness of the
Hollywood star system and how it employs other media metonymically to connect the actual Charlie Chaplin to The Tramp. *The Gold Rush* reveals Chaplin’s recognition that Hollywood celebrity culture depends on other media for its cultural cachet and public circulation—and his interest in using his recognition of that culture for artistic material.

Fitzgerald makes similar observations, but he is not nearly as playful as Chaplin. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shows how the newspaper metonymically grants the aura of celebrity to everyday citizens and how this celebrity can alter the relations even of former acquaintances to a fan/star relationship dynamic. In piecing together the back story of Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship, we learn that their romance took place in newspapers as much as real life. Gatsby reveals that he has “read a Chicago newspaper for years just on the chance of catching a glimpse of Daisy’s name” (84). Gatsby follows Daisy’s life as a beautiful Southern belle in the celebrity text of newspaper clippings, and this encourages him to idealize her memory. The role that these articles plays in Gatsby’s imagination becomes clear when he hands Daisy the clippings he has collected and says, “Here’s a lot of clippings—about you” (99). It is Gatsby’s way of saying that he has faithfully followed her with a fan’s devotion—and Fitzgerald’s way of implying the traditionally myopic perspective that comes with fandom.

It is fitting, then, that the newspapers come clamoring for information about Gatsby’s life story after his death. After Gatsby dies, “an ambitious young reporter” arrives at Gatsby’s door and asks Nick for a statement. The reporter was merely following the scent of celebrity, and for Nick, this “random shot” reminds him of all the people at Gatsby’s parties who “accepted his hospitality and so [became] authorities on his past” (103). Like Chaplin, Fitzgerald uses this scene to represent Hollywood celebrity culture, but he will also
use it to encourage comparisons to his own novel. When Nick recalls the false rumors, Fitzgerald invites his authorial audience to retrospectively compare the version of Gatsby’s life offered by celebrity culture to his story as represented by Nick (and Fitzgerald). This invitation comes through temporal ordering: at the precise moment in the narrative discourse that Nick imagines those false rumors, he immediately transitions into the flashback of James Gatz’s real story. It is the placement of the “real story” of James Gatz right after the suggestion of a possible newspaper story that invites the comparison between *The Great Gatsby* and the submerged newspaper story. In this way, Fitzgerald invites his authorial audience to consider what Thomas Pavel (43 – 71) would call the “actual fictional world” that Nick Carraway describes in the novel, and then to compare it to a specific kind of hypothetical story, the kind of “possible fictional world” that would be written by a sensational journalist.

Such a tabloid version of *The Great Gatsby*’s fabula would probably feature little of Nick Carraway’s insight into Gatsby’s dreams and character, but all of the crime and marital infidelities and innuendo that could be found or invented. It would probably erroneously report that Gatsby ran over Myrtle Wilson as he was escaping out of the country with his lover, Daisy Buchanan. Further, it would report that it was Gatsby, not Meyer Wolfsheim, who fixed the World Series and ran the crime ring. Perhaps it would quote guests who would suggest that Gatsby was a “German spy during the war” or a murderer (48) It would have much of the excitement and sordid events that characterize the fabula of this novel, in other words, but it would allow characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan to escape censure. In this way, Fitzgerald disguises the tabloid-like content of his own fabula and draws attention to the “truth” possible through his chosen fictional medium.
It is possible to imagine this battle of contesting narratives (Abbott 138–55) in chapter six—and The Great Gatsby as the clear winner—because Fitzgerald represents rumor mongers and sensational journalism throughout his novel, as part of his critique of Hollywood celebrity culture. We know little about the ambitious young reporter except that he was operating on hunches and rumors instead of verified fact. The one newspaper woman in the novel is the apparently highly immoral celebrity-hound named Ella Kaye, who takes advantage of the fact that Dan Cody was “on the verge of softmindedness” and then takes advantage of Cody’s death by seizing the legacy of twenty-five thousand dollars that was meant for young Jay Gatz (105). And ironically, we only “know” her life story third-hand through the “turgid journalism of 1902” (106). The sole young reporter who appears before Gatsby’s death is quickly followed after his death by “the endless drill of police and photographers and newspaper men” (171 and 173). In this way, journalism is linked with Hollywood celebrity culture and Gatsby’s rumor-mongering guests, whereas literary narration is linked with Nick, who did eventually learn Gatsby’s real story. And by creating this possible fictional world (the sensational account) to contest to his actual fictional world (the Gatsby account), Fitzgerald makes it so that his novel, though fictional, appears much closer to the actual world of the 1920s because it has exposed the sorts of fictions in which sensational journalism dealt.

Fitzgerald also takes care to contrast his own novel with printed materials that feed into Hollywood celebrity culture. As we have seen, Myrtle’s apartment provides ample examples of the kind of printed material that Fitzgerald loathes: the copies of “Town Tattle,” the copy of Simon Called Peter, and “some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway” appear together in Myrtle’s apartment because they are share an identical relationship to
Fitzgerald’s implied norms (33). They are marked as low-class examples of Hollywood celebrity culture. Later, Gatsby’s library will offer an upper-class example of print materials feeding into Hollywood celebrity culture when Gatsby’s guest with “enormous owl-eyed spectacles” points out that the books are real, but have not been cut:

‘It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?’

(50)

Fitzgerald uses this scene to suggest that Gatsby is not a reader, but he does an excellent job of appearing to be one. Owl Eyes will eventually attend Gatsby’s funeral (183), and for both him and Nick, the quality of Gatsby’s performance justifies, or at least ameliorates, his deceit. Fitzgerald’s judgment is harsher. Gatsby’s kind of reading is a kind of theatre, another effort to signal his celebrity to Daisy and other East Eggers. This is a problem for Gatsby’s character within the symbolic media hierarchy of *The Great Gatsby*, for Fitzgerald uses characters’ reading materials as an important way to signal his judgments of them. Gatsby did apparently read dime paperback novels like Clarence E. Mulford’s *Hopalong Cassidy*, the book in which he wrote his self-improvement plans as a boy. Like Myrtle’s fan magazines, Gatsby’s reading material indicates his interest in capturing a particular version of the American dream, but also the prosaic quality of that dream.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the two characters in the novel who most resemble villains, Meyer Wolfsheim and Tom Buchanan, are both associated with practices of bad reading and writing. The human molars that Meyer Wolfsheim wears on his cufflinks and his refusal to attend Gatsby’s funeral at the novel’s end identify him not just as a
dangerous criminal, but also an execrable person. This character judgment is also implied through his letter to Nick: Wolfsheim uses “my” “me” or “I” nine times in four sentences (174). Just as Wolfsheim’s egocentric letter helps reinforce the authorial audience’s judgments of his character, we also learn about the sort of person who writes a bad letter. Similarly, while Tom’s association with Goddard’s *The Rise of the Coloured Empires* guides our judgment of his character as an ignorant racist (even in the context of the 1920s dominant ideology), Fitzgerald uses Tom’s confused racist rant in chapter one, with its insistence that “these books are all scientific,” to describe the sort of people who are indiscriminate or misinformed readers. In the economy of *The Great Gatsby*, those with the least attractive personalities and the most distorted perceptions of their world are also the poorest readers and writers. With this narrative strategy, Fitzgerald also implicitly suggests the converse rule, that good readers and good writers are moral and perceptive. It is another way of putting his novel and then its appreciative readers at the top of his own secularized Great Chain of Being.

Although Fitzgerald definitively rejects straightforward racism through his character judgment of Tom Buchanan, the novel’s hierarchies nevertheless often combine implied judgments of literacy, class, race, and gender in implicit and disturbing ways. These hierarchies can feed into and reinforce each other. For example, besides being a fan of Hollywood celebrity culture, Myrtle Wilson is also fairly poor, poorly spoken, and a woman. Wolfsheim is a bad writer and egotistical. He has also done much to ruin the national game of baseball through his gambling scheme, and he is repeatedly marked as a Jew through signals that include his last name, his diction, and the “lovely Jewess” that serves as his secretary (178). These decisions regarding characterization are not Nick’s, but Fitzgerald’s
responsibility. It is may be an analytical stretch to suggest that Fitzgerald “feminizes” Hollywood celebrity culture through Myrtle, or that the identification of Wolfsheim as a Jew recalls the fact that Hollywood cinema was commonly associated with Jews who ran the movie studios—a fact that is also recalled in Fitzgerald’s previous novel, The Beautiful and Damned. But in his eagerness to privilege his novel over Hollywood celebrity culture and its subsidiary media, Fitzgerald used all the binaries of valuation available to him as a white, male novelist communicating with a 1920s readership that would be largely comprised of white, privileged males with predictable attitudes toward race, gender, and class. Historical relativism should not distract us from observing Fitzgerald’s culpability in this regard.

III. Nick Carraway’s Soft-Focus Unreliability

The remainder of this chapter shifts away from subsidiary media, and toward the primary way that Fitzgerald engaged Hollywood celebrity culture: his use of Nick Carraway’s distorted vision, what I call his soft-focus unreliability. In a two-part essay which represents the most insightful treatment of movie culture in The Great Gatsby to date, Joss Latz Marsh argues that Fitzgerald “deliberately constructed” his protagonist Jay Gatsby as a movie star, and used his novel to investigate the movie star phenomenon and the movie audiences who identified with them (5, original emphasis). Marsh also briefly suggests that Nick Carraway functions both as a fan and a critic to Gatsby’s star: “Carraway is wrapt up in the experience of identification with or idealization of Gatsby even while he is aware that his star is a manufactured fake” (65 - 67). Marsh’s analysis is persuasive, but Myrtle Wilson’s exemplary case of ocular confusion shows that Fitzgerald had a much more detailed and antagonistic stance toward Hollywood celebrity culture—and the distorted visions it encouraged—than
Marsh suggests. It also strongly suggests that Fitzgerald was interested less in movie stars themselves, and more in the kinds of faulty perceptions that culture encouraged.

Fitzgerald connects Nick’s narrative perspective to Hollywood celebrity culture, and soft-focus cinematography specifically, for three reasons. Especially early in the novel, Fitzgerald uses Hollywood celebrity culture to make Gatsby initially compelling to his authorial audience, especially through the glamour and romance created by Nick’s soft-focus perspective. Second, Fitzgerald distances himself from Nick’s soft-focus unreliability by associating it with Hollywood celebrity culture, and especially the blurry effect created by Nick’s soft-focus perspective. In these ways, Fitzgerald accomplishes his third and overarching purpose: he makes an implicit argument for the cultural superiority of his novel at the start of Classical Hollywood Cinema.

Gatsby is arguably one of the most memorable, glamorous, and romantic characters in twentieth-century American literature, and Nick Carraway’s perceptions of Gatsby have much to do with that. Especially early in the novel, Nick’s perceptions help Fitzgerald establish Gatsby as worthy of our readerly interest. A familiar example of this occurs at chapter one’s famous conclusion, when Nick sees Gatsby for the first time:

The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight and turning my head to watch it I saw that I was not alone—fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor’s mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens.
Critics have focused on the symbolism of the green light that follows this description, but it is important to see that Nick perceives Gatsby the way a camera lens might perceive a romantic movie star: in soft-focus. Looking from the darkness, Nick Carraway perceives Gatsby emerging from darkness into the romantic moonlight, but he sees him only partially, from a distance. Details like the silhouette of the moving cat, the silvery pepper of the stars, and later, the single green light in the distance, also indicate the romantic potential of the scene. The scene is memorable partly due to Fitzgerald’s combination of cinematic and literary conventions. If we understand such scenes just as Fitzgerald’s literary use of a light motif, we would miss the special importance such lighting takes in the context of Hollywood films of the era to indicate stardom, mystery, and glamour. Fitzgerald adapts or “remediates” these conventions to grant his character a star-quality (Bolter and Grusin). And when Gatsby’s image vanishes moments later, Nick is alone in the “unquiet darkness,” much like a fan in a theatre at the end of a movie, as Marsh suggests (26).

This famous scene also exemplifies how, especially early in the narrative progression, Fitzgerald draws upon Hollywood celebrity culture for certain effects—even as he leaves clues to undermine that experience later. When Nick first sees Gatsby in the moonlight in chapter one, we have little reason to note how Nick’s perception is severely taxed, that he “distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been at the end of a dock” (26). And in chapter two, we may only note in passing the similarities between Nick’s perception of Gatsby and the other distorted perceptions and images, including “the impenetrable cloud” in the valley of ashes (27), the story of Dr. Eckleburg’s blindness, and of course, the images in Myrtle Wilson’s apartment. All these clues are initially
submerged. Partly to generate interest in his titular figure, Fitzgerald depended upon the fact that, when he published *Gatsby*, it was a reading convention for American consumers to respond positively to representations of romantic moonlight, a convention of course established by English poets including Keats or Arnold, but also, and increasingly, by Hollywood celebrity culture.

Similarly, when Nick actually meets Gatsby at his party in chapter three, Fitzgerald uses another aspect of Hollywood celebrity culture to encourage his authorial audience to share Nick’s interest in Gatsby. We first “hear” of Gatsby not through Nick’s personal interaction with him, but through rumors and what Nick calls “romantic speculation” (48) when Jordan and two girls gossip about him. The atmosphere at Gatsby’s party is similarly awash with the aura of celebrity: a young woman is falsely rumored to be Gilda Gray’s understudy from the *Follies*, and a married man flirts with an actress. Of course Gatsby himself is responsible for creating some of his party’s atmosphere, and that is partly why Owl Eyes calls him “a regular Belasco” (50). But it is not Gatsby, nor even only Nick’s perception, that has “A wafer of a moon . . . shining over Gatsby’s house, making the night fine as before and surviving the sound of his still glowing garden” (60). It was Fitzgerald who imagined that wafer of a moon in the first place, encouraging his authorial audience to join Nick as he revels in the romantic atmosphere and Gatsby’s place in it—and using the allure and techniques of Hollywood celebrity culture to do so. We have seen that Fitzgerald repeatedly denigrates Hollywood celebrity culture thematically, but this move disguises his clever remediations of that culture.
Fitzgerald hints at his source for his lighting motifs when he represents a movie producer and a movie star in an otherwise tangential scene at Gatsby’s party in chapter six. There, the producer and star are represented as if they were characters in a romantic movie:

Almost the last thing I remember was Daisy and watching the moving picture and his Star. They were still under the white plum tree and their faces were touching except for a pale thin ray of moonlight between. It occurred to me that he had been very slowly bending toward her all evening to attain this proximity, and even while I watched I saw him stoop one ultimate degree and kiss at her cheek. (113)

This description probably alludes to lines 16 – 20 in John Keats’s poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the poet describes two lovers about to kiss, a scene frozen forever on the urn. But while Fitzgerald borrows the melancholic attitude of Keats’s poem—as well as its interest in “repeating the past” like Gatsby—he also offers a literary analogue to a close-up scene in a movie. The slow pace and “pale thin ray of moonlight” grant a romantic affect to the scene as if it were shot in soft-focus. Fitzgerald has “shot” the romantic scene just as it would be represented in the movies, and he uses an actress and a movie producer to hint at his remediation of Hollywood style, here and elsewhere. At the level of Nick Carraway’s narration, this scene produces more of the glamour encouraged by Hollywood celebrity culture. But at the level of authorial intention, the scene also signals Fitzgerald’s interest in adapting the formal affordances of Hollywood cinema to show what a novelist can do, a sort of subtle one-upmanship with an emerging entertainment medium.

Still, Fitzgerald’s hints at the source of his soft-focus style are as subtle as they are pervasive. But recognizing Hollywood cinema as the source allows readers new “perspective”
on otherwise mysterious scenes in the novel, like Nick Carraway’s kiss of Jordan at the end of chapter four. As the “the sun had gone down behind the tall apartments of the movie stars in the West Fifties” (83), and as Nick’s narration makes important allusions to Rudolph Valentino’s hit movie, *The Sheik* (Marsh 6), Nick and Jordan kiss like in the movies, and in soft-focus:

> We passed a barrier of dark trees, and then a façade of Fifty-ninth Street, a block of delicate pale light, beamed down into the Park. Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms. Her wan scornful mouth smiled and so I drew her up again, closer, this time to my face. (85)

It is as if the scene were shot with transitions from a medium shot of Jordan and Nick, to a matching shot of Nick’s vision (“closer, this time to my face) to a close-up of Nick and Jordan about to kiss, to a fade out. And like the “pale thin ray of moonlight” in the kissing scene with the movie producer and actress, here the “block of delicate pale light” evokes the soft-focus cinematography used to create glamour and romance in Hollywood movies of the time. When chapter four concludes a few paragraphs later, both the indirect glow of the many movie stars living in New York City and Fitzgerald’s written analogue to soft-focus lighting have helped make this moment even more romantic—for a moment.

However, we can anticipate Fitzgerald’s purpose for associating Hollywood celebrity culture with Nick’s perspective if we ask about the quality of his perception of Jordan here. It is indeed a romantic moment, but we would be mistaken if we thought that Nick’s romantic perception would lead to a lasting relationship. Fitzgerald wanted to create a
romantic moment that his reader would feel strongly, but he also was practicing what Meir Sternberg has called a “rhetoric of anticipation,” by making it so we could retrospectively determine that Nick’s perception was incorrect. In, say, a Rudolph Valentino film, a scene like this could work as the closing shot; but in *The Great Gatsby*, this moment between Jordan and Nick will ultimately lead to nothing. Fitzgerald not only associates Nick’s perception with the movies, he also strengthens his claim to literary realism by representing a scene that would not be out of place in a conventional movie script, and then going beyond that script with his novel’s closing.

Recognizing Fitzgerald’s judgments of Hollywood celebrity culture brings into question all those moments that Nick sees Gatsby as glamorous and mysterious—the same way that Gatsby sees Daisy and “the orgastic future” (189), the same way Myrtle must have seen Tom Buchanan. In that fourth chapter, Nick also uses a curious metaphor to explain how he responded to Gatsby’s request to meet Daisy: “The modesty of the demand [by Gatsby] shook me. He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths” (emphasis mine, 83). Why should Nick use the word “starlight” to describe Gatsby’s celebrity on the same page as the two allusions to Hollywood stars, and right before a kiss that is perceived though a literary remediation of cinematic soft-focus? It is another way of encouraging the authorial audience to first view Gatsby as a kind of movie star—and allowing them to see that it is Nick who sees him as a star, not Fitzgerald.

This is to say that the blurry effect of soft-focus cinematography is as useful to Fitzgerald as its romantic and mysterious aura. Referring to the famous scene at chapter one’s conclusion, Gatsby will tell Daisy, “If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay. You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of the dock” (98).
Gatsby sees Daisy as Nick sees Gatsby: a mysterious, romantic figure. As in the opening scene of *Broken Blossoms* (1915), mist in *The Great Gatsby* obscures or distorts perceptions while granting the perceived object mystery and romance (Bordwell 288). Mist separates Gatsby from Daisy and the green light, but it separates Nick from the green light also. Fitzgerald draws upon the mystery and glamour of soft-focus, but he is equally interested in examining—and judging—the value and accuracy of that perceptual mode as another synecdoche for his negative judgment of Hollywood celebrity culture.

From this perspective, recognizing Fitzgerald’s use of soft-focus can help us better understand why Nick Carraway’s un/reliability is so contested by Fitzgerald’s critics. As James Phelan (“Rhetoric and Ethics”) has persuasively suggested, a key reason why Nick Carraway’s reliability is a critical crux is because Fitzgerald uses his narrator for a variety of different functions at different moments in his narrative progression. Such diverse functions include speaking for the author, offering important information, offering descriptive passages that are more often associated with an external narrator, relating a complicated time scheme of story events, communicating Fitzgerald’s judgments on characters and ideologies, and making us interested in Gatsby. The role played by Hollywood celebrity culture in *The Great Gatsby* adds to many of these diverse and often confusing functions. Readers who find Nick Carraway reliable can point to those moments where Fitzgerald draws upon Hollywood celebrity culture to enhance our interest in Gatsby and Nick Carraway’s appreciation of him and his dream. In contrast, readers who find Nick Carraway unreliable can consciously or unconsciously register the novel’s rejection of distorted vision, of star worship, and its connections to Hollywood celebrity culture.
More specifically, attention to Hollywood celebrity culture in this novel can help explain why many readers identify Nick Carraway as unreliable in terms of his perceptions, as opposed to his acts or his values (cf. Phelan, *Living*). Nick tells us that Gatsby had “waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths” (83). But it is Nick who sees starlight most often, literally and figuratively, second only perhaps to Myrtle Wilson. Fitzgerald associates Nick’s perception with soft-focus cinematography to leave submerged clues so that readers could retrospectively question Nick’s perception. If we ponder details like Myrtle Wilson’s death, the ocular confusions throughout the novel, the implied author’s judgments against Hollywood celebrity culture and bad readers, allusions to movie stars like Rudolph Valentino or the apartments of movie stars, then we are more likely to identify those moments when Nick sees in soft-focus and attribute those descriptions to Nick’s unreliable perception, his tendency to see glamour and mystery generally, and in Gatsby specifically.

Questioning the source of Nick’s perception also has special consequences for our understanding of the novel’s closing. It helps draw our attention to the fact that, although Nick eventually modifies his perspective on Gatsby’s house in the novel’s final pages and now thinks of it as “that huge incoherent failure,” he is still determined to value a soft-focus perspective of a world and a man that have hard edges (188). That is why Nick must erase the obscene word that the romantic moonlight now only highlights; it is why he notices the “shadowy, moving flow of a ferryboat”; and why he recalls the green light that Gatsby sees at the end of Daisy’s dock, but not the mist that we know distorted Gatsby’s vision of that green light, and distorted Nick’s vision too (188 – 89). The novel’s final page reveals Nick at some level understanding the mist that is between him and Gatsby, the same sort of mist
that was between Gatsby and all that he desired, but choosing to honor that perception, however flawed.

It is true that Fitzgerald evokes that glamour and mystery once more in that final scene, and in this way the narration concludes with both Fitzgerald and Nick reveling in the magical promise of that perception in Gatsby’s character, and ultimately in Nick Carraway’s character also. Let me be clear: *The Great Gatsby* never denies that there can be greatness in acts of misperception, and it creates those beautiful acts of misperception for our reading pleasure and aesthetic contemplation. But noticing how Nick Carraway’s glamorous and romantic perspective is associated with Hollywood celebrity culture helps us see that Fitzgerald understands Nick’s distorted vision as finally unworthy of the artist himself, a more ironic version of artists like Flaubert and Joyce who remain “within or behind or beyond or above [their] handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring [their] fingernails” (Joyce 217).

This also explains why some of the novel’s best readers have noticed a certain blurry quality to Gatsby and Daisy. Fitzgerald’s famous friend and editor, Maxwell Perkins, wrote early to the author about Gatsby’s character:

--Gatsby is quite vague. The reader’s eyes can never quite focus upon him, his outlines are dim. Now everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery i.e. more or less vague, and this may be somewhat of an artistic intention, but I think it is mistaken. Couldn’t *be* be physically described as distinctly as the others…” (qtd. in Scribner 199 – 200, original emphasis)

Perkins made this comment on an earlier draft of *The Great Gatsby*, and Fitzgerald added some detail to his character, but we can still notice this mysterious, vague, quality to his
character. Ronald Berman has recently made a similar observation and has linked it to a commonplace of Fitzgerald criticism, the mythical quality of some of the novel’s characters: “Daisy and Gatsby do not have the same hard delineation as their surrounding cast. They are partly mythical and even allegorical, so that the quality of diffusion is understandable” (88). I believe there is good reason why the reader's eyes can never quite focus upon Gatsby and Daisy, and it is only indirectly due to their mythical and allegorical qualities. The reason, I have suggested, is that we get the vast majority of our observations about them through Nick Carraway, who narrates with soft-focus unreliability, who learns to perceive from the Hollywood celebrity culture that is rife in post-World War I America, and particularly in New York City, which was, with its strong ties to the film industry, a sort of Hollywood avant la lettre which Fitzgerald had already discursively represented in The Beautiful and Damned.

However, there are also good reasons why some of the novel’s best readers have missed the association between the “blurry characters” and Nick Carraway’s soft-focus unreliability. While the novel’s thematic judgments against Hollywood celebrity culture are fairly clear, its remediations of soft-focus cinematography are subtle, perhaps even hidden, despite the hints that I have sought to reveal. The reason for this, I believe, can be found in a combination of facts: the cultural status of Hollywood cinema in 1925 as an entertainment for lower-classes, Fitzgerald’s thematic efforts in The Great Gatsby to underscore that perception through his representation of Myrtle Wilson and Hollywood celebrity culture more generally, and the flesh-and-blood F. Scott Fitzgerald’s aspirations as a formally-ambitious American novelist. Fitzgerald was more than willing to borrow the affordances of Hollywood celebrity culture, the opportunities it provided for literary remediation—and he
did so brilliantly. But to advertise that kind of borrowing in 1925 may have seemed too much of a risk for Fitzgerald, as it could connect him to popular fiction in the model of the Hollywood novel (see Brooker-Bowers, Rhodes, Springer). Ultimately it would mean that people like Myrtle Wilson—people who read Hollywood magazines and dreamed Hollywood dreams—could end up reading and enjoying *The Great Gatsby*.

Instead, Fitzgerald found a different way of connecting Hollywood cinema to literary culture. *The Great Gatsby* is great, in part, because it forms both a nexus and a tension between Hollywood cinema and literary modernism. On one hand, Fitzgerald was faced with the plain fact that Hollywood cinema was growing in popularity and culture esteem. Both Fitzgerald and Hollywood cinema sought to sell their entertainment product to the young generation. In response, Fitzgerald could demean his competition by attacking the misperceptions that Hollywood celebrity culture caused in American consumers, drawing upon the techniques of unreliable narration that his hero Joseph Conrad and other early literary modernists had employed so effectively. In this way, Fitzgerald could connect his fiction not only to literary modernism, like Marlow’s fuzzy narration and Conrad’s deliberately opaque prose in *Heart of Darkness*, but also connect with the misty origin of modernism proper: the mist in Claude Monet’s *soleil levant* that provocatively documented how a misty morning could alter how a single human, in a particular time and particular place, perceived a sunrise.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald faced more immediate artistic problems than merely joining an esoteric literary movement which began in Europe. For example: How could he write a popular novel with a sensational plot that nevertheless had great artistic merit? How could he fully represent the attractions of 1920s popular culture—with its atmosphere of sex,
promise, and mystery—and still distance himself from its ideologies? And finally, how could he portray the power and attractions of American dreams without becoming only a dreamer? One answer, I have argued, would be to represent Hollywood celebrity culture in a negative light, but also to slyly adapt for his novel the same misperceptions he exposed in Hollywood celebrity culture, and so to write a truly American novel for the youth of his generation, but also for the critics of the next and subsequent generations.

References


Notes

1 The popular subject matter, considerable commercial success and mostly positive critical reviews of Fitzgerald’s first novel, This Side of Paradise (1920), immediately established him as a novelist for the young generation, but also one who had promise as a formally-ambitious literary artist. See Matthew Bruccoli’s authoritative biography Epic Grandeur (101 – 120) for details about Fitzgerald’s dual interest in commercial success and critical acclaim after This Side of Paradise.
Jonathan Enfield has recently argued that Fitzgerald’s ambivalence about Hollywood cinema contributes to a global incoherence, both formal and thematic, which plagues *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). What is certain, in any regard, is that the novel explores the tension between New York print culture and New York and Hollywood cinematic culture through the characters of novelist Dick Carmel and film producer Joseph Bloeckman.

One of the most important advances in recent Fitzgerald scholarship is the process of revisiting and reassessing Fitzgerald’s career-long interest in Hollywood cinema. Consequently, it is clear now that while Fitzgerald engages with Hollywood cinema most explicitly in his final and unfinished novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, this interest is salient in his fiction and letters throughout his literary career. See Dixon for his foundational argument, and Margolies; Enfield; Marsh; Kundu.

For more on the early history of the literary genre called “the Hollywood novel,” see Brooker-Bowers; Rhodes; Springer. By the time Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, hundreds of novels had been written about Hollywood and Hollywood cinema.

Here and throughout, my discussion of Hollywood celebrity culture is indebted to Balio; Belton; Fellow; Margolies; and especially Bordwell, and shares key similarities with the discussions of Marsh and Henderson, respectively.

By “Fitzgerald,” I mean “a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author’s capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text” (Phelan “Living” 45). Because it is awkward to constantly refer to the “implied Fitzgerald,” I use his last name as shorthand. When I want to refer to the F. Scott Fitzgerald who existed in history, I use the phrase “the biological Fitzgerald” or “the flesh-and-blood Fitzgerald.” I maintain this shorthand.
throughout the dissertation. The concept of the implied author originates in Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

There has been considerable debate in narrative theory about the relevance and value of the implied theory concept, especially as it relates to (un)reliability. For good discussion from a rhetorical perspective, see Phelan (“Living” 38 – 49) and Booth’s final and eloquent defense of his concept (“Why Bother?”). See also my own intervention (McCormick, especially 321 – 325 and 342 – 48).

Throughout, but especially in my understanding of character narration, unreliability and the implied author, I am indebted to Chicago school rhetorical narrative theory (e.g., Booth *Rhetoric*; Phelan *Living*; Phelan *Experiencing*).

6 The motif of failed vision is a commonplace in early Fitzgerald criticism, but Dixon was the first to discuss the motif in the context of Fitzgerald’s representation of Hollywood cinema.

7 As Robert C. Allen suggests, “In the early 1920s it is quite possible that Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were the most famous living people in the world” (606).

8 Fitzgerald also used a Keats’s poem for the title and epigraph of his next novel, *Tender is the Night*. Here are the relevant lines for *The Great Gatsby*:

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (16 – 20)

9 D.W. Griffith popularized the close-up with movies like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

10 See my introduction, Serpell, and Ryan (*Narrative*) for more discussion of affordances.
Chapter 2: Mediated Noises and Narrative Voices in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*

Today Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* is commonly recognized as a canonical example of the cinematic novel. But when West drafted his novel from 1935 to 1939, Hollywood cinema had already been thoroughly represented by popular writers but also by formally-ambitious authors like John Dos Passos and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Even popular movies like *What Price Hollywood?* (1932) and *A Star is Born* (1937) found profit in behind-the-scenes stories about the movie industry. The days of formally-ambitious novelists persuasively dismissing Hollywood as mindless entertainment were therefore long over, not least because the movie studios publically reveled in their reputation of producing entertainment for a mainstream audience (Balio 281). The usual problems of relevance and originality were further compounded in West’s particular case, for *The Day of the Locust* would reveal how Hollywood cinema exploits the prosaic dreams of everyday folks. If West wished to avoid self-parody, then he needed to avoid reproducing the same old yarns about Hollywood.

As much as reproduction was West’s problem, however, it was also his solution. *Locust* reproduces the sounds that brought the biographical Nathanael West and other novelists to Hollywood to write screenplays in the first place: the sounds of talkies, movies with recorded sound. And while it seems strange to imagine the written words of a novel reproducing the sounds of cinema, it is probably no stranger than the task for which
East Coast novelists including West were hired: writing “realistic dialogue” for talkies. Hollywood studios hired novelists who formerly wrote dialogue designed to be read silently, and told them to make the dialogue “realistic” so that it sounded as if humans would actually speak those words (Balio 80). The Day of the Locust experiments with the artificial voices and noises of radio, cinema, and literature in ways that suggest West never forgot how strange and artificial they all are, I argue.

In part one, I briefly discuss how West was uniquely prepared to write his strange cinematic novels by the combination of his previous literary experiments, on one hand, and his experiences with radio and sound cinema, on the other hand. In part two, I analyze The Day of the Locust to show how West experimented with strange noises and voices to create a neat inversion. When he was not writing realistic dialogue for movie characters as a screenwriter, West composed his cinematic novel as a kind of intentionally failed talkie. Using sound cinema as literary inspiration, Nathanael West wrote some intentionally artificial sounds and dialogue for literary characters working and living in Hollywood, and thus succeeded in making his artificial and reproduced authorial voice seem downright natural.

1. Nathanael West’s Early Experiments with Artificial Voices

An early scene in The Day of the Locust introduces the very real tension that existed between some East Coast writers and the Hollywood establishment in the 1930s. While attending a party thrown by the successful screenwriter Claude Estee, set designer Tod Hackett overhears a dialogue between two unidentified Hollywood men, “talking shop”:

‘The picture business is too humble’, he said. ‘We ought to resent people like Coombes.’
'That’s right,’ said another man. ‘Guys like that come out here, make a lot of money, grouse all the time about the place, flop on their assignments, then go back East and tell dialect stories about producers they’ve never met.’ (70)

This account humorously implies that East Coast writers like Coombes have doubly flopped on their assignments. Not only do they fail to write realistic dialogue for the movies, they can’t even tell a story realistically to their friends. Since most movie producers were reputedly or actually Jewish, the “dialect story” would presumably be anti-Semitic. These failed screenwriters are trying to replicate well-known voices they haven’t even heard in person—a fact which partially explains why they flopped at writing realistic dialogue in the first place. There’s a wry inside joke, too. The biographical Nathanael West was an East coast writer who came to Hollywood in 1934, and The Day of the Locust offers a notoriously bleak view of Hollywood. But West was a successful screenwriter like his brother-in-law S.J. Perelman, and he was unlikely to tell such dialect stories anyways, since he was himself of Jewish descent (Martin).

The joke is further complicated by the fact that this particular dialogue—though arguably realistic—occurs in the storyworld of a novel and not on a movie screen based on a screenplay.

Still, many formally-ambitious novelists—including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald toward the end of his career—really did struggle to write realistic dialogue for talkies. Film historians disagree about how efficiently the movie industry made the transition to sound (cf. Crafton 1997 and Gomery 2005), but it is indisputable that the movie industry moved quickly to meet the public’s demand for talkies after the considerable successes of The Jazz Singer (1927) and The Singing Fool (1928). In addition to the complex technological changes that sound cinema required, this meant that new jobs were created (e.g., music
editor, sound editor, and the dubbing mixer), movie theatres had their acoustics improved, formerly silent actors attempted to make the difficult transition to sound, and new writers were needed, desperately. Even though the industry had more or less completed the transition to talkies by 1931 and solved many of its most pressing technological issues, the need for writers remained. As the screenwriter Julius J. Epstein humorously describes the situation as he saw it in 1933, “When sound came in, Hollywood raided every field of literature. The trains were full of playwrights, novelists, short story writers, poetry writers, people who wrote home for money—anybody who could put a word on paper” (Cameron 98 - 99). While many kinds of writers were used, well-known novelists from the East Coast were particularly attractive to movie studios, in part because a well-known name in the credits could add prestige to a picture.4

Talkies also transformed the relations between Hollywood cinema and radio, as The Day of the Locust shows. Beside East Coast novelists, the studios employed familiar voices from radio, professional theatre, and vaudeville (Balio 161). The major studios also came to rely increasingly on the marketing power of 1930s radio, which prospered mightily in the Depression years. By the time West started drafting The Day of the Locust in 1935, 60% of all American homes had radios (Balio 14). Radio’s increasing popularity meant that the major studios depended upon radio advertising just as radio depended upon Hollywood stars to give its stations prestige. This business relationship is discursively represented in Locust’s final chapter as the “young man with a portable microphone” uses the reaction of the movie premiere crowd to excite his radio audience, even as the movie crowd at the premiere is so excited by the radio man that the police try to remove him from their hearing range (176). The scene also represents new kinds of relationships that American consumers had with new
media sounds in the 1930s. The scene suggests that one reason the premiere crowd becomes excited to violence is their knowledge that they are “on air,” and that their numbers are multiplied by the disembodied radio audience, who “attend” the premiere only by hearing about it.

As this scene shows, the strange sounds of modernity created rich opportunities for formally-ambitious American novelists generally, and particularly for Nathanael West. In her recent analysis of “modernist soundscapes,” Melba Cuddy-Keane suggests famous authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce drew upon the sights but also the sounds of modern cities to represent different human perceptions and experiences. But in 1930s America, the strangest sounds were coming from Hollywood and radio. At the time West wrote The Day of the Locust, these media were making audible, visible, and eventually “natural” certain syntheses and incongruities between human bodies and mechanized sound that were previously unfamiliar. Examples include: disparities between a Hollywood actor lip-synching his lines and his dubbed voice, actors’ voices being replaced by other voices when they sing, disembodied voices issuing from radio, accidental noises on a movie set that make it into a film, and unnatural sounding dialogue from radio and Hollywood cinema that seems unlikely to be spoken by any person, or unlikely to be spoken by the person delivering the dialogue. Many of these challenges to maintaining cinematic realism were largely addressed through technological adjustments by 1930 (Crafton; Cameron; Erb 49). Through repetition and reproduction, other challenges were “naturalized,” to use Jonathan Culler’s term, that is, made familiar and in some way motivated: in this case, justified through their versilimitude. But as a novelist writing dialogue, West had opportunities every day to remark upon the strangeness of writing “realistic” dialogue for another person to speak.
Furthermore, a quick glance at Nathanael West’s early literary career suggests that even before *The Day of the Locust*, he was experimenting with non-mimetic dialogue and voices issuing from entertainment media. West’s first novel, the highly experimental *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), leaves the confines of literary realism far behind in its embrace of a surreal, dream-like story. The novel draws upon many different literary genres frequently, including a diary, crime journal, hagiography, pamphlet, biography, letter, drama, songs, folktales, jokes, and prayers. But it was not until his second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), that West began to experiment with the formal properties of popular media.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West used the conventions of newspaper advice columns to make a few letters represent the silent sentiments of many sufferers. The eponymous protagonist works as a newspaper advice columnist, and in that capacity he responds to desperate letters written by newspaper readers. Many of those letters are embedded in the novel’s text, and some letters are signed with proper names and others are signed with names like “Sick-of-it-all,” and “Desperate.” Miss Lonelyhearts has psychological difficulty responding to the letters in his column: “The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (1). The letters are written in colloquial and individuated styles, and each contributor imagines their own problems unique. But Miss Lonelyhearts realizes that, taken together, the letters represent “profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering” (32). While only six letters appear in their entirety, those six letters come to represent the untold sufferings of many more people. Each letter becomes what Susan Lanser calls “a communal voice” whose
narrative authority is created by their relation to all the other letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives (247). By drawing upon the conventions of a popular print genre, the newspaper advice column, West represented a cacophony of human suffering.

In his third novel, *A Cool Million* (1934), West began experimenting with literary representations of the mechanically-reproduced voices issuing from radio. *A Cool Million* features an intrusive external narrator who tells a satirical version of a rags-to-riches story set in the Depression. In Chapter 28, the narrator recalls a “small playlet” from memory, over the course of two pages in West’s novel. The entire playlet dramatizes a simple swindle in which the “Sleek Salesman” sells worthless bonds to an old woman for her life savings. The narrator quotes the character’s lines, but offers commentary on those lines also. One of the playlet’s characters is a “rich, melodic voice” named “Radio”:

Radio: ‘The Indefatigable Investment Company of Wall Street wishes its unseen audience all happiness, health and wealth, especially the latter. Widows, orphans, cripples, are you getting a large enough return on your capital? Is the money left by your departed ones bringing you all that they desired you to have in the way of comfort? Write or telephone.’ . . .

Here the stage becomes dark for a few seconds. When the lights are bright again, we hear the same voice, but see that this time it comes from a sleek, young salesman. He is talking to the old grandmother. The impression given is that of a snake and a bird. The old lady is the bird of course. (164)

West accomplishes three artistic effects with these two passages. First, he personifies “Radio” to subvert the implicit authority of voices on the radio. While the passage satirizes the investment company and Depression-era capitalism, it also parodies the authority many
listeners gave to radio (Barfield). The capitalized title of the company typographically registers the voice’s implicit authority and imitates the sonorous and authoritative accent given to that title: “The Indefatigable Investment Company of Wall Street.” But then West immediately reveals the artifice behind the “naturally” authoritative voice of radio by showing how it belongs to a “sleek, young salesman” and not some authoritative and abstract entity. The literary effect is something like when Dorothy’s character in The Wizard of Oz hears a great voice and dares to peek behind the curtain—only to find a small man yelling in a microphone. Perhaps when West wrote this passage, he was mindful of the persuasive power of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats, those famous radio addresses on political issues which commenced approximately six months before West started writing A Cool Million in the fall of 1933. What is more certain, in any regard, is that West wrote this passage to critique the power of radio on American consumers.

Second, West depersonalizes or mechanizes the young salesman’s voice, exposing him as just a mouthpiece, just a voice. The young salesman appears as hardly human, his voice a mere synecdoche for the Company and Radio. West satirizes not just radio’s implicit claim to authority but also the salesman’s implicit claim to humanity: he is figured as snake and mechanical voice, but not quite human. This is also true in a way of the old grandmother, who is figured as a bird. The passage shows West beginning to classify his characters into the “cheaters and the cheated,” the original title for The Day of the Locust, while maintaining a kind of anthropological distance from his literary characters. West distances himself from his literary characters by representing them as other than human, and both The Sleek Salesman and the old grandmother are precursors to the many mechanized characters in The Day of the Locust that Jonathan Greenberg has recently identified.
Third, and most subtly, West naturalizes and personalizes his external narrator’s judgmental voice. That is, he not only makes the disembodied voice seem familiar, but he also makes it seem quasi-human, personalized. Notice how the dramatic form of the playlet is first kept intact with pure dialogue, and then how West allows his external narrator to summarize the action and offer his narrative judgment: “The impression given is that of a snake and a bird. The old lady is the bird of course” (164). Now that West has denaturalized and thus subverted the implicit authority of Radio, the judgmental voice of his external narrator appears even more natural and thus authoritative in comparison. Indeed, the judgmental voice of West’s disembodied narrator appears downright human in comparison to the Sleek Salesman and Radio, because the narrator’s voice is distinct, individualized, agentive. In this way, West’s literary representation of Radio heightens an effect that is already present throughout the novel: the more grotesque or mechanical his characters appear, the more human the voice of his narrator appears in contrast.

West’s early novels offer a glimpse into his early penchant for experimenting with the anti-mimetic possibilities inherent in literary genres and popular media. They also suggest that, given his privileged insider position in Hollywood, the biographical West would have been particularly receptive to the strange noises issuing from radio and sound cinema, but also the strange voices issuing from his own pen in his work as a screenwriter. Clearly, writing “realistic” dialogue was not a practice central to West’s early fiction.

It is this historical context that provides necessary perspective to a critical crux regarding *The Day of the Locust*. In one form or another, much of the novel’s criticism has pursued a question common to almost every cinematic novel: Does this novel “imitate” cinema to critique Hollywood cinema and claim its own originality and authenticity? If so,
are those claims enervated by its imitation? The novel’s critical history contains many analyses of its thematic and formal engagements with Hollywood cinema (e.g., Allmendinger; Simon; Sarver; Strychacz; Rhodes; Greenberg; Springer), and Robin Bly has recently argued that *Locust* adapts Hollywood’s earlier “radical experiments” with sound production, using dissonance to critique the realism of sound cinema in the 1930s.

However, the career author Nathanael West was always intrigued by the strange voices in popular media but also in his own writing, and he used those voices not just for critique, but also for what he could do with them in his highly non-mimetic literary worlds. In contrast to the famous opposition that Walter Benjamin makes between an author’s aura of authenticity and mechanical reproduction in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Hollywood cinema, radio, and his own artistic impulses gave West every reason to connect the two concepts. This is because the American media environment in which West drafted *Locust* helped him value the strangeness he saw in mechanical reproduction, including that of his own writing. In the hermetic and insistently artificial literary world of *The Day of the Locust*, I will now show, West was able to create some interesting artistic effects—and to provide harsh judgments of 1930s Hollywood cinema—by writing his own failed talkie.

2. *The Day of the Locust* as a Failed Talkie

The first chapter of *The Day of the Locust* opens with strange sounds that come from a behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood cinema production. In the novel’s opening sentences, Tod Hackett’s curiosity immediately initiates and then parallels our readerly interest in a series of strange sounds: “Around quitting time, Tod Hackett heard a great din on the road outside his office. The groan of leather mingled with the jangle of iron and over all beat the
tattoo of a thousand hooves. He hurried to the window” (59). When Tod hurries to the window, West introduces us to their source, which turns out to be extras working on a movie about the battle of Waterloo, an “army of cavalry and foot” currently walking through the movie set outside Tod’s office. Then we hear another sound, the voice of the “fat little man” who is directing the large army: “‘Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!’ he screamed through a small megaphone” (59). All these sounds are result of West inviting us to listen as well as to see behind-the-scenes. It is an arresting scene, from the anachronistic sounds of iron and horses that also evoke radio effects, to the amusing power this small man wields over a large army. This strangeness is emphasized by the oxymoronic descriptions of the “fat little” director and his “small megaphone” (59, my emphasis). In addition to the humor from oxymoron, the director humorously resembles short Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo—but we know how that battle ended for Napoleon. West introduces these noises and then explains them—in an example of what Ian Watt calls “delayed decoding”—to draw our attention to their strangeness, to make unfamiliar, curious, and even funny the noises of film production.

Almost immediately the authorial audience learns more about Tod Hackett, the man who listened so attentively. A single sentence of exposition hints at why Tod Hackett often provides our narrative perspective in *The Day of the Locust*: “He had been in Hollywood less than three months and still found it a very exciting place” (59 - 60). West relies upon Tod Hackett’s perspective often in this novel because he has recently been recruited by Hollywood from the East Coast to learn set and costume design. For this reason, the sights and sounds of Hollywood cinema are strange to Tod Hackett in a way that they would not be to, say, his friend named Claude Estee, who is a successful screenwriter. Almost as
important, we learn in chapter one that Tod has a special interest in a particular kind of person who visits Hollywood, those mysterious “people of a different type” who stare mysteriously and “had come to California to die” (60). Tod's artistic interest initiates our own readerly interest in these strange people, but the passage also allows West to begin establishing an almost anthropological ethical distance from them—they are putatively humans, but also distant objects of study, “people of a different type.”

However, the novel’s most important sound is not Tod Hackett’s internal voice, but the voice of West’s external narrator. While we often perceive the story world through Tod Hackett’s perception for roughly half of the narrative discourse (Chapters 1 – 6 and 24 – 27 especially), we also perceive through other characters, including the young aspiring actress Faye Greener, her father and vaudeville actor Harry Greener, and the Midwesterner Homer Simpson. By the closing of chapter one, we are introduced to a kind of aphoristic moralizing that will continue later even when it is not presented through the filter of Tod’s consciousness:

Both houses were comic, but he didn’t laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. (61)

We know that it is the external narrator’s voice after the textual rupture of the line break because the voice shares the authority of that entity (the narrator) that earlier revealed Tod “definitely has talent.” Tod may share these particular judgments, but in any regard West uses this passage to introduce a voice that will provide high-level intellectual and ethical
reasoning about Hollywood and its people throughout the novel. The narrator’s assured voice of sympathetic judgment generally contrasts to mediated noises in the novel’s opening, and it particularly contrasts to the amplified screaming of the comical director in the first chapter’s opening.

These contrasts, between the voice of the movie director and the external narrator, and between the frantic noise of film production and the calm introduction of Tod Hackett’s character, initiate an unusual opposition that will build throughout the novel. The voice of the movie director is mimetic, “realistic” in the sense that “Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!” seems like something a movie director would say. (“Precisely,” says poor Coombes, now back safely on the East Coast.) But the “mob” that is being directed, is less human than a mass of confusion, “bobbing disorder.” In contrast to the director and his actors, the “voice” that ends chapter one could be described as profoundly humane, if not human, with its recognition of a horrible world and its sympathy for human needs that are largely unfulfilled. But the very ethical distance implied by the voice, the sense of looking upon the goings-on and judging from afar, suggests no “realistic” mooring. And although we may associate the voice with Tod Hackett here as a way of naturalizing it, that same voice has already described Tod Hackett’s backstory and judged him from the same distanced perspective. It is the disembodied voice of an external narrator that is legibly strange because it is distanced from this horrible world and sounds relatively sane during Babel.

Soon, West will ask his authorial audience to maintain a similar sort of ethical distance from both the producers and consumers of Hollywood cinema with his allegory of “the dancers.” In chapter two we learn more about those American consumers who consume Hollywood cinema, the starers:
Abe was an important figure in a set of lithographs called “The Dancers” on which Tod was working. He was one of the dancers. Faye Greener was another and her father, Harry, still another. They changed with each plate, but the group of uneasy people who formed their audience remained the same. They stood staring at the performers in just the way that they stared at the masquerades on Vine Street. It was their stare that drove Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout. (62)

This passage illustrates West’s preferred method of depersonalizing characters who are supposed to be human (cf. Greenberg). By identifying a group and not several individuals, by ensconcing that group within Tod’s art, and by keeping the group members the same, West creates an ethical distance between his authorial audience and the audience of starers. These “figures” are not to be understood as sympathetic humans, he seems to say, but as synthetic rather than mimetic characters, that is, as characters-as-ideas rather than characters-as-humans (Phelan, Reading). In fact, the synthetic overshadows the mimetic elements of all these characters. West opposes “the dancers” or the producers of Hollywood cinema to the “starers,” or consumers of Hollywood cinema, but all of them are objects of study, figures of anthropological interest. They are also figures in the literary sense of metaphorizing Hollywood production and its consumption. That metaphor reveals American consumers hungry for something they cannot identify, and desperate Hollywood producers trying but failing to satisfy the urges they’ve created.

We know that the artistic distance is West’s—not Tod’s—because Tod tries to maintain his own artistic distance from the dangerous sexual allure of actress Faye Greener,
but ultimately fails. Early in the narration, for instance, Faye’s psychological danger to Tod is represented by her “swordlike legs” (67). Tod recognizes Faye’s dangerous sexual allure when he looks at her picture, “a still from a two-reel farce” (67), and West uses Tod’s obsession with her still image from a Hollywood film to first suggest the inexorable sexual allure of Hollywood images. As he looks at the picture, Tod recognizes a certain danger in his attraction to Faye’s image, but the narrator reveals Tod’s failure to escape:

Her invitation wasn’t to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. . . .

He managed to laugh at his own language, but it wasn’t a real laugh and nothing was destroyed by it. (68)

Eventually Tod will succumb to his fantasies and try to rape Faye in the hills of Los Angeles, and this will reveal him to be just as grotesque as the people he wants to paint. But even here, as the narration switches from Tod’s direct thought to the narrator’s judgment of him, Tod fails to protect himself psychically against Faye’s image, to “destroy it.” Tod employs laughter as his psychological defense against Faye’s sexual allure, against his own dark thoughts prompted by the sexual allure of Hollywood, but his laughter fails to protect him against Hollywood’s allures, and he knows it.

Laughter and comedy are also how the screenwriter Claude Estee attempts to protect his artistic identity from his association with Hollywood cinema, as we learn in chapter five. A friend of Tod’s, Claude writes dialogue for sound cinema, and laments that movie audiences only want “amour and glamour.” To protect himself psychically, Claude becomes “master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation
and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit” (72). This comic rhetoric is displayed when Claude and Tod visit an upscale whorehouse run by Mrs. Jenning, where they will watch a silent film with other members of the Hollywood community. In free indirect speech, we listen to Claude as he ironizes Mrs. Jenning with lines like, “She had often said, and truthfully, that she would not let a girl of hers go to a man with whom she herself would not be willing to sleep” (73). The suggested joke is that, like her girls, Mrs. Jenning may also have sex with nearly anyone with “wealth and position, not to say taste and discretion” (73).

Claude’s use of comic irony on Mrs. Jenning has symbolic significance because he writes dialogue for sound cinema and talks comically about her, while she is a madam now and used to be a “fairly prominent actress in the days of silent films, but sound made it impossible for her to get work” (73). If Claude represents the singular voice of an artist, albeit one who produces sound cinema like Nathanael West, then Mrs. Jennings represents the sexy Hollywood image that sells and the problematic transition from silent films to talkies. Mrs. Jennings also represents Hollywood’s insistence on art when it is really selling sex, for we are told that when johns talk to her in the whorehouse they always want to talk about sex, or what Claude calls, “certain matters of universal interest.” Mrs. Jennings refuses to talk about sex, however, and Estee notes that, “she was really quite cultured . . . and insisted on discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris” (73). One question driving the coming narration, then, is whether Claude’s comic irony will protect him against the Hollywood sexual images that have threatened his friend, Tod Hackett.

Ultimately, Claude’s irony fails against the sexual allure of the Hollywood image. The film short that is screened in Mrs. Jenning’s whorehouse, Le Predicament de Marie, is an allegory of thwarted sexual desire; its plot is about a young woman who is sexually attractive.
to every member of the household save the young daughter, and who herself has sexual

desire only for the young daughter. When, like Marie, the film does not satisfy (because it
gets stuck in the projector), Mrs. Jenning’s audience at the viewing erupts in a mock riot that
foreshadows the riot at the novel’s end. Mrs. Jenning’s audience, Claude among them,
complain that Mrs. Jennings is using “The old teaser routine” by showing only a little bit of
the film (75). The film audience demands that the film keep its promise of sexual closure,
and Claude’s earlier ironic voice, his singular and “peculiar rhetoric,” is silent against the
crowd’s loud noise and its own half-comic imitation of a “rowdy audience at a nickelodeon”
(73, 74).

In that film, Marie’s real predicament is her ability to create sexual desire in everyone,
but her inability to fulfill those desires. While the entire family desires her, she only has eyes
for the young girl, but is continually distracted by others. Judging from the reactions of the
movie audience, this is also the predicament of Hollywood cinema, which is possibly why
Mrs. Jennings shows dirty films in her whorehouse in the first place: after the audience
watches the film, Mrs. Jenning’s business will presumably pick up. West sets the movie
screening in Mrs. Jenning’s whorehouse to mock Hollywood’s commercial prostitution, but
also to show the real power that film can exert over its audience. This mob may feign their
violent uproar, but the next one will not. The failure of Claude’s rhetoric recalls the failure of
Tod’s laughter in the previous chapter, just as the sexual allure of the silent film short recalls
the sexual allure of Faye Greener’s image. In The Day of the Locust, human characters laugh to
distance themselves from aspects of Hollywood cinema, especially its sexual allure, but their
laughter fails to destroy anything.
There are some laughs that are effective in this novel, some sounds that destroy, but they issue from the mouths of characters that represent aspects of Hollywood cinema. And as I will explain, “human” is not quite the word to describe their voices. For example, such voices come from the bodies of Faye and Harry Greener when they meet Homer Simpson in chapter eleven. Homer Simpson is a sympathetic but dim Midwestern who represses his sexual urges, but his hands constantly betray his repressed sexual desire by reaching for Faye's body despite their owner. Homer pays attention to Faye when they meet for the first time, but she is oblivious to his charms and begins to fight with her father in Homer’s house.

The verbal argument between Harry and Faye Greener illustrates the power of Hollywood’s reproduced voices in contrast to the artistic voices of Claude Estee and Tod Hackett. First consider the voice of Harry Greener, who for most of the novel is metaphorized as vaudeville theatre’s fate in the mid-1930s media environment. A former vaudeville actor, Harry cannot find work in Hollywood, and his death in the novel represents vaudeville theatre’s virtual demise. Similarly, it is fitting that Harry (vaudeville actor) is father to Faye (aspiring Hollywood actress), for vaudeville was one of the many cultural practices from which Hollywood drew. However, Harry has one marketable skill in Hollywood: his mechanical laughter. The narrator explains that Harry’s laugh “was his masterpiece. There was a director who always called on him to give it when he was shooting a scene in an insane asylum or a haunted castle” (96). What makes his laughter even more terrible in this particular scene is its mechanical, inhuman quality: it begins with a “sharp, mechanical crackle” and ends with “a machinelike screech” (96). In contrast to Tod’s laughter at the sound of his own interior monologue, Harry’s laughter is powerful and bothers Faye precisely because it is reproduced and thus terrible—a Hollywood laugh.
Faye fights fire with fire. She develops her own version of a reproduced voice by singing tunes from musicals and the radio. If Faye figures as Hollywood cinema’s silently seductive images early in the novel, she quickly develops into a figure for the power of talkies, and thus the development of her character’s symbolism parallels the historical development of Hollywood itself. Faye’s concern for her ill father quickly turns to anger when he laughs, and her subsequent response is extraordinary:

Faye knew only one way to stop him and that as to do something he hated as much as she hated his laughter. She began to sing.

“Jeepers Creepers!”

Where’d ya get those peepers? ... “

She trucked, jerking her buttocks and shaking her head from side to side. (96)

This song is “Jeepers Creepers,” and West reproduces eight lines of its lyrics in chapter eleven. The song became popular when Louis Armstrong sang to the horse named Jeepers Creepers in the movie Going Places (Dec. 31, 1938). The dialect and description of Faye’s dance indicates that this is not how the human named Faye normally talks in her fictional world; rather, it is the way Louis Armstrong sings and dances in his fictional world. Faye is essentially performing in blackface—which may be why Harry hates the performance. In addition, West uses her performance to help us better “hear” what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the passage’s double-voiced quality, its way of repeating the same words spoken in different contexts (300). The medium of print hides what would be Faye’s distinct acoustic tone; the written dialect imitates Armstrong’s way of singing the lyrics; and West avoids using adverbs to describing how Faye sounds when she sings. In these ways, the implied
West inflects what Bakhtin would call the “intentions and accents” of Faye’s words to emphasize that the words also belong to Armstrong.

Adding to the passage’s strangeness is the way the external narrator’s describes Faye “jerking” her buttocks and “shaking” her head, descriptions which anticipate both the racialized and mechanical elements to her performance. The mechanical quality to Faye’s dance is more noticeable because it seems like it was creatively added by West, rather than merely imitating Armstrong’s dancing performance in *Going Places.* In the movie, Armstrong appears natural—well, as natural as anyone could appear when singing and dancing with a horse named Jeepers Creepers. For these reasons, Faye’s performance appears as mechanical, depersonalized, and as frightening as Harry’s laugh. Thus the song’s usefully creepy title, “Jeepers Creepers.” Harry’s final laugh in the fight is just as impersonal: “It began with a sharp, metallic crackle, like burning sticks … it climbed until it was the *nicker of a horse,* then still higher to become *a machinelike screech*” (my emphasis 96). The metaphor “nicker of a horse” strongly suggests that West has Armstrong’s movie performance firmly in mind, for Armstrong sings to a horse. Finally Harry cannot stop laughing and “the noise poured out of him” (97) until Faye ends the fight by punching him—as if he were a record skipping. The fight between Harry and Faye is a fight between two voices that are distinct from the noises that usually issue from their human bodies.

With his account of the Greener family argument, then, West responds to the mechanical voices of his media environment thematically. Faye and Harry Greener become figures for mediated voices and for their power and distancing effects. The voices of sound cinema cannot be reasoned with because such voices have no rhetorical situation, no focus;
they are just destructive noise. Indeed it is their very depersonalization, their mimicry of mechanical reproduced sounds that make them so powerful.

This raises a question: In what sense is it “Faye” who sings “Jeepers Creepers”? That is, how do we understand her character differently if we imagine both her voice and Armstrong’s voice when she sings? The passage helps disrupt our mimetic assumptions about Faye as a human being in the storyworld. West emphasizes Faye’s role as a thematic device in a novel—and submerges or even subverts her role as a human being—because we can imagine a disconnect between her body and her voice, including her apparent racial identity and the racial mimicry of her performance. This disconnect recalls Faye’s earlier failure to speak her one line correctly in the “two-reel farce.” It also recalls the disconnect between Louis Armstrong’s own voice and image when he sings “Jeepers Creepers” in Going Places. The disconnect in Armstrong’s movie performance is due to a slight non-synchronization between his voice and image that was fairly common at the beginning of sound cinema, especially in the late 1920s (Balio 117). In short, West uses the scene to encourage us to think of Harry and Faye’s Hollywood voices as artificial and imitative, mechanical and powerful—even after the time that Hollywood had largely fixed issues of synchronization.

In the context of the narrative progression, this battle of artificial voices prepares West’s authorial audience to privilege synthetic characterization over mimetic characterization whenever the external narrator offers song lyrics throughout the novel. We are often encouraged to identify the incongruity between the singers and the songs they sing, to “hear” strange songs issue from unexpected human mouths. The more similar situations we come across, the less we think of West’s characters as human, and the more we
understand that their voices are not their own. It is as if West allows certain characters to become a kind of radio, a dispenser of some popular and mediated voices whenever the novel’s typography shifts to the song lyrics format of indented paragraphs, line breaks, and italicized words.

As West does this, he also naturalizes, or makes familiar, the voice of his own disembodied external narrator. As in A Cool Million, the intrusive voice of the external narrator is marked as “human” in contrast to the Greener’s mechanical voice. Moreover, the external narrator’s mask narration gains further authority as West’s voice because of its extreme difference from the mechanized character voices, and because it is not marked as impotent like the free indirect thought of Tod Hackett or the comic irony of Claude Estee. In this way, West deconstructs the opposition of unnatural and natural to empower the only truly “human” voice of the story: the distinct, individuated, and agentive voice of his disembodied authorial narrator.

For the most part, that extratextual voice is defined only negatively in the beginning and middle of The Day of the Locust (Lanser). It appears as distinct and agentive against the background of Tod’s and Claude’s failed voices. But this is not always the case. The extratextual voice recognizes that Hollywood is not an inherently exciting place, rather a monstrous one. It takes an ethical distance from all characters, but is also sympathetic to their need for “beauty and romance.” And it has a keen ear for mechanical language and mechanical actions, like Homer who worked “mechanically” as a bookkeeper and with an “impersonal detachment.” That voice insists on pointing out how human beings can sound and act like machines.
In the middle chapters of *Locust*, West conducts other notable experiences with mediated voices. These experiments allow West to attack from different angles what he conceived of as the noise of the 1930s American media environment. His thematic treatments of mediated voices in these examples provide a crucial supplement to his widely acknowledged critique of Hollywood cinema as “A Sargasso of the imagination!” or a “dream dump” for American consumers (132). That is, these literary representations of radio and sound cinema show exactly how and why humans become machines without dreams, voices without personality.

One such experiment occurs in chapter fourteen, when Faye and Tod join the cowboy Earle Shoop and his friend Miguel in the hills of Los Angeles. Predictably, all the men are suitors for Faye’s affections, although Earle has been the most successful suitor to date. West begins the scene by using the external narrator’s description of a trapped quail to foreshadow his thematic description of trapped humans: “It was a trapped bird, but the sound it made had no anxiety in it, only sadness, impersonal and without hope” (114). Once the diners begin killing and eating the bird, we soon hear impersonal and hopeless “human” voices. These voices issue from the mouths of Miguel and Faye when they begin singing an impromptu duet. The external narrator reproduces six lines of that duet, but offers commentary between them:

Mig laughed guiltily and began to sing.

*Las palmeras lloran por tu ausencia,*

*Las lagunas se seco—ay!*

*La cerca de alambre que estaba en*

*El patio también se cayó!"*
His voice was a plaintive tenor and it turned the revolutionary song into sentimental lament, sweet and cloying. Faye joined in when he began another stanza. She didn’t know the words, but she was able to carry the melody and to harmonize.

‘Pues mi madre las cuidaba, ay!

Toditito se acabo—ay!’

Their voices touched in thin, still air to form a minor chord and it was as though their bodies had touched. The song was transformed again. (116)

Miguel and Faye create what appears a largely successful musical collaboration—despite its “cloying” character and Miguel’s guilt—because when Miguel sings and Faye harmonizes they obviously create sexual and musical excitement. From this perspective, the scene seems to depart from West’s earlier uses of artificial voices. This is especially so because the song’s lyrics make it identifiable as a version of the revolutionary folk song called “Los Cuatro Milpas” (“The Four Fields”), which belongs to a genre of Mexican ballads called the *corrido.*

In fact, however, with the *corrido* West picked the perfect musical genre for his thematic discussion of 1930s mediated voices. The Mexican corrido reached the height of its popularity in the first couple decades of the twentieth century. But when radio came, it arguably lost some of its revolutionary charge after the Mexican revolution petered out in the 1920s (Parades, Ancestry). It is significant that Faye does not know the lyrics to this revolutionary song, then, because the medium of radio was responsible for changing the function and value of *corrido* songs. Whereas such songs were formerly prized for their communicative value, Faye’s duet with Miguel tells the story of how a folk tradition can be
emptied of its didactic intent and remediated in new media environments. Here, that new media environment is Los Angeles in the age of radio and sound cinema.

Furthermore, this particular corrido song was an excellent choice for West’s purposes. When West was writing his novel, *Los Cuatro Milpas* was already sentimentalized for radio, just as Miguel sentimentalizes it for Faye. Some of West’s readers could have heard this formerly revolutionary song on the radio, for in 1928 it was recorded by the legendary Tejano recording artist, Lydia Mendoza, who was famous for her sentimental versions of folk songs. Nathanael West famously wrote to a friend that his novel was filled with “private jokes,” but this particular one now seems explainable. The original “Las Cuatro Milpas” (The Four Fields) was a folk song about an intimate connection to the land, and it was “one of the most powerful and enduring anthems of the Mexican revolution in 1910” (Chabram-Dernersesian 353). But it was transformed for commercial radio audiences by a famous artist known for her sentimental love songs. Faye and Miguel’s performance of “Los Cuatro Milpas” illustrates how folk music and revolutionary spirit are appropriated by popular media renditions. The lyrics of the song’s final line, “Toditito se acabó—ay!” (“Everything is lost”) therefore has particular resonance, the more so because Faye does not understand the literal meaning of Miguel’s Spanish lyrics when she harmonizes with him.

As Earle and Tod respond violently to this duet, West suggests that these transformed radio songs adversely affect American audiences—the revolutionary affect remains, but the point of the violence is lost. Tod and Earle figure as American consumers of radio in this scene because they do not understand the lyrics, but respond only to the affect of the song with their violence. First the song has a dramatic effect upon Earle, who is jealous of the physical attraction between Miguel and Faye, and tries to join their song and
dance but cannot. Significantly, Earle strikes and presumably renders unconscious Miguel—the only character who knows the original meaning and spirit of the lyrics. This is significant because Earle, the Hollywood cowboy who stares at commercial signs, is a different version of the staring people who come to California to die. In his symbolic role as an American consumer of Hollywood dreams, Earle does not know and does not care about folk art, but once again he is excited to violence, “from apathy to action without the usual transition” by popular revisions of it. Tod Hackett is equally affected, equally violent. As Faye runs past him, he grabs for her ankle but misses. Tod then fantasizes about raping Faye because he is dangerously aroused by her version of the song. Thus, the violence of Tod and Earle, much like the song of Miguel and Faye, resembles the song of the trapped bird that introduced the scene: “no anxiety in it, only sadness, impersonal and without hope” (114).

While West uses “Los Cuatro Milpas” to show the danger of radio, he uses Adore Loomis’ musical performance of “Mama Doan Wan’ No Peas” in Chapter 19 to show how sound cinema can pervert children. The film genre of musicals was a natural result of Hollywood’s transition to talkies, and in 1936 the child actress Shirley Temple was the biggest-drawing movie star in the world (Balio 146). In 1937, novelist and film critic Graham Greene pointed out the precocious sexuality of Shirley Temple’s character in the movie Wee Willie Winkey. West must have been thinking along similar lines as Greene when his external narrator describes Adore’s musical performance: “He seemed to know what the words meant, or at least his body and voice seemed to know. When he came to the final chorus, his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain” (141). It is in this context that West asks us to understand the comment of Mrs. Loomis about her son Adore: “He thinks he’s the Frankenstein monster” (140).
Through his allusions to Frankenstein, West asks us to take seriously the notion that Adore is in some ways not human when he sings, that his character is composed of various elements of media culture—with both his mother and Hollywood as Dr. Frankenstein. But like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, West unfortunately uses implied racial stereotypes to strengthen his denigrations of cinema for his 1939 audience. Here as with Faye Greener’s dances, sexy dances are performed in blackface: part of the “monstrous” aspects to Adore’s dance is his imitation of an African American blues singer. Adore’s voice and the dance do not fit with his human character: “His singing voice was deep and rough and he used the broken groan of the blues singer quite expertly. He moved his body only a little, against rather than in time with the music” (140). West’s authorial audience may also hear the voices of the song’s original artist, Cleo Brown, or the voice of Shirley Temple when they read the italicized lyrics ostensibly sung by Adore. They might also imagine Shirley Temple when they think of Adore performing—especially if they are familiar with Greene’s well-publicized critique.

A final and telling example of experimental voices occurs when Tod and Faye visit a drag club in chapter twenty. This example suggests the extent to which West went well beyond merely imitating mediated sounds to parody, imitate, or critique Hollywood cinema, and instead used mediated sounds to create new literary effects. At the club, Tod hears the voice of a female impersonator singing a lullaby Paul Robeson made famous. Once again, West has a character perform in blackface so that the voices seem even stranger. After we read five lines of the song, the external narrator describes the man’s vocal performance and declares that the music
was in no sense parody; it was too simple and too restrained. It wasn’t even theatrical. This dark young man with his thin, hairless arms and soft, rounded shoulders, who rocked an imaginary cradle as he crooned, was really a woman.

When he had finished, there was a great deal of applause. The young man shook himself and became an actor again. (146)

The narrator’s insistence that the man “really was a woman” is supplemented by West’s narrative technique in a remarkable fashion. In the passage above, West seems to do full justice to the man’s transgendered status: in the textual space of the song quotation, that song is both masculine and feminine. This is because West’s authorial audience would be familiar with different versions of the same song through radio. If West succeeds in getting us to imagine the performance as double-voiced, sung by previous female and male performers as well as this person, then he succeeds in granting to his character’s voice gender ambiguity or bigendered status. Here the print medium allows West to achieve a kind of artistic effect that cinema could not achieve in the same way.

These three examples are not the only experiments with mediated voices that West undertakes in *The Day of the Locust*. But taken as a group, they begin to suggest how richly and deeply West engaged with sound cinema. They also suggest a common answer to some familiar questions about the novel: why Tod Hackett is a painter, why Tod’s work-in-progress painting titled “The Burning of Los Angeles” is frequently mentioned in the text, and why Tod’s new heroes are painters like Goya and Daumier, like “Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio, the painters of Decay and Mystery” (132). Basically, West’s experiments with strange voices help him to achieve what the painters and Tod tried
to achieve through painting. To broadly generalize, these painters avoided strictly mimetic (=realistic or lifelike) representations of humans, instead employing fantastic, stylized, grotesque human-like figures and landscapes to represent their themes. This is also an effect West seeks to achieve in this novel, and he alludes to their work to draw attention to its similarities with his. As Jonathan Greenberg has recently noted, throughout the novel “human bodies are repeatedly described as robotic or puppet-like” (601). Once we see how West experiments with unnatural voices, we can see that he creates grotesque characters at the level of acoustics as well as image: his characters are machine-like and their voices represent West’s remediation of the mechanically-reproduced sounds of radio and Hollywood.

The final chapter of *The Day of the Locust* begins as Tod Hackett walks into a mob of people on the street. The thousands of excited fans await the world premiere of a new movie. The crowd quickly gets out of hand as the excited voice of a radio announcer urges them on. A violent riot ensues. Tod sees Homer Simpson walking like “a badly made automaton” in the crowd and eventually Tod manages himself from the violent crowd, but loses Homer to them. As Tod is finally lifted into a police car for his own protection, he hears the siren of an ambulance. At first he thinks he is making the noise himself, but at the novel’s closing he realizes that his lips were shut: “He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could” (185).

This closing chapter is remarkable, and it has justifiably received a significant amount of critical attention because it provides a synthesis and clarification of some of West’s most treasured themes. One way West clarifies those themes is by seamlessly shifting from Tod’s free indirect thought to the extratextual voice of his authorial narrator, as when Tod looks at
the mob. Tod notices how people change when they join a crowd, but the extratextual voice spends several paragraphs explaining how American consumers feel cheated because Hollywood cinema and newspapers have implicitly and impossibly promised and failed to give their lives meaning (178). This explains why the crowd erupts violently at this movie premiere—they feel bored, vaguely cheated, and they have grown familiar with violence through mass media.

As if to confirm this suspicion that Hollywood cinema cheats American consumers, the child actor Adore Loomis (as a symbol of young Hollywood) appears out of nowhere to tempt Homer Simpson (as a symbol of the cheated American consumer) with money, only to then yank the prize away. Homer responds violently once he realizes he has been cheated, which encourages the mob to still greater violence. All this trauma is too much for poor Homer, who is already walking dazed and aimless in the violent crowd as a result of his recent realization that Faye Greener, that personification of Hollywood’s sexual allure, will never return his affections. (We learned in chapter twenty-four that he caught Faye having sex with Miguel in his own house.) The riot represents West’s ever-present argument that Hollywood cinema creates expectations for violence, sex, and entertainment that it cannot control.

But the final chapter also shows why West’s experiments with voices provide his chief interface for representing Hollywood cinema and his media environment. In fact, the final chapter first reaffirms the power and the danger of mediated voices, then reminds us of the impotence of human voices, and finally indicates West’s ultimate response to his noisy media environment, all quite methodically. In other words, the chapter rehearses in miniature the novel’s complete narrative progression, so I shall return briefly to the final
scene with the radio man. The first step occurs when West unites in one man his previously
distinct arguments that the mediated noises of radio and Hollywood cinema are powerful
and dangerous. This thematic unification occurs through the only powerful voice that can be
heard amongst the mob’s noise:

A young man with a portable microphone was describing the scene. His rapid, hysterical voice was like that of a revivelist preacher whipping his conregation toward the ecstasy of fits.

‘What a crowd, folks! What a crowd! There must be ten thousand excited, screaming fans outside Kahn’s Persian tonight. The police can’t hold them. Here, listen to them roar.’

He held the microphone out and those near it obligingly roared for him.

‘Did you hear it? It’s a bedlam, folks. A veritable bedlam! What excitement! Of all the premieres I’ve attended, this is the most. . . the most . . . stupendous, folks. Can the police hold them? Can they? It doesn’t look so, folks…”

The radio announcer recalls the opening joke of the novel, in which the small director
intimidates an entire army of film extras with his mechanically-projected voice. However, by
now such scenes are no joke. The man’s mechanically-projected voice is unnaturally
powerful, and it is undeniably influential for “the cheated,” those lower-middle class people
who have learned the excitement of violence from newspapers and movies, but have been
given “the old teaser routine” by Hollywood (178). And if the movie director could control
his crowd of people, this radio announcer can only urge the movie premiere crowd and his
remote audience to violence, playing one off of the other. The excited voice of a radio announcer at a Hollywood premiere provides the perfect figure for the powerful and dangerous sounds of radio and Hollywood cinema in West's media environment.

If we have been paying attention to West's narrative progression, then what happens next is perfectly predictable: the human voices of Tod and Homer are rendered impotent, ineffective in their silenced protest. After attacking Adore Loomis, Homer is attacked by the crowd: “[Tod] saw Homer rise above the mass for a moment, shoved against the sky, his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn’t. A hand reached up and caught him by his open mouth and pulled him forward and down” (181). A mute sufferer, Homer’s image most immediately resembles grotesque and silent people in paintings by Goya and Daumier. But in the context of the narration, Homer’s silenced, impotent voice also strongly resembles the earlier failures of Tod Hackett and Claude Estee to distance themselves from Hollywood cinema with their personalized voices. Then, in the novel’s closing sentences, Tod struggles to distinguish his own voice from the mechanically-reproduced sounds of his media environment. But he eventually tries a new tactic, and purposely imitates those sounds by the novel’s end.

In a still influential argument, Strychacz argues that, like Tod Hackett in these closing sentences, Nathanael West’s critique of Hollywood cinema in The Day of the Locust is enervated by the fact that the author imitates the same techniques he would criticize. For her part, Bly explains that in this scene West reveals and critiques the dangerous siren screen of sound cinema. However, there is a real sense in which West joins his character Tod Hackett in his desire to “imitate the siren as loud as he could” (185). What Tod’s imitation of an ambulance siren at the end of the novel encourages, I argue, is the basis for a re-reading of
the novel’s acoustics as I have done here. The novel’s noisy ending represents Tod’s imitation of a mechanically-reproduced noise. Thus, it encourages us to recall its noisy beginning and to listen again for West’s imitations of mediated voices. Published in the same month and year as Joyce’s aural masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake, The Day of the Locust* coincidently encourages a similar kind of circular reading, bringing us as it does back to its beginning. In this way, it represents West’s literary version of mechanically-reproduced sound. But if we listen carefully, I have tried to show, we will hear those same sounds very differently. The biographical West was hired to produce “realistic” dialogue for talkies, and by all accounts he did so very well. But on his own time he wrote *The Day of the Locust* as a failed talkie, embracing rather than rejecting or critiquing the strange sounds he noticed everywhere around him. In reproduction, he found his solution.

Supposedly, the classic modernist stance against the onslaught of noisy modernity is the well-crafted novel by the formally-ambitious author: the painstakingly crafted artwork against the machines, a novel not unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* as I have interpreted it. But West was never built that way; he forged his artifice from the artificial. Being “human” and using a human voice doesn’t turn out very well in *The Day of the Locust*, and one has to squint pretty hard to see the novel as realist or even terribly cohesive. What works in this novel is ethical distance, the disembodied artistic voice that is sympathetic and authoritative—and far removed from these observed characters. What works is that at once most strange and most conventional of literary techniques, the external narrator with a disembodied voice. What West knew, and what he reminded us, is that books produce and reproduce the strangest voices of all. Hollywood cinema helped him hear those strange voices better.
References


1 I am indebted to Martin Jay’s excellent biography on West for all my biographical facts.

2 Problems with integrating sound—and especially with writing dialogue were discussed in movie industry publications in the early 1930s (e.g., *Variety*) and in retrospective accounts from directors and producers at the time (see e.g., *Sound and The Cinema*).

3 The standard account makes *The Jazz Singer* the film most responsible for the industry-wide change, and Gomery makes a persuasive case that *The Singing Fool* was just as responsible. See Abel and Altman on the early public demand for sound cinema.

4 A writer’s name on the credits would be especially valued for a “prestige picture,” an expensive film with formal ambition that was designed to bring fame to the movie studio that produced it. Often prestige pictures were based on a classic novel, or a contemporary novel, screenplay, and the like. In these cases, as today, studios could try to recruit the original author to help with the screenplay.

   Film historian Tino Balio notes that “the prestige picture was far and away the most popular production trend of the decade” (179) and that, from 1934 – 1940, about half the movies were prestige pictures. Indeed, Balio notes that prestige pictures were sometimes given credit for the film industry’s strong financial performance in 1934—which also happened to be the year that West came to Hollywood.

5 The story of sound technology in films is a long and complicated one. For good discussion of this history, see *Sound and The Cinema*, but especially James G. Stewart’s first-hand report, “The Evolution of Cinematic Sound: A Personal Report” (38 – 67), in that same collection of essays.
6 Blyn makes a confusing mistake when she claims that The Day of the Locust was published in 1933, instead of the year that it was actually published, 1939. Her mistake seems like more than a typographical error since she suggests, partly on her own research, that Hollywood cinema was conducting many radical experiments with dissonant sound until 1932—the year before she says West’s novel was published. In fact, most film scholars suggest that sound cinema was quite conventionalized by 1931, and that leaves at least three years of sound cinema before West arrives in Hollywood in 1934. In contrast to Blyn, I would suggest that it was likely West’s screenwriting that caused him to rethink the novelistic possibilities of strange voices. Surely West was aware of all the other incongruities that radio and talkies revealed, I argue, but he also reveled in the strange voices of his screenwriting and literary fiction—including his disembodied external narrator in The Day of the Locust.

7 In response to public complaints about the immorality of Hollywood films, and in fear of government censorship, in the beginning of the 1930s the Hollywood studios accepted a Production Code that spelled out unacceptable content. But while this was instituted at the decade’s beginning, it wasn’t seriously enforced until Joseph I. Breen took over enforcement duties in 1934. Consequently, there is a significant difference in the naughtiness of pre-1934 movies (often quite naughty) and post-1934 movies (less so). Prestige pictures were often allowed to get away with more risqué content. See Doherty 2008 for more on the moral universe of Joseph I. Breen.

8 Sherwood Anderson’s character named Wing Biddlebaum in Winesburg, Ohio also has hands that repress his sexual desire.
The idea that laughter is frightening is a conceit from West’s earliest fiction: The external narrator of *The Dream Life of Belso Snell* remarks that, “People say it is terrible to hear a man cry. I think it is even worse to hear a man laugh” (18).

For good discussion of *Going Places* and Armstrong’s role in it, see (http://dippermouth.blogspot.com/2009/01/70-years-of-jeepers-creepers.html). Previous to the film’s premiere, Armstrong played the tune on a Martin Block radio appearance on December 14, 1938.

In Louis Armstrong’s performance in *Going Places*, there is a discernible difference between sound and image—the synchronization fails. Clips of Armstrong’s performance in the movie are readily available online also. See for example: http://jazzlives.wordpress.com/2009/04/19/jeepers-creepers-1938/

For more on the corrido, see the authority, Américo Paredes, beginning with *With His Pistol in His Hand*: A Border Ballad and Its Hero. See also Paredes’s The Ancestry of Mexico's Corridos: A Matter of Definitions. *Journal of American Folklore* 76(301): 231-35.


Mrs. Loomis explicitly compares Adore’s talent to Shirley Temple’s: “What's Shirley Temple got that he ain’t got?” (138).

For good discussion of how Adore and Homer Simpson allude to the Frankenstein movie, see Sarver.
Chapter 3: Immersive Narratives and Reel Worlds in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*

John Ray Jr.’s foreword, which begins Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, anticipates public concerns about potentially “‘aphrodisiac’” scenes in Humbert Humbert’s memoir, “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male” (4). Far from encouraging sexual deviance, the fictional Ray Jr. asserts, “‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (6). Nabokov uses the comically elevated register of Ray’s remarks to parody cultural anxiety about what I will call *immersive narratives*: stories from popular American media that adults feared would encourage juvenile delinquency. Today the term “immersive narratives” has positive or neutral valences for literary critics and media historians, but I use it anachronistically to describe a common enough cultural anxiety that nevertheless reached a fevered pitch in postwar America as youth culture and popular media emerged. The anxiety was that children could not distinguish reality from fiction—that they would repeat in their lives aspects of the unwholesome fictions they consumed.

Sometimes when cultural critics discussed the dangers of immersive fictions, they half-heartedly lumped cheap Hollywood movies together with emerging media forms like comic books, cheap paperback novels, pornography, and even rock ‘n roll as “mass media.” But usually this fairly inchoate anxiety revolved around popular, relatively low-brow media that children might consume, without sharp distinctions made among media. For example, anxieties about immersive fictions manifested themselves in the popularity of psychologist
Frederic Wertham’s *The Seduction of the Innocent*, but his book focused primarily on the dangers of comic books. However, hearings of a Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee investigated how media could encourage juvenile delinquency, and focused on the dangers of motion pictures—as well as comic books, television, and pornography. This is to say that when the biographical Vladimir Nabokov began composing *Lolita* in the late 1940s, Hollywood cinema was still very popular, but a known quantity in the American media environment—just another element of mass culture. But in the context of the American cinematic novel, that was remarkable, and Hollywood’s role as a relatively “old” medium led to a new set of opportunities for American cinematic novelists. With *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov for the first time claimed himself as an American novelist (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 315), and this chapter will show that the changing American media environment—along with his valid concerns about *Lolita*’s possible reception as pornography—led Nabokov to a more sympathetic, less “anxious” treatment of Hollywood cinema than Fitzgerald or West.

To explain this claim, I bring together two previously distinct strands of the novel’s criticism. The first strand involves the difficulty of understanding Dolores Haze in a memoir written by a pedophile, and the second strand involves the question of how Nabokov engages with Hollywood cinema and other popular media. In part one, I begin by discussing how Humbert tries to immerse Dolores Haze in his narratives about a nymphet he calls “Lolita”. Part two explains my own intervention in the novel’s rich critical history. Part three tries to find Dolores in the supposedly immersive narratives she consumes. And in part four, I explain why focusing on Nabokov’s engagement with Hollywood cinema provides an important introduction to understanding his own response to immersive fictions, especially his own.
1. Humbert’s Solipsism and his Immersive Narratives about “Lolita”

From the first moment he sees her, Humbert makes Dolores Haze a fictional character in his fantasies. As he begin writing his memoir, Humbert transmogrifies Dolores into his former childhood love, Annabelle:

I was still walking behind Mrs. Haze through the dining room when, beyond it, there came a sudden burst of greenery—’the piazza,’ sang out my leader, and then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.

It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess . . . I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. (39)

Understanding how the implied Nabokov intends to characterize Humbert and his fantasies can be challenging, partly because it requires readers to interpret and judge both the experiencing-Humbert (the character in the storyworld) and the narrating-Humbert (the memoirist writing in prison), including the narrator’s retrospective judgments of himself. As Dorrit Cohn notes, a key question in retrospective character narration is often, what is the attitude of the narrator to his experiencing-self (Transparent Minds)? And as James Phelan notes, answers to that question are particularly crucial to understanding the relation between the character narrator and the implied author (Living; cf. McCormick 2010). But is this
passage, significantly, the implied Nabokov eliminates that familiar confusion. As a narrator, Humbert repeats and insists upon the perceptions he experienced as a character. The more narrating-Humbert insists on the “sameness” between Annabelle and Dolores, the more we see that the perceptions of Humbert as narrator and character are identical. In both roles, at both times, Humbert insists that young Dolores is a version of Annabelle, without her own distinct identity, and he still insists that “it” was the same child—as opposed to saying “she” was the same child. Humbert refuses to perceive Dolores as a fellow human being, someone who is equal, irreducible, and profoundly Other. Instead, he creates a fairy tale in which she and he exist as literary characters, just as artificial as Nathanael West’s characters in *The Day of the Locust*.

Throughout his memoir, it helps Humbert to use images so that his fairy tale appears as a reality governed by his own ethical rules. That is how he transforms the girl Dolores Haze into the fictional “Lolita,” who is imaginary both in the sense that she appears as a moving image and in the sense that she is a fictional character. For example, Humbert likes imagining Dolores “as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark” (62). And at other points, he dreams of her at night and sees “but an immobilized fraction of her, a cinematographic still” (44) and he wants “all her enchantments, immortalized in segments of celluloid” (232). If Dolores is onscreen, she will become what he has always viewed her as, a moving icon who exists to please him. This is also why he opposes “stunning stars of the screen” to “essentially human little girls,” and why he similarly opposes “nymphets” to those same little girls (17). Humbert uses cinema to justify his solipsistic view of Dolores and then to justify his rape of her. The process begins when Humbert perceives Dolores as a stand-in for Annabel. It continues
when Humbert insists that he has “safely solipsize[d]” her in the davenport scene as “Lolita” when he secretly masturbated with her on his lap. And it can be noticed throughout his narration whenever he discourses about nymphets—“which [are] not human” (16). While allusions to fairy tales help Humbert create a magical world for his own pleasure that is unconnected to Dolores’s life as a human being, allusions to images—especially movies—help reify her sexual image in his memory and place the blame on his victim for her “demoniac” seduction of him.

From this perspective, Humbert’s allusions to movies provide one of his two primary defenses for his rape and mistreatment of Dolores. Throughout Part I and much of Part II, Humbert’s rhetorical purpose for writing his memoir is that he will persuade the “[l]adies and gentlemen of the jury,” his readers, that he is not guilty for his crimes and mistreatment of Dolores (9). Although he also plans to use his writing to defend himself against the charge of murdering Quilty, Humbert clearly believes that the best way to defend himself is through the story of his experience with Dolores. If Humbert can convince us that Dolores seduced him like a demon or a movie star, then that would attenuate or eliminate his guilt, he hopes. His other defense is that he is a poet and that his relationship with Dolores was essential to his art: “The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—not crime’s prowling ground” (131). *Lolita’s* critics have offered useful explications of how Humbert’s rich allusions to various literary intertexts work in this regard.6 Less frequently noted, however, is the fact that while Humbert enjoys immersing himself in literary texts, he gains sexual satisfaction as a character as well as rhetorical validation as a memoirist when he imagines Dolores immersed in movies and movie culture.
Nabokov places evidence of Humbert’s sexual satisfaction, even early in Humbert’s narration, to undermine his narrator’s rhetorical attempts.

For example, there is a revealing scene early in Part I in which Humbert fantasizes about kissing Dolores before she goes off to camp, and uses his imagination regarding Hollywood movies to do so. In his journal entry, Humbert recollects that she sat upon his lap in his study and “I knew she would let me do so [kiss her], and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches” (48). Humbert’s view of Hollywood cinema as immersive narrative at first seems to be shared by Nabokov. But then Humbert thinks, “a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups, might not think it too strange, I guessed, if a handsome, intensely virile grown-up friend—too late (49). In this sentence, as in the scene as a whole, the longer Humbert fantasizes, the more his supposed psychological insights into Dolores’s mind are revealed as projections of his own sexual fantasies. The length of this sentence its accumulation of noun clauses reveals how experiencing-Humbert slowly convinces himself why he should try to kiss Dolores, even though he knows she would resist. Humbert’s “too late” is also quickly explained: the actual Dolores just learned about a dead animal in the basement, and she’s excited to find out what it is. This is one of many examples in which Nabokov humorously juxtaposes the reality of the flesh-and-blood Dolores Haze against Humbert’s fantasy Lolita.

This scene also represents Nabokov pattern of neatly attacking the hypocrisies of culture critics who publicly attack immersive narratives. Recall that in his preface, Ray considered what would happen if an editor might “dilute or omit scenes that a certain type of mind might call ‘aphrodisiac’” (5, my emphasis). Instead of sharing the common concern that young people might experience certain scenes as aphrodisiac, Nabokov uses Ray to suggest
that certain adults might call them so only because of their own dirty minds. This same idea repeats in Humbert’s fantasy in the passage above. Humbert fantasizes that Dolores will become immersed in Hollywood narratives and become a seductress. But it is his sexual fantasy, not hers. Throughout *Lolita*, it is a dark running joke that Dolores’s rapist is actually a high-brow cultural prude who disdains Hollywood’s immersive narratives and who worries about her education.7 Crucially, this running joke also provides another implicit defense for Nabokov’s *Lolita*, for Nabokov uses his plot to suggest that the same people who might censor his supposedly pornographic novel are precisely the ones who are projecting, as cultural anxiety, what is actually their personal fantasy about how children might respond to immersive narratives.

Despite these authorial signals, much popular culture and several critics have followed Humbert in perceiving “Lolita” as a seductress who learns from immersive narratives from Hollywood and popular culture more generally.8 This mistake is understandable because it can be difficult to resist Humbert’s unreliable perception and ethics, but also because Dolores is a literary representation of a complex human being, and therefore flawed like us. For example, much textual evidence, especially early in the narrative discourse, suggests that she does create her fantasies from popular culture. Humbert create his persona as “a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood” not only because he likes playing the role, but because it helps to attract his prey (69). Likenesses of both Humbert and the dramatist and movie scenarist Clare Quilty appear on Dolores’ wall, and she eventually has sexual relationships first with Humbert and later with Quilty. As a young girl living with her mother, Dolores rabidly devours potentially immersive narratives: she watches movies, and reads movie magazines and comic books.
So, when Dolores later accepts money and privileges in return for sex, it appears that Humbert is right when he says that “any wearable purchase worked wonders with Lo” (64) and that “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every poster” (148). Perhaps the most damning scene for her character is when Humbert declares that her (actually dead) mother may need a serious operation, and she replies, “‘Stop at that candy bar, will you’” (115). It’s at these moments in which readers can be most tempted to connect the dots, to agree that Dolores will never be anything more than a callous “ideal consumer” who is, at best, a victim of advertising and immersive narratives that undermine any innate good sense or mores she once possessed. However, Nabokov also offers evidence to suggest that this view comes mostly from Humbert’s fantasy based on Dolores Haze as a young girl, and not the author’s judgment of Dolores Haze’s life.

Aside from scattered moments like Humbert’s early Hollywood fantasy, two key parts of the book particularly signal that our view of Dolores, as formed by Humbert, needs to be radically reconfigured.

The first signal is Dolores’ confession to Humbert in the Enchanted Hunters hotel in chapter twenty-nine that she had sex with Charlie Holmes and Elizabeth Talbot at camp (135 – 37). Her confession comes as a shock to both Humbert, for he expects (and hopes) that Dolores has learned about sex from Hollywood. It also comes as a shock to Nabokov’s readers, for we might expect (and hope) from narrative convention that Dolores is sexually innocent. Her sexual innocence would make the story simple and satisfying: Dolores is not a juvenile delinquent who learned about sex from Hollywood’s immersive narratives. Instead, Nabokov complicates the story. What Dolores learned from her sexual experience at Lake Climax is that sex is a game that kids play in the woods, a game that presumably adults have
nothing to do with. But while Dolores is not a virgin, she’s also still naive and pretty innocent—especially compared to the true depravity she experiences at the hotel from Humbert. To recoil at Humbert’s defense for his rape, “I was not even her first lover” (135), and to recognize that a young girl could not have “seduced” Humbert as he claims, is an important step toward rejecting all sorts of simple stories about how fictions work. Dolores didn’t need Hollywood or any popular media to turn her into a juvenile delinquent. Life in 1950s America did that just fine. Dolores’s confession, and Humbert’s obvious manipulation of it, also suggests the wide gap between Humbert’s view of Dolores and reality within Nabokov’s narrative world.

The second signal in Lolita that we should reconfigure our perception of Dolores Haze is Humbert’s own confession in the final chapters of the novel. From chapter twenty-nine to the final chapter thirty-six, Humbert finally shows some understanding that Dolores was not just a character in his narrative, but a human being in his world. For example, in chapter thirty-two Humbert writes, “Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (287); and it is only in that same chapter when it occurs to him “that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me” (284). These confessions suggest, at least to some degree, that Humbert slowly comprehends the enormity and profundity of his crime in the process of writing his memoir from prison (Phelan, Living). Certainly it suggests that Humbert’s view of Dolores as “an ideal consumer” and seductress in Part One and most of Part Two, when his primary
motive for memoir writing was defense, requires considerable reconfiguration if we are to transition from Humbert’s narrative audience to Nabokov’s authorial audience.

It is tempting, at this point, to myopically focus on the questions of whether Humbert’s confession is actually heartfelt and to what extent it atones for his crimes against Dolores Haze. I pursue these important questions later in this chapter, but I delay their full answer here because a premature focus on such questions threatens to reinforce Humbert’s solipsism by emphasizing his role and importance in Nabokov’s novel. Even if Humbert does reach a limited acceptance of Dolores’ humanity toward the end of his life, he does so only after he has exhausted her uses as a thematic or synthetic character in his narrative. And in doing so, he has obscured our vision of Dolores Haze as a mimetic character in Nabokov’s novel. From this perspective, Michael Wood offers profound insight when he writes,

The actual ‘Lolita’ is the person we see Humbert can’t see, or can see only spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not because the reader makes her up or because she is just ‘there’ in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do. (25)

I would add too that Dolores is what a reading finds in order to read the novel as Nabokov intended. For, by placing Humbert’s confession at the end of his novel, Nabokov encourages us and even challenges us to reconfigure her character in a re-reading of the novel: Can we see the garden, twilight, and palace gate in Dolores hidden by Humbert’s narration, or have we reduced her to a working part of Humbert’s artfully crafted manuscript, “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male?” Have we joined Humbert in
imagining, even fantasizing, that she was suckered by Hollywood and other immersive narratives into becoming little more than a shallow prostitute?

2. The Difficulty of Finding Dolores: A Critical History

To recast Wood’s insight in this way, that is, to see Humbert’s confession as Nabokov’s challenge to his authorial audience, is partly a question of emphasis, admittedly. But even so it is an emphasis well needed, I argue, for in *Lolita’s* criticism there has been much discussion of the author’s ethical responsibility to us, and much less of our responsibility to him. Wayne Booth was one of the first critics to argue that “many, perhaps most readers” will misread Humbert’s unreliability because we tend to identify with character narrators, that “the laws of art are against [Nabokov]” (*Rhetoric* 390 – 91), and to imply that Nabokov’s narrative technique failed his readers in some way. Many have agreed. Yet, it was also Booth, later in his career, who wisely emphasized the ethical and interpretive benefits of working hard to understand the author’s perspective before casting judgment (*Company*). It’s that version of Booth, that “implied” Booth, whose perspective that I want to try out. And that perspective requires re-reading *Lolita* with Nabokov’s (and Wood’s) challenge in mind, looking past the “Lolita” first constructed by Humbert and then ironically the popular media, to catch a glimpse of Dolores Haze. A quick look at some of the novel’s critical history will how difficult that task can be, but it will also show that Nabokovian criticism has made considerable progress in recent years.

Some of the earliest and finest attempts at finding Dolores in *Lolita* and understanding the novel’s ethical stakes have come from feminist criticism, but their readings exhibit instructive weaknesses too. On one hand, Linda Kauffman and Elizabeth Patnode independently and compellingly argue that, for some readers, the act of reading a
first-person story whose subject includes a child’s molestation and rape may re-create real life trauma. For such readers, even re-reading *Lolita* might not function as a meaningful ethical or intellectual exercise, but rather pose a needless psychological risk. Also, both critics show the dangers of Humbert’s perspective, clarify why that perspective could be accepted by certain readers, and offer important insights into Dolores as a mimetic character and into the importance of re-configuring her character.

However, both essays also inadvertently show how difficult it is to find Dolores in *Lolita*. Both Kauffman and Patnoe incorrectly argue on very flimsy evidence that Dolores did not seduce Humbert and have sex with Charlie Holmes, even though Humbert reports that she told him she did and that, “She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults” (133). Such interpretations requires them to perform critical acrobatics like arguing that “the stark act” does not necessarily refer to the stark act of sex but that it could refer to heavy petting. I resist these misreadings because they reductively simplify what Nabokov intended to be a more complicated ethical and interpretive engagement. Dolores is both Humbert’s victim and an imperfect child. But, while ill-conceived, these interpretations do have their genesis in *Lolita*—in a way. Humbert’s crime is so repulsive that when we see Dolores’ character as a literary imitation of a complete and therefore naturally flawed person, that fact seems to almost attenuate our justly harsh judgments of Humbert. When searching for Dolores, it is tempting to reject as much of Humbert’s perspective as possible—even if it means misreading the text to do so.

Another way critics have tried to understand Nabokov’s view of Dolores is to see her only thematically, for example, only as a symbol for consumerism, Hollywood cinema, low-brow culture, or America. For example, Dana Brand associates Humbert with
aestheticism and Quilty with mass culture. Keith Brooks claims that Dolores looks through the lens of consumer culture, while Humbert looks through a literary one. In her recent *Nabokov at the Movies*, Barbara Wyllie at points seems to successfully resist this tactic, as when she correctly rejects the critical opposition between Humbert, who allegedly doesn’t like movies or low-brow popular culture, and Charlotte, Dolores, and Quilty, who allegedly do (129). As Wyllie points out, Humbert likes movies sometimes too, and it is too simplistic to connect Lolita and Quilty only with low-brow culture like Hollywood movies and Humbert only with high-brow culture like allusions to *Carmen*.

But ultimately Wyllie resorts to the same type of reductive reasoning when she claims that Nabokov uses film in his novel to reflect its “dominant preoccupation: the consequences—dramatic, thematic, perceptual—of juxtaposing two antithetical, conflicting entities, namely Europe and America, in the guise of HH [Humbert] and L [Dolores], respectively” (121). As Nabokov seems to suggest in “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” it is too reductive to make any character represent an culture (314). While critics like Brand and Wyllie helpfully draw attention to Dolores’ connections with Hollywood cinema and consumer culture, and while most literary characters do have a thematic function, these critics are too quick to simplify the thematic purposes of her character and to ignore the mimetic aspects of her character, the ways that Nabokov wanted her to represent her as a human being.

Two recent interpretations of *Lolita* by Graham Vickers (2008) and Susan Mooney (2008) point to fresh perspectives for finding Dolores in Nabokov’s novel. In contrast to Patnoe and Kauffman, Vickers does not try to re-write the novel’s fabula as he reconfigures Lolita’s character; rather, he helpfully collects essential facts about Dolores and summarizes
the chronological and factual account of Lolita’s life better than any previous account. This process helps him to sharply contrast Nabokov’s Dolores with the pop-culture account of the character as a seductress. Although Vickers is still far too ready to accept Humbert’s view of Dolores as the ultimate consumer, his factual approach draws our attention to “glimpses of Lolita’s expressed pain” and correctly notes that “just because Humbert rations them in his memoir does not mean that they might not have been more numerous” (19). Indeed, Vickers is too tentative in this regard, for through Humbert’s late confession Nabokov insists that such moments were more numerous. While Vickers helpfully focuses on the facts of Dolores’s life, Mooney’s chapter on Lolita cleverly looks for Dolores in the cultural artifacts that she consumes.

However, while Mooney provides an impressively nuanced overview of the many texts in which Dolores immerses herself, her account of artistic censorship in Lolita, focusing as she does on the artistic censoring of sexuality (her book’s title), doesn’t account for how Nabokov’s art engages with cultural discussions about censorship in postwar America. Partially as a result of that interest, I argue, Nabokov invites us to radically reconfigure our understanding of why and how Dolores immerses herself in narratives, and the effect Dolores’s immersions have upon Humbert before his death. Moreover, I will argue that finding Dolores in that way helps us better understand Nabokov’s contribution to American fiction and his use of Hollywood cinema.

3. Dolores’s Attraction to Immersive Narratives

When Humbert confesses that he has failed to see Dolores, that confession functions as Nabokov’s invitation to reconfigure our understanding of his novel, and especially Dolores’ role in it, because Lolita’s character narrator is unreliable in his
perceptions and ethics. To do so requires us to re-examine what we think we know about Dolores: that she is callous and uncaring, materially-driven and sexually precocious, and that she has learned greed and sexual precocity from Hollywood and popular culture. And to do that, we need to attend to details of Dolores’ character that Nabokov must indirectly communicate through Humbert’s narration, to attend to how she changes over time, to think about her circumstances from her perspective, and to look for more plausible explanations for her interest in immersive fictions than Humbert’s sexual fantasies and his artistic self-defense will allow.

Two useful starting places are Dolores’ interests in acting and her relationship to her mother, Charlotte Haze. We know little about Dolores’ aspirations for the future or how she perceives herself, but we receive similar reports from Humbert and Mrs. Haze early in the novel. At the end of chapter eight, Humbert claims to transcribe a page from “Who’s Who in the Limelight,” which includes the dramatist Clare Quilty’s biography. The page is filled with pertinent plot anticipations and Clare Quilty’s biography is particularly noteworthy because eventually he will help Dolores escape from Humbert and will have a sexual relationship with her too before she finally leaves him. In the next entry, Dolores is subtly linked with Quilty in an entry for the fictional stage actress “Dolores Quine” (32). Of that entry, Humbert retrospectively remarks, “How the look of my dear love’s name even affixed to some old hag of an actress, still makes me rock with helpless pain! Perhaps, she might have been an actress too” (32). At another point, Charlotte Haze makes a related claim that while Dolores sees herself “as a starlet, I [Mrs. Haze] see her as a sturdy, healthy, but decidedly homey kid. This, I guess, is at the root of our troubles” (65). Although Charlotte and Humbert agree on very little, these comments are similar in that they both suggest that
Hollywood cinema and culture are important to Dolores’ construction of her own identity. And because they agree on very little, those similar reports deserve special attention from Nabokov’s authorial audience. However, there are nuanced differences in their claims, too, so I begin with Charlotte’s claim about the root of her troubles with her daughter.

In retrospect, Charlotte’s attempt at pop psychology communicates Nabokov’s suggestion that what Dolores really wanted from her immersive fictions was an escape from what she considered her lousy life. The most flattering adjectives that Charlotte can attach to her daughter—sturdy, healthy, homey—might be used to describe a cow; or possibly, in misogynist America of the 1950s, a housewife. And while seemingly innocuous and even comedic at the time, Charlotte’s view of Dolores here anticipates Nakobov’s dark and damning revelation about Charlotte once she reads Humbert’s personal journal. After reading about Humbert molesting her daughter, Charlotte is not frightened or disgusted for her daughter—amazingly—but rather angry and disgusted with her. This shocking attitude is revealed when she says to Humbert, “I am leaving tonight. This is all yours. Only you’ll never, never see that miserable brat again” (96). This revelatory depth of Charlotte’s disregard and disdain for Dolores retrospectively places into a new and almost laudable light Dolores’s alleged self-view as a starlet and the images resembling Quilty and Humbert she attached to her bedroom walls. These revelations suggest that if we wonder why Dolores wanted to see herself as being as glamorous and beautiful as a starlet, or why she wanted to be thought of as desirable by a sophisticated man like Humbert or Quilty, we might consider these actions as her effort to escape Charlotte’s view of her. Charlotte had fantasies about her life with Humbert that involved Dolores playing a minor role, a cameo appearance. To
resist, Dolores makes herself the star in the immersive fictions she finds or creates with advertisements, movie posters, comics, and movies.

Later, what Humbert represents as Dolores’ seduction of him in the rape scene at The Enchanted Hunters hotel is actually her fairly innocent invitation to join her in what she understands as a childish sort of game. Humbert understand this imperfectly, or pretends to, but he reports the facts accurately. He reports that, due to her sexual experiences with Charlie Holmes and Elizabeth Talbot at Lake Climax, “She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults (133). The last thing that Dolores says before their first sex act is, “Okay . . . here is where we start” (133). While Humbert styles this as her mature agreement to start a sexual relationship with him (his adult’s fantasy world), his previous explanation suggests that what Dolores thought they were starting was a childish game she had played before (her childish fantasy world). Humbert’s heartbreaking description of his rape communicates otherwise, despite his best efforts to make it aesthetically pleasing through metaphor and images: “a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child” (134 – 35). Throughout the narration, Humbert will try to draw Dolores deeper into his adult fantasy while she searches for a truly childish fantasy free of adults like him.

Her search begins immediately. After Dolores is raped in the Enchanted Hunters hotel, the next morning Humbert disapprovingly describes her in the lobby as “deep in a lurid movie magazine” (139). No doubt the magazine is more lurid than Humbert’s beautiful metaphorical description of his rape in chapter 30. But Humbert forgets the fact that, after he had sex with the child three times at The Enchanted Hunters, he initiated the john-prostitute relationship he complains about throughout his narration when he gave her
money and specifically commanded her to buy a magazine. As Humbert ironically blames movies and popular culture for corrupting his own sex slave, “a fellow in tweeds” named Clare Quilty is surreptitiously looking at Dolores also. Meanwhile, Dolores looks at her magazine, now desperate to imagine herself as a starlet.

But what is Dolores actually reading in her “lurid movie magazine” as both her current rapist and her future “lecherous” pornographer gaze at her? According to Humbert’s free indirect presentation, she’s reads about how an actor met his wife and about Jill, “an energetic starlet who made her clothes and was a student of serious literature” (139). Trying for humorous irony, Humbert suggests to his narrative audience that “nothing could be more innocent” than Dolores reading about these subjects. But it is her experiences with Humbert, not supposedly “lurid” magazines with content like this, that have taken Dolores’ innocence.

In a masterpiece of understated artistic effects, Nabokov has Dolores remain quietly and passively immersed in the film magazine as they leave the hotel so that his authorial audience can fill that empty space of her represented mind with what they might feel in Dolores’ situation. Meanwhile, Nabokov uses Humbert’s grammar to indirectly suggest Dolores’ trauma with passive voice: “She read to the car. Still reading, she was driven to a so-called coffee shop a few blocks south” (139). Immediately after her rape, that is, she quietly tries to immerse herself in the fictional world of the movie magazine, even as Humbert (and Quilty) secretly hope the magazine will make her sexually available. When she finally lays aside her magazine, Humbert only notices that “a queer dullness had replaced her usual cheerfulness” (139). In the following days—and for very different reasons—Humbert and Dolores watched “all the movies in Lepingville” (139 – 140). Their very different
motivations for watching movies can be summarized as the difference between distraction and immersion. Barbara Wyllie has argued that Dolores is “both placated and distracted by her favorite movies” (222), but this only represents one of Humbert’s motivations for taking her to the movie—to distract her from his past and present offenses. For her part, Dolores watches movies to immerse herself in those worlds, and there’s a significant analytical difference in the distinction I’m making. Far from corrupting her real life, movies provide Dolores with a counter-narrative to re-construct her self-identity. And far from agreeing with cultural critics (and Humbert) that her interest in immersive fictions causes her rape, Nabokov shows that Dolores’ rape causes her to immerse herself in fictional worlds.

But while Dolores starts out as a mere consumer of immersive fictions, she also gains interest in becoming an actress so that she can better create them, and, as Humbert retrospectively suggests, that incipient interest has something to do with her growing need to deceive Humbert. Retrospectively, this fact is evident the chapter appearing immediately after Humbert calls her the ideal consumer, as a refutation of that idea. As Humbert revels in his ecstasy, she seems to him “indifferent”:

There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove. Her eyes would follow the adventures of her favorite strip characters: there was one well-drawn sloppy bobby-soxer, with high cheekbones and angular gestures, that I was not above enjoying myself; she studies the photographic results of head-on collisions; she never doubted the reality of place, time and circumstance alleged to match the publicity
pictures of naked-thighed beauties; and she was curiously fascinated by the photographs of local brides, some in full wedding apparel, holding bouquets and wearing glasses. (165)

From Humbert’s perspective, Dolores appears immune to trauma as he imposes his sexual will. But then again, Humbert’s perspective didn’t allow him to notice for a long time Dolores’ secret affair with Clare Quilty. Retrospectively, Nabokov’s authorial audience also reconfigures her discussion of the newspaper column “Let’s Explore Your Mind” that appears right after this passage, to realize that she was already secretly learning how to keep Quilty informed about her whereabouts. From the newspaper, she learns, “If . . . you don’t have a pencil . . . scratch the number somehow on the roadside” (165 – 66). In retrospect, then, we can see that Dolores was intellectually active and purposeful just when Humbert thought her most passive and indifferent. This suggests that Nabokov has a different purpose for her apparent indifference in the passage above.

In fact, all of Humbert’s alleged evidence of her indifference provides us with a limited but useful perspective into her consciousness. Humbert’s purpose for writing this passage in his manuscript is to expose her as a brat who isn’t seriously hurt by his “safely solipsizing” her into the sexual partner of his fantasies. But Nabokov uses this passage to disclose much more about her subjectivity as part of our reconfiguration of her character. Comic strips are one of the few outlets available to Lolita in her particular circumstances because she’s scared of the police and cannot yet run away. If she never doubts the time, place, and circumstances of publicity photos, it is probably because she partially exists in that place and time, which she has made heroic time in Bakhtin’s sense (Discourse); it is because she lives vicariously through the starlet whose thigh is naked like her own. The photographs
of car wrecks and the photographs of brides present desirable alternatives to Dolores’ present situation. Only in chapter thirty-two does Humbert gives us a hint of what Dolores must have felt during such moments when he happens to see, through a mirror and an open door, a haunting look of helplessness on Dolores’ face (283). This moment also represents another prompt offered by Nabokov in later chapters so that his authorial audience will reconfigure her character retrospectively.

Dolores’ immersion in Hollywood cinema is especially strong on their first road trip, though she’s eager to immerse herself in any fictional world superior to her own. Humbert writes that, [Dolores] at the time still had for the cinema a veritable passion (it was to decline into tepid condescension during her second high school year). We took in, voluptuously and indiscriminately, oh, I don’t know, one hundred and fifty or two hundred programs during that one year . . . Her favorite kinds were, in this order, musicals, underworlders, westerners. In the first, real singers and dancers had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence where-from death and truth were banned . . . The underworld was a world apart:...in a robust atmosphere of incompetent marksmanship, villains were chased through sewers and storehouses by pathologically fearless cops . . . Finally there was the mahogany landscape, the florid-faced, blue-eyed roughriders, the prim and pretty schoolteacher arriving in Roaring Gulch, the rearing horse, the spectacular stampede, the pistol thrust through the shivered windowpane, the stupendous fist fight, the crashing mountain of dusty old-fashioned furniture… (170)
As suggested by Humbert’s story about the “two harpies” who saw him nuzzling Dolores in a movie theatre and stopped him with their comments, the movies provided her some sexual safety. Similarly, the movies themselves provided her some psychological safety, even when Humbert joined her in watching them. Musicals provided a non-mimetic fictional world far different from Dolores’s real life, and “underworlders” and Westerns would typically represent the “B” film in a 1940s double feature. B films were made for less money, often by independent movie studios, and they often used more violence or sex to make up for their lack of star power or polish. As I have suggested earlier, postwar cultural critics imagined that innocent and naive teenagers like Dolores, with their “veritable passion” for movies, may become immersed in Hollywood’s narratives, especially its “B” movies, and reenact in their actual lives the debauchery and violence they see on screen. But here Nabokov suggests another story about how “mass media” works in Dolores’ life.

The musicals’ essentially grief-proof storyworld, the underworlders’ otherworldliness, and the westerns’ clear delineation between evil and good provided narrative worlds as distant from Dolores’ actuality as possible. It is likely that she is often miserable, whereas musicals are grief-proof; no one chases her villain, but he never gets away in gangster films due to the Production Code; and the contrast between good and evil is much more ambiguous in Dolores’ life than western life, for her “father” and “lover” is also her rapist and tormentor. In general, very little in her real life seems entertaining or exciting to her in what Humbert accurately calls “the demoralizing idleness in which she lived” (173).

At first, Dolores’ attraction to movies seems essentially trivial due to Humbert’s suggestion that her “veritable passion” for movies soon declines into “tepid condescension” (170). But she actually shifts from watching fictional worlds in movies to immersing herself
more deeply in fictional worlds with drama, by acting in them in the dramatic program at Beardsley College. Headmistress Pratt comically wants “our girls to communicate freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books” (177, original emphasis), but as I have argued, Dolores would rather live in fantasy worlds, and for good reason. Possibly Humbert is correct to imply a connection between her interest in Beardsley’s theatrical program and the possibility that “the poor fierce-eyed child had figured out that with a mere fifty dollars in her purse she might somehow reach Broadway or Hollywood” (185). He also suggests that “[b]y permitting Lolita to study acting I had, fond fool, suffered her to cultivate deceit” (229). What is certain is that Dolores’ participation in the dramatics program gave her time and some freedom from Humbert. And she used some of that time and freedom to build a friendship with Mona, but also to start a sexual relationship with Clare Quilty. Retrospectively we learn that she had made Clare Quilty’s acquaintance when she was young. At Beardsley, Dolores knew that Quilty would attend the play, *The Enchanted Hunters* (Pratt calls it “The Hunted Enchanters” [196]), and that Quilty might also attend rehearsals as well (196). These are all good reasons for why Dolores would be attracted to drama at Beardsley.

But there is no warrant for assuming that Dolores was attracted to dramatics because of Clare Quilty; actually, it is more probable that she was attracted to Clare Quilty because of dramatics. She knows Clare Quilty as a popular culture icon (recall his image on the advertisement in her room) and a famous playwright and movie scenario writer. And she would be particularly attracted to work with someone who created different narrative worlds, and to actually participate onstage in that world. Her interest in becoming an actress is one
reason for her attraction to Quilty; in contrast, all Humbert knows about the subject is that “she preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis” (323).

Moreover, Humbert’s terse synopsis of The Enchanted Hunters plot suggests that the play would be particularly attractive to a young girl who wishes to immerse herself in narrative worlds and believes that she can do so. The six hunters, Humbert recalls, “remembered their real lives only as dreams or nightmares from which little Diana had aroused them” and a seventh hunter “was a young Poet, and he insisted, much to Diana’s annoyance, that she and the entertainment provided (dancing nymphs, and elves, and monsters) were his, the Poet’s invention” (201). Dolores was to kiss Mona in the play “to enforce the play’s profound message, namely, that mirage and reality merge in love” (201). And although Humbert is joking here about the supposed profundity of the message, Nabokov’s novel builds upon this theme, as we shall see. Therefore, when we ask why Dolores fell in love with Clare Quilty in the first place, one compelling answer is that she learned about love-as-a-vehicle-of-fantasy from his play: it was a logical continuation of her search for alternate possible worlds. So we have an answer for Humbert when he puzzles why Dolores quit drama practice only a week before its “natural climax” (209), and when he asks himself, “Was it thanks to those theatricals that she had now outgrown her juvenile jaded airs and was so adorably keen to explore reality?” (208). In fact, Dolores has moved from creating narrative to trying to transform reality into narrative—through her affair with Quilty. Like her character in the play, she fell “in her turn under the spell of a vagabond poet” (200)—Clare Quilty. She also has hope of acting again, but this time in movies: we learn later that Quilty promised her a tryout for the Hollywood adaptation of his play, Golden Guts (276).
Dolores doesn’t just like acting: she’s also good at it, as we learn from multiple sources. A second-hand source exclaims, “you should have heard the author raving about her after the rehearsal” (208, original emphasis); Pratt tells Humbert, “she was such a perfect little nymph in the try-out”; Pratt confirms that Miss Gold, the conductor of the play group, is one of the few teachers who likes her (197); and we have already recalled Humbert speculating, “Perhaps, she might have been an actress too” (32); and Mona writes only half-jokingly about her “responsiveness, . . . relaxed vitality, . . . charm” as an actress (222). Furthermore, for a time Dolores fantasizes about acting well. Not only is it likely Dolores herself who spreads the rumor about her mother being a “celebrated actress” (189), but she is reading Baker’s *Dramatic Technique* on screenwriting (the chapter on dialogue) when Humbert meets her at school (198).

The reason that Dolores enjoys acting—and the reason she is good at it—is because she has become accustomed to immersing herself in narrative worlds, which has been her habit since Humbert began having sex with her. Quilty’s plays, including *The Enchanted Hunter*, create highly fantastic worlds, worlds that are quite distant from the ones in which Humbert dwells. But Dolores must completely immerse herself in her character in order to succeed as an actress. At least, this is the advice she reads in the chapter on dialogue in Baker’s book on screenwriting, *Dramatic Technique*. In that book, the author suggests that “only by representing a situation not for itself but as felt by the people involved can it be made fully interesting” (Baker 327). He also argues that good dialogue “must be kindled by feeling, made alive by the emotion of the speaker” (328). In general, Baker argues that good dramatic technique has always required a historical evolution away from abstraction and toward highly individualized character (328). Dramatic audiences want to feel that the
fictional character has an interiority and reality, and good writing and acting will make them feel that the actor on stage is a person in another world.

Baker’s advice on screen writing fits well with the approach to acting Dolores learned for *The Enchanted Hunter*, which was “a quite recent and technically original composition which had been produced for the first time only three or four months ago by a highbrow group in New York” (x). That approach was actually a method—The Method—which was a relatively new mode of acting that had started in Moscow by Konstantin Stanislavski and had been introduced to the New York Theatre world by Lee Strasburg at the Actor’s Studio in the 1940s. While there are now many different varieties of The Method, it revolutionized American acting because it taught actors to avoid stylized approaches to representing characters and to instead identify emotionally with them: basically, to enter a fictional world and to immerse themselves in a character’s consciousness. In chapter twenty we learn that Dolores practiced a version of the Method’s sensory memory exercises when Humbert quotes the mimeographed sheet he still keeps (230). From this perspective, it is evident that Humbert is at best partly correct when he declare that acting taught Dolores “deceit”: it helped her construct her own fictional worlds.

Method acting is also another way Dolores is connected with postwar Hollywood cinema. Although Marlon Brando wouldn’t give his famous Method performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* until 1951, Method acting had already come to Hollywood cinema when Lolita studied dramatics at Beardsley in 1948 – 1949. Furthermore, this new acting style complemented technological experiments like 3-D, Cinerama, Cinemascope, and widescreen by encouraging greater audience immersion in the narrative world (Dirks). Nabokov was very knowledgeable about cinema (Appel; Wyllie) and he almost certainly
would have been familiar with Method acting by the time he composed *Lolita*. It would make sense, then, that Dolores would be good at acting because she could draw upon the emotions and experiences that she repressed; she could draw upon her experiences in the so-called real world to further immerse herself in Quilty’s unrealistic and fantastic drama. 

Nabokov makes little evaluative or analytical distinction between drama and cinema in *Lolita*: both present opportunities for Dolores to enter fictional worlds, and for the author to thematize their function in her life and his novel.

Once Dolores realizes she’s dwelling in Humbert’s adult world, she tries to avoid such worlds as often as she can. Throughout Part II, she always tries to speak to a “normal” family or act like a “normal” teenager. When she can’t do that, she looks for fictional worlds as different from Humbert’s fantasy worlds as possible. That’s the subtext behind Humbert’s statement that he could not get her to read any literature because she didn’t want to waste her “vacation” (173). And that’s why Humbert reveals more than he knows when he says, “She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain revulsion…To the wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies” (166). From Dolores’ perspective, she would be a fool to prefer his so-called wonderland. Although Quilty’s plays are high-brow, they are also as exotic and fantastic as the corniest gangster film, musical, or western.

Ultimately, however, Dolores tries to become immersed in Quilty’s life more than his drama; she seriously tries out the main conceit of *The Enchanted Hunters*, that love can unite fantasy and reality. Because we must rely on Humbert’s narration, we miss Dolores’ transition from fantasy back to reality, and so it’s all the more shocking when we reunite
with her after Humbert’s years with Rita. Pregnant, 17 year-old Dolores (now taking her husband’s last name, Schiller) tells Humbert (and us) all we need to know, that she loved Quilty but he wanted to sexually objectify her and to join a group of girls and men and “tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures” (276). As Alfred Appel has previously noted, for much of the novel Humbert wants to entangle Dolores in his Annabelle and nymph narratives just as Quilty wants to entangle her in his pornography: both men dream of capturing “Lolita’s” cinematic image (see Dark Cinema). The pathos in chapter twenty-nine comes from the fact that Dolores reveals how she loved Quilty, “the only man she had ever been crazy about” (272), and Humbert reveals that only now does he love her as a human—not a literary character, a symbol, or a sex toy (278). Only in this late chapter does Humbert finally avoid solipsizing her into his narratives, calling her instead “brave Dolly Schiller” (285). There is also pathos in the fact that, although Dolores chose Dick Schiller and reality over her immersive worlds, her reality as a human being is not particularly comfortable. Still, after dwelling in the immersive worlds of first Humbert and Quilty, “real” life must have tasted fairly sweet to Dolores before her death.

4. Real Worlds and Reel Worlds

In his essay, “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” Nabokov makes his memorable remark that “reality” is “one of the few words that mean nothing without quotes” (312). The double quotes that Nabokov puts around “reality” creates typographic borders around it and makes it a specific act attributed to a speaker or writer rather than an abstract metaphysical category. After Nabokov’s authorial audience recognizes Humbert’s solipsism, we recognize his perspective on “reality” as a story designed to keep Dolores imprisoned as “Lolita” inside his fictional world. A reconfiguration of Dolores’ character requires us to see the narratives that
Clare Quilty forges with his plays and pornography; it also requires to rethink the immersive fictions that Dolores consumes, including Quilty’s drama, and Hollywood fictions. Now I will argue that in the closing chapters of the novel, Nabokov asks us to reconfigure not just literary characters, but also the relations that are possible between immersive worlds, on one hand, and “reality,” on the other hand. Drawing particularly on Hollywood cinema, I argue, Nabokov shows that those borders can be permeable and invites us into his own immersive fiction, in all its richness and fecundity.

Chapter twenty-nine begins Lolita’s denouement and marks an important division in the text in several ways. It is in chapter twenty-nine that Humbert and Nabokov’s narrative audience meet Dolores after a long absence from experiencing Humbert’s life and from the narrative discourse. Dolores appears physically changed, pregnant, with “ruined looks,” and so finally shatters Humbert’s resilient myth of her as “Lolita” (277). The tone that Humbert strikes in his remarks on this older Dolores, elegiac, sad, even quasi-tragic, is not a tone that he has sounded before. Also in this chapter, the novel’s great plot tension is resolved: Humbert gives us the final hints to what “the astute reader has guessed long ago”—that Clare Quilty helped Dolores escape Humbert (272). Finally, Dolores and Nabokov cast a final judgment on Humbert when she says that she would rather go back to Clare Quilty than with Humbert (279). All these revelations and changes mark the denouement’s beginning because they start the final storyworld events: Humbert’s search for Quilty. They also quickly bring about a late change in narrating-Humbert’s rhetoric to his narrative audience: no longer interested in proclaiming his complete innocence, our narrator now writes his memoir for the “melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” by chapter thirty-one (283).
But as he writes and reflects about the scene at Coalmont, Humbert also begins using articulate art to create a different aesthetic response to Dolores, one which is at once more touching, ambitious, and outright wicked than his previous efforts. After writing about Coalmont, that is, narrating-Humbert finally realizes that he will never fully immerse Dolores in his fictional world. So he tries to join hers. Nabokov’s first hint of this fact appears as Humbert writes about leaving the Schiller house in chapter thirty. He describes how the outline of a restaurant sign, a large coffee-pot, kept bursting, every full second or so, into emerald life, and every time it went out, pink letters saying Fine Foods relayed it, but the pot could still be made out as a latent shadow teasing the eye before its next emerald resurrection. We made shadow graphs.

(282)
The shadows and x-ray images ("shadow graphs") evoke the bleak, mysterious atmosphere of a film noir, as if Humbert has entered a filmic world. It also subtly evokes other possible worlds, different worlds next to or parallel to our own. Like other doubles in Lolita, including Quilty/Humbert and Annabelle/Lolita, the “latent shadow” evokes a trace, a shadow world or presence that is barely visible. Placed at the beginning of the denouement, this image suggests that Nabokov will close his novel by having Humbert dwell in those shadow worlds. Soon to die of heart failure (“coronary thrombosis”), our narrator has gone insane, but his particular mode of insanity will lead him to the fictional worlds in which young Dolores Haze spent her darkest moments.

Shadow worlds are once again evoked at the remarkable conclusion of chapter thirty-three, this time more explicitly. As he drives toward the appropriately-named Grimm Road,
Humbert glimpses a drive-in movie in a scene Nabokov uses to suggest a closer connection between “reality” and cinematic worlds which rely on shadow for their projection:

In a selenian glow, truly magical in its contrast with the moonless and massive night, on a gigantic screen slanting away among dark drowsy fields, a thin phantom raised a gun, both he and his arm reduced to a tremulous dishwater by the oblique angle of that receding world, and the next moment a row of trees shut off the gesticulation. (293)

This passage is an excellent example of Vladimir Alexandrov’s insight that throughout Nabokov’s oeuvre, “other worlds abound . . . There are past worlds, alternative worlds, posterities, travestied histories, novels within novels, shades of shades, versions of the hereafter” (qtd. in Connolly 209). Of course, the “thin phantom” foreshadows Humbert’s coming murder of Quilty. But it also provides Nabokov’s authorial audience with a momentary glimpse of another “receding world,” just as “real” or fictional as the earlier ones created by Humbert. This passage appears just before Humbert travels to Pavor Manor to confront Clare Quilty, and helps prepare Nabokov’s authorial audience to see other fictional worlds at the novel’s closing.

Alfred Appel and Barbara Wyllie have both offered many insights about Lolita’s allusions to specific films and film genres, which helpfully highlights the crucial role of Hollywood cinema in the novel, and particularly the novel’s closing. In terms of the novel as a whole, both critics helpfully note that Humbert’s murder of Quilty completes the film noir plot that began when Humbert started to determine Quilty’s identity and chase him. Like a film noir detective, they say, Humbert searches for clues in a bleak film noir world complete with now-familiar clichés like street lights reflected off of puddles, but also, and more
substantially, the “intrusive, destructive forces of fate in film noir” symbolized by McFate (Wyllie 153; 28). There is plenty of evidence of McFate’s intrusive hand in Nabokov’s destructive plot. For example, McFate is that “agent of fate” responsible for Frederick killing Charlotte Haze by car accident—a very literal *deus ex machina* that makes Dolores dependent upon Humbert and initiates their travels across America (102). McFate is also responsible for the “freak mechanical flaw” that causes Humbert’s coins to come “tumbling back” to him with “a hitting-the-jackpot clatter” after he calls Dolores at camp (107 – 108), and for the fact that Humbert and Dolores have sex at a hotel that shares the same name as Quilty’s play. Appel also influentially suggests that McFate is just one of Nabokov’s strategies of “involution,” metafictional strategies that function as a game that Nabokov plays with his authorial audience (“Preface”). But these otherwise helpful explanations ignore what Humbert is trying to accomplish as he finishes composing his memoir, a point that will later have implications for Nabokov’s authorial audience as well. After seeing Dolores Schiller—not Lolita—in Coalmont, Humbert will uses the conclusion of his memoir to write himself into the immersive fictions that Dolores used to escape him as a child: the fantastic worlds of 1940s genre movies.

It is Humbert, after all, who alludes to film as he writes about killing Clare Quilty. For example, Humbert notices that Clare Quilty imitates “the underworld numbskull of movies,” (297) the underworld movies that were “a world apart” and that Dolores liked so much (170). Quilty notes that he has made “private movies out of ‘Justine’ and other eighteenth-century sexcapades” and claims, “I’m the author of fifty-two successful scenarios” (298). But it is Humbert who emphasizes that Quilty is his double at the novel’s end: “I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299) and
Humbert who asks his elderly readers to see that the scene recalls “the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood” (299). At this point, all of Nabokov’s readers should also recall the Westerns of Dolores’ “childhood.” Humbert characterizes the noises emitting from Quilty’s nostrils as “soundtrack snorts” (302), and in the surreal death scene Humbert claims he “may have lost contact with reality for a second or two” (304). As he leaves the murder scene, he drives on the opposite side of the road in an effort to overcome “basic physical laws” (306). If Quilty’s death represented for Humbert “the end of the ingenious play staged for [him] by Quilty” (305) then it is also the beginning and end of Humbert’s screenplay for Dolores, or at least the end of the screenplay he writes for himself (305). At one time, Dolores wanted to act in Quilty’s fictional world; in response, Humbert writes himself an acting part in one of her movies, as part of his memoir, right before he died.

This also gives a special resonance to his memoir’s closing sentences. Finally, at the end of his memoir, Humbert reveals that in “mid-composition” he realized that he could not publish his memoir because it would further hurt Dolores—a statement complicated by the fact that he alternately calls her “living Lolita” and “Dolores Schiller” (308). He closes by reveling in the fictional worlds he created as an author and shared in as an actor:

And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art.

And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (309)

It is doubtful that Dolores Schiller would want to spend her immortality with Humbert Humbert any more than she wanted to spend her mortal life with him. And Humbert’s final
words, “my Lolita,” suggests that two months in jail haven’t rid Humbert of his possessiveness and selfishness. But to the extent that Humbert writes himself into Dolores’ immersive worlds at the end of his manuscript, this act suggests how desperate he is to share any kind of immortality with Lolita. Moreover, while Humbert ultimately fails to join his life to Lolita’s narratives, Nabokov has given us the tools to reconfigure her life as a mimetic being, to reach a significantly greater ethical understanding of her character than the one achieved by Humbert, even at the end of his life.

In his essay “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” Nabokov writes about the “initial shiver of inspiration” for Lolita, “a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (311). We will never know if, at some stage of novelistic composition, the biographical Nabokov ever thought about another cinematic ape—the eponymous King Kong (1933). But when John Ray Jr. refers to Humbert’s name as a mask through which “two hypnotic eyes seem to glow” (3) it is difficult not to recall King Kong’s burning eyes at the start of the film, when he first takes Fay Wray. Coincidentally, one American (and cinematic) novelist who did find those burning eyes artistically inspirational was Thomas Pynchon, Nabokov’s former student at Cornell (Gravity’s Rainbow 250), whose Gravity’s Rainbow 1973 alludes to King Kong frequently throughout the novel before it ends with a missile striking the Los Angeles Orpheus movie theatre. But if it was meant as a cinematic allusion, Nabokov managed once again to use cinema to characterize Humbert as an animal desperate to immerse himself in Dolores’ movies, the only immortality that Nabokov would let him find.
Of course, in the same essay Nabokov also argues that *Lolita* has no purpose and certainly no didactic message, and that the America he has “invented” has no relation to the real America. Rather, says Nabokov, his only interest is in creating “aesthetic bliss”: “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314 – 15). It is doubtless for this reason that so few literary critics have sought to situate his work in its historical context. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the biographical Nabokov meant what he said, as he offered versions of these same ideas to students in his literature courses at Cornell and created fantastic Zemblan and Antiterrar fictional worlds in *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.

But putting aside the obvious point that Nabokov’s non-didactic impulses still allowed him to write an essay on how (not) to read *Lolita*, it should be noted his claims in the essay are also a product of his time: the residual high modernist moment (“late modernism”) in postwar America associated with New Critics. The New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s famously saw works of fiction as autonomous, worlds of their own that need to be understood by their own internal logic (Genter 2011). But if the New Critics saw worlds, Nabokov saw fictional universes: contiguous fictional worlds that included movie-worlds and comic-worlds. In *Lolita* we see entire fictional worlds only in passing, as when Humbert drives past the drive-in theatre, as when Quilty sings as though he’s in a musical, and especially as when Dolores immerses herself in Hollywood fictions.

At first this can be difficult to conceptualize because literary critics, including narrative theorists, usually conceptualize the representation of fictions (like Dolores’ movie) within another fiction (like Humbert’s memoir) with schemas like Russian dolls or Chinese boxes that embed one fiction inside the other (Richardson). Or more recently, they organize
fictions on a vertical hierarchy, with the supposed fiction-in-a-fiction higher or lower than the original fiction. But such critical schemas are only useful if they teach us something about an author’s ontological imagination. As becomes clearer with his later novels like *Pale Fire* or *Ada*, Nabokov imagines contiguous fictional worlds that exist metonymically, on what structuralists once called the horizontal axis. That is, no particular world seems to receive special ontological privilege—it’s just that some worlds are shown, some hidden, some exist at an “oblique angle” from our own. And some worlds we need to work to find—like those of a little girl named Dolores Haze. This is probably why Nabokov’s first title for *Lolita* was *The Anthemion*, “which is the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters, but nobody liked it” (Appel 352). As a working title, “The Anthemion” captures Nabokov’s baroque and daring vision of how “other worlds abound” in *Lolita*. The metaphor of a movie theatre like the ones Humbert and Dolores frequent would also work, as long as it’s understood that they can jump into the screen and exist alongside those characters, as in Woody Allen’s *Purple Rose of Cairo*.

This capacious artistic imagination partly explains why Vladimir Nabokov took a sympathetic view of Hollywood cinema in *Lolita* in a way that F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West could not or would not, but only partly. It is challenging to compare the three novelists because the Nabokov was so much more advanced in his literary career, but also as a cinematic novelist. F. Scott Fitzgerald was just a young man in his twenties when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*, and his unfinished novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon* suggests that his engagement with cinema changed considerably as he matured as an artist and worked in a different American media environment. Nathanael West tragically died a few years after he published *The Day of the Locust* in a car accident—on the way to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s funeral.
In contrast, the novelist formerly known as Sirin was a highly experienced, highly accomplished novelist before he wrote the first word of *Lolita*. More importantly, as the excellent scholarship of Alfred Appel Jr. and Barbara Wyllie has persuasively shown, Nabokov was already an accomplished cinematic novelist. For example, he had already offered his own rather dismissive treatment of cinema in his much earlier *Laughter in the Dark*, but he had also already engaged with cinematic techniques in his short story, “The Assistant Producer.” So when he set out to “invent America” for the first time, it would make sense that he would turn, really for the first time, from European cinema to Hollywood cinema.

While his biographers describe the biographical Nabokov as a film buff when he was a younger novelist writing in Germany (see Appel; Boyd), there is no particular reason to think that he was particularly familiar with the history of the American cinematic novel, the New Novelists in France, or the recent history of Hollywood cinema when he wrote *Lolita*. It is certainly possible that Nabokov noticed the changes that Hollywood made to win back customers from television and other emerging media, including wide screens, color, improved sound technology, and experiments with 3-D. He may have noticed that the films of the postwar years were particularly escapist in comparison to the war years, and that, as film historian Murray Pomerance puts it, “the gaudy, intoxicating culture of the screen was perhaps never so removed from the pressures and concerns of everyday life as during this decade [the 1950s]” (2). Certainly these observations may have encouraged him to think more about the immersive fictions in which young Americans like Dolores immersed themselves.

But what is certain is that the version of Hollywood cinema that Nabokov encountered when he composed *Lolita* from 1948 – 53 was strikingly different than the one
that Nathanael West would have encountered in 1939. One measure of that difference is the proliferation of “mass media” in *Lolita*—the comics, movie magazines, popular drama, and so forth—as compared to the primary focus on Hollywood cinema in *The Day of the Locust*. A better measure is the degree to which Nabokov rejected cultural anxieties about immersive fiction, and accepted Hollywood fictions as his own. The threat of censorship and the public outcry against immersive fictions indirectly affected Hollywood cinema, but it also indirectly affected formally-ambitious novelists like Nabokov. Consequently, even as John Ray Jr. connects *Lolita* to censored high-art novels like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Nabokov also encourages readers to dive Alice-like into the immersive worlds of Hollywood and comics in order to read ethically and appreciate the reel worlds that became a characteristic of future postmodern novels (McHale 128 – 130).
References


Zimmer, Dieter E. with additions by Jeff Edmunds. A Biography of Criticism.

http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/biblol.htm, Online.
1 I am grateful to the authors of the following bibliographies on Lolita criticism: Clark; Juliar; Jones; Zimmer. For early reviews of Lolita, see Page.

2 Bolter and Grussin famously argue that all media enact the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy: that is, they both erase a consumer’s sense of a fictional world being mediated (“immediacy”), and they make consumers aware of the media they are consuming (“hypermediacy”). Marie-Laure Ryan offers a similar binary, one between immersion and interactivity, where immersion is understood as the consumer’s sense that they are living inside a fictional world, “a bodily projection.” Such formulations offer new takes on Marshall McLuhan’s earlier distinction between cool media and hot media, which distinguish among types of media depending upon whether they offer a consumer much information but little consumer participation (hot media) or little information and much more consumer participation (cold media).

3 See Gilbert regarding the cultural concern about juvenile delinquency and the important role that mass media played.

4 Gilbert explains that Wertham’s argument was anticipated and echoed in the late 1940s and early 1950s in A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s. As Gilbert explains, Wertham’s argument was well received because “he spoke to the already existing fears about the effects of mass media on children. His success as an advocate was based upon the degree to which he articulated ideas already present” (9)

5 Composing Lolita from 1949 – 1953, the biographical Nabokov anticipated the reaction Lolita would receive as a potentially pornographic novel, as evidenced by his afterword. For a long time, he anticipated publishing the manuscript anonymously (Appel).

6 Alfred Appel provides excellent notes in The Annotated Lolita, to which I’m indebted.
Distinctions between high-brow, middle-brow, and low-brow were made in a 1949 issue of *Life* magazine, but the basic idea is nothing new: even basic literacy has historically represented certain economic and cultural hierarchies.

See Vickers for the best overview of “Lolita” and lolitas in popular culture.

I’m indebted to Phelan (*Worlds; Living*) for this reading. For example, Phelan argues that “the chief reason why Humbert cannot be exonerated is that although Lolita takes the initiative, she is really rather naïve and innocent about sex” (*Worlds* 164).

Throughout this chapter, I’m indebted to Phelan’s argument that Humbert changes as a result of writing his memoir and his discussion of Humbert’s purposes for writing the memoir (*Living*). See also Tamir-Ghez for good discussion of Humbert’s rhetorical ploys.

See Phelan (*Reading*) on mimetic, thematic, and synthetic aspects of literary character.

In an early review of *Lolita*, Robertson Davies claimed Lolita’s central theme “is not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child” (Boyd 230).

For an overview of critics who have argued that Humbert is unreliable in his facts, and for a persuasive rejection of that claim, see Boyd. As discussed, Patnoe and Kauffman find Humbert unreliable in his facts about Dolores’ confession of sexual experience, but their claims are not persuasive. Character narrators can be unreliable in their facts, perceptions, and ethics (Phelan, *Living*).

Charlotte’s interest in pop psychology is likely rooted in the popularity of orthodox Freudian psychology in 1950s America (Genter). Nabokov made his disdain for Freud’s work well known.
Appel (Dark Cinema and “Introduction”) is very good on comics in Lolita. See Harvey on comics history at this time and note that McCloud argues that comics are particularly immersive.

“Movie theatres regularly featured double bills, in which an “A,” or big-budget film, would be accompanied by a “B,” or lower-budget film, in addition to a cartoon, a newsreel, a travelogue, some previews of coming attractions, and perhaps a serial chapter or two” (Dixon 14). See Pomerace 1 – 10 on 1950s immersive cinema.

For good discussion of King Kong in Gravity's Rainbow, also see the entry in Weisenburger (402).

Appel quotes from the 1966 version of Nabokov’s experimental autobiography, Speak Memory.
Chapter 4: Filmic “Belatedness” in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Film historian David Bordwell has recently used “belatedness” to describe a characteristic common to many American films made after 1960. His catchall term describes modern filmmakers’ relative interest in film history, including their allusions to previous films and film genres—allusions that may be lost on some audiences but are enjoyed by others. Prior to 1960, the films of Classical Hollywood Cinema were less likely to make such allusions, in part because they were mostly produced and marketed for a general audience that included audiences of all ages, demographics, and with different levels of familiarity with film history.¹ Modern filmmakers are more likely to engage film history, for historical reasons that included 1960s changes in Hollywood’s audience demographics, its rating system, and its marketing strategies. While Bordwell focuses on contemporary film, his explanation of belatedness suggests that Orson Welles’ anachronistic use of RKO’s newsreels in *Citizen Kane* (1939) was more exceptional in 1939 than, say, Roman Polanski’s revisions of the classic 1940s film noir genre in *Chinatown* (1974), the parody of the western genre in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), or the allusions to Japanese samurai films in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003).

This sense of filmic belatedness, of consciously reworking film history, also describes a trend in the history of the American cinematic novel that is exemplified by Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). Linda Hutcheon compelling argues that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one of many examples of the tendency of post-1945 fiction to work as
“historiographic metafiction,” that is, fiction that revises simplistic and unified versions of historical “fact.” But I use “belatedness” to emphasize an important and underappreciated facet of *Gravity’s Rainbow* revision of history, its revision of film history. Certainly, the character of Harry Greener in *The Day of the Locust* partly represents cinema’s vaudeville past, just as Mr. McKee recalls Hollywood’s use of nineteenth century Pictorial photography. However, American cinematic novelists like Fitzgerald, West, and Nabokov generally focused on contemporary cinema, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* has a strong sense of filmic belatedness unlike any cinematic novel before it. Like the famous film directors who were his contemporaries, Pynchon represented film history to revisit the cultural role of the movie director, the potential of cinema as a countercultural art form, and to imply his own superiority as a cultural critic.

1. Gerhardt von Göll and the Movie Director as Auteur

*Gravity’s Rainbow* concludes by provocatively connecting the place and time of its told with its telling. Until the novel’s closing chapter, Pynchon largely focuses on representing Tyrone Slothrop and other characters as they live in Western Europe during and immediately after World War II. However, the novel’s conclusion begins with the launch of the V-2 rocket numbered 0000 from the Luneburg Heath on Easter weekend in 1945—with the boy named Gottfried inside it. That rocket will finally descend upon the Orpheus movie theatre in a dystopic Los Angeles in the early 1970s in the novel’s final chapter. Pynchon uses the path of the rocket through space and time to suggest a thematic connection between the events he sets in postwar Germany and the contemporary American culture of 1973. The novel details how international military-industrial cartels and unknown forces threaten our individual freedoms and our very lives through their desire for domination and
their ideological reliance on elitist thinking, inflexible scientific explanations, and cause-and-effect logic. With the rocket’s path, Pynchon suggests that he is also interested in indirectly representing the ideological foundations of 1970s American culture.

Because Gravity’s Rainbow engages cinema so explicitly at the level of theme and narrative technique, it has received a great deal of commentary as a cinematic novel. Critics have argued that it works as a cinematic novel in “at least seven different ways” (Clerc 23), that it presents itself as a kind of film (Simmon), and that Pynchon is a cinematic writer in content, technique, “overt imitation,” and inferred analogy (Larrson). Similar observations have been made often enough that they prompted Molly Hite to suggest in passing—in 1981—that perhaps too much has been made of the novel’s engagement with cinema. But despite all this, even today the novel’s representation of cinema hasn’t been crosscut with American film history at the time that Pynchon wrote the novel: the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is especially curious because Pynchon’s closing, which insists upon a strong thematic connection between the past and the present, parallels a pattern initiated by the American film directors who were Pynchon’s contemporaries.

The period of American film history often called “New Hollywood” was exciting, in part, due to the new cultural relevance of film directors. From about 1967 to the mid-1970s, from Bonnie and Clyde (1967) until Jaws renewed the blockbuster model in 1975, there was a new buzz about and within “New” Hollywood cinema. Some of that buzz came from the American film directors and American moviegoers who were inspired by the formally-ambitious “art house” films that were regularly appearing in select American theatre by the 1960s, films like Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon and Michelangelo Antonioni’s L’Avventura which openly toyed with filmic conventions regarding plot, narration, and cinematography
Among these influences, the writings and films of the French New Wave directors from 1960 - 1968, and especially Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless (1960), were often most influential (Cook 11 – 12). Breathless helped many Americans to perceive the films of Classical Hollywood Cinema differently through its allusions to 1940s American films, especially focusing on the “B” films that would have received second billing in a 1940s double-feature. Breathless encouraged the belatedness of later American films because it paid homage to these films through its allusions to Humphrey Bogart and 1940s American films, even as it revised and even rejected Classical Hollywood conventions through its weak narrativity, lack of continuity editing, mixing of film genres, and lack of plot closure.

Moreover, the critical writings of French New Wave directors like Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard introduced two key ideas that would become popularized in American culture, largely through the essays and book of the American film critic Andrew Sarris: that Classical Hollywood Cinema produced films that Americans themselves may have underestimated, and that some formally-ambitious film directors could be thought of as “auteurs” (Sarris; see King 85 - 115). With his explanation of “auteurs,” Sarris argued that, like literary authors, some movie directors have an identifiable style developed over their careers. He argues that while many people collaborate to make a film, in many cases we could usefully think about famous film directors as providing a film’s primary artistic vision, agency, and excellence. In The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929 – 1968, Sarris listed and evaluated great directors like Fritz Lang and Orson Welles, but also some of the older American film directors still working in 1960s Hollywood, directors like Howard Hawkes and John Ford. A combination of the recent popularity of foreign films and film festivals in American cinematic culture (Monaco 54 – 55), the French New Wave influence,
the late recognition of the life’s work of older American directors like Hawkes and Ford, and the controversial work of Andrew Sarris all combined to thrust the “director” into the spotlight in American culture.

Even as Sarris encouraged American culture to reevaluate film directors as individual artistic artists rather than mere cogs in the studio system wheel, economic challenges within the studio system similarly encouraged studio executives to re-evaluate their economic relations with some new directors (Belton 290). While the film industry as a whole suffered economic downturn in the 1960s as a “direct result” of overproduction, young film directors offered the studios economic hope (Cook 13). Films like Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962); Michael Nichols’ *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967); Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); and Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969) and Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) were made cheaply and were extremely profitable. They were also made by inexperienced film directors, popularized by the new “youth market,” and dealt with controversial themes like pedophilia, divorce, youthful rebellion, and marital affairs.

While Penn’s influential *Bonnie and Clyde* alludes directly to the French New Wave (Lewis 12), and *The Graduate* was directly influenced by European cinema (Cook 12), however, most late 1960s New Hollywood films did not have those direct connections. What they had was a new attitude toward film and film history—and box office sales. Given the film industry’s financial crisis from 1969 – 1971, movie studios began to give more artistic independence and financial resources to young film directors in the early 1970s in the hope of repeating these successes. And like Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, subsequent films by young directors like Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H*, Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971), George Lucas’s *American Graffiti* (1971) often evidenced belatedness because their
directors were either former film critics (Bogdanovich), formally-ambitious filmmakers who worked in multiple genres (Altman), or were educated in film schools (Lucas).

Finally, this newer generation of film directors also benefited from changes in the film rating system, formerly known as The Production Code. These changes were another result of the newly emergent youth market for films. As film historian Geoff King explains, The audience for Hollywood films was generally becoming younger, more educated and in some cases more radical in its views than that typical of the studio era. If some films of the 1960s and 1970s foregrounded aspects of the youthful counterculture, in other words, this was not simply a reflection of social context. It was also part of a deliberate audience-targeting strategy. The Production Code began to creak under a variety of strains. (30)

While the explosive content of films like *Lolita* (1962) and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) shows how much the industry eased its censorship practices by the mid-1960s, in 1968 the industry adopted a modern rating system resembling the current one, which allowed the studios to capture even more of the youth market. Previously Classical Hollywood cinema had been targeted for a broad audience. Now film directors could target “adult” themes and representations—and allude to film history for a more tightly defined audience—as long as they accepted restrictions on their potential audience. The new ratings system, the financial support of studios, the emergence of film schools, and the directors’ early successes meant that when Thomas Pynchon published *Gravity’s Rainbow* in 1973, young film directors and audiences were rethinking American cinema’s past and its future.

It is in these contexts, I suggest, that we need to situate Pynchon’s characterization of the enigmatic German filmmaker named Gerhardt von Göll. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, von
Göll was a well-respected studio filmmaker in Weimar and Nazi Germany before and during World War II, and he was associated with the dominant national German studio, UFA. We learn about this part of his biography in bits and pieces throughout the novel. But his story becomes more complicated later. By the time of the Potsdam Conference in postwar Germany, von Göll has fully transformed into a cagey and powerful black marketeer and an independent filmmaker. The Potsdam Conference takes on symbolic significance in Gravity's Rainbow since it was at this momentous meeting that Allied leaders met to decide how Germany would be punished and what the national boundaries of postwar Europe. So while Pynchon will use Gerhardt von Göll’s studio career to reflect on the film history of Nazi Germany, and especially auteurist film directors, von Göll’s independent filmmaking in the Occupied Zone of Germany and elsewhere comes to represent Pynchon’s reflections upon the roles of film directors in the modern world.

To reflect upon the film history of Nazi Germany and its Ufa production company, Thomas Pynchon relied heavily upon Sigmund Kracauer’s famous film history, From Caligari to Hitler (1947) (Larsson, Weisenbuger). In this decision as in many others, the biographical Pynchon was both an idiosyncratic literary author and a contemporary of American film directors who also practiced belatedness. As early as his first novel, V., the author had developed his idiosyncratic method of weaving historical facts seamlessly into his fictional narrative so that characters or situations that seemed to be obviously fictional, often paralleled, modified, or otherwise drew upon historical facts. Familiar examples in Gravity’s Rainbow include the stories of the Herero tribe from Southwest Africa, the German military-industrial cartel that included IG Farben, to a precise use of Argentine slang and details relating to German V-2 rockets. This is part of the novel’s “postmodernist revisionist history”
McHale 96) and its practice of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 59). With regard to his interest in film history and his use of Kracauer, however, Pynchon was also the contemporary of film directors from the French New Wave and New Hollywood. Just as American film directors trained in film school began to emerge in American cinema, and just as “the study of film began to grow as a distinct academic discipline” in the 1960s (King 88; see also Monaco 18), Pynchon drew on film history in his fictional representation.

But while belatedness in Hollywood films and 1960s American cinematic culture often took the forms of homage, imitation, and juxtaposition, Pynchon revised Kracauer’s already fairly damning history of Nazi German films to represent the culpability and artistic weaknesses of German film directors through von Göll. In episode 1.14 we meet this character for the first time, and Pynchon’s external narrator refers to him as:

once an intimate and still the equal of Lang, Pabst, Lubitsch, more lately meshed in with the affairs of any number of exile governments, fluctuations in currencies, the establishment and disestablishment of an astonishing network of market operations winking on, winking off across the embattled continent. (114)

This passage encourages us to thematically connect von Göll with famous German filmmakers, and the connection works both ways. Just as von Göll’s character gains artistic credibility through his association with these filmmakers, representations of von Göll come to represent Pynchon’s revisionist take on these directors who existed in history. But while Pynchon depends mostly upon Kracauer’s discussion of Fritz Lang to craft his literary film director, we will see that Pynchon tweaks his fictional portrayal so that German film directors are judged even more harshly in Gravity’s Rainbow than they are in Kracauer.
For example, we learn that in his wartime years Gerhardt von Göll directed a film that angered the Nazis (*The Mad Kingdom*), an effect which he didn't intend, and then made a film that mollified them (*Good Society*) (401). This sequence parallels Kracauer’s discussion of Fritz Lang’s transition from *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse* to *Metropolis* (164). However, Kracauer considers it possible that Fritz Lang intended his film as a Nazi critique (164), and this would make Lang appear sympathetic historically. Compare this to the reasons that von Göll makes his first film:

Von Göll had dreamed of making a film about Ludwig II. It nearly got him blacklisted. The rage then was all for Frederick. It was considered unpatriotic to say that a German ruler could also be considered a madman. But the gold, the mirrors, the miles of Baroque ornament drove himself a little daft. Especially those long corridors . . . . ‘Corridor metaphysics,’ is what the French call this condition. Oldtime corridor hepcats will chuckle fondly at descriptions of von Göll, long after running out of film, still dollying with a boobish smile on his face down the golden vistas. Even on orthochromatic stock, the warmth of it survived in black and white, though the film was never released, of course. (401)

Here the literal and metaphoric significance of “golden vistas” nicely combines the suggestions that von Göll was attracted to make the film by the material wealth of the castle in which he filmed it, but also by the way that the shots of the castle showed on camera. Gerhardt von Göll is not an agent for social critique, but a gifted filmmaker who wasted his skills. This is why Charles Clerc is mistaken when he suggests that “[von Göll] showed integrity and independence when he attempted to make the movie *Das Wütend Reich* [Mad
“Kin
gdom!” (121). Actually, Pynchon rewrites Kracauer’s film history to suggest that greed and pride were the primary motivations for influential German “auteurs” like Fritz Lang.

Furthermore, Pynchon adds a stinging moral judgment of wartime German filmmakers that does not appear in Kracauer’s film history. Gerhardt von Göll is directly implicated in sadomasochism through the production of his most famous film, Alpdrücken, which stars the actress Greta Erdmann. First, it was the first of “dozens of vaguely pornographic horror movies” (400) that von Göll produced with Greta Erdmann as his lead. Second, as the film was being made, von Göll simply watched and left the film rolling as many anonymous men joined Greta and her co-star and lover Max Schlepzing in a violent orgy on set. Third, Greta Erdman will reproduce that “scene” many years later by having sadomasochistic sex with Tyrone Slothrop on the same old movie set in Neubabelsberg (episode 3.10). Fourth, the rocket technician Franz Pökler will view Alpdrücken and his sadomasochistic fantasy of “fucking her into some submission” (404) will result in his sex with Leni and the birth of their child, Ilse, “his movie child.” Fifth, Greta Erdmann becomes pregnant with Bianca, who also repeats sadomasochistic acts with Slothrop when she grows up. Like the stills of a pornographic movie, the singular sadomasochistic scene made with von Göll passive movie camera allows for a movie sequence that repeats over and over.

Alpdrücken is thematically central to Gravity’s Rainbow because it ties so many characters together, and because, as Steven Wiesenberger notes, the episode 3.11 which features the film “is the longest in the novel and is placed very much at the center” (17). And unlike Kracauer’s Lang, Pynchon’s von Göll is directly implicated in the evil of Nazi Germany because he is director of this film. It is precisely the point that he did nothing, that he merely left the cameras rolling. His passivity is his flaw in wartime Germany. Furthermore,
Gerhardt von Göll’s cinematic sadomasochism is thematically linked to the novel’s most menacing antagonist, Captain Weissmann (aka Blicero), whose life story allows Pynchon to further connect European colonial atrocities, World War II, and contemporary America. Over the course of his life, Weismann corrupts and spiritually destroys central characters including Katje Borghesius, the boy Gottfried, and more indirectly, Edward Pointsman. His sadomasochistic sex acts are key to his control; he teaches his victims to enjoy pain, to go “beyond the zero.” Weismann also manages and completes his personal project, the firing of the rocket numbered 00000, with the boy Gottfried inside covered by a specially engineered shroud. In other words, Pynchon uses von Göll’s cinematic sadomasochism to connect him to the person most directly responsible for the missile that is about to fall on the American Orpheus movie theatre in the 1970s right when the novel concludes. The missile makes a fully circular path around the Earth (Wiesenberger), gravity’s rainbow, just like the thematic circle of a destructive movie director connected to the destruction of a movie theatre. In this way, Pynchon revises film history to emphasize the personal culpability of German wartime movie directors.

However, the end of the war potentially offers new opportunities for Gerhardt von Göll—and by extension, new opportunities for film directors. This is implied by the cinematic quote that opens Part III that is titled “In The Zone,” easily the longest part of the novel’s four parts (283 – 687). The epigraph is from Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz: “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more” (281). Pynchon uses his allusion to this earlier film to represent the Occupied German Zone after the war as a place and time of possibility, a magical place like Oz. For example, Enzian is a member of the Herero African tribe and a former protégé of Weissmann. But he leads his people, rejects Weissmann’s influence, and
does not attack his brother Tchitcherine in the Zone, as was expected. For these reasons, Enzian’s early suggestion to Tyrone Slothrop eventually proves somewhat prophetic: “But you are free. We all are. You’ll see. Before long” (293). Similarly, the girl named Geli Tripping, whose magic connects her to Ozz’s witches, is both metaphorically and literally accurate when she tells Slothrop, “Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren’t any” (298). Just as the divisions between nations are being decided, characters like Slothrop and Gerhardt von Göll have the opportunity to reinvent themselves in the potential freedom of the Zone. Slothrop will have his previous identities disintegrate in the Zone after a moment in which “his chest fills and he stand crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural...” (638) and he will go on to a “long, scuffling future,” just another common man, one of the preterite (752). But while critics have offered much commentary about Slothrop, much less has been said about von Göll new existence in the Zone.

Gerhardt von Göll also transforms in the Zone: from a German auteur in the Fritz Lang mold to a black marketeer and an independent filmmaker. If American film directors looked to the films of Classic Hollywood Cinema to rethink what a film director could do with new freedoms, Pynchon suggests that the Occupied Zone offered his character new freedoms too. No longer bound by the will of the Nazis or anyone else, Gerhardt von Göll becomes a much more interesting character in the Zone. I believe it is von Göll’s existence in the Zone that prompted Donald Larsson to correctly note, “what is of especial interest in the exclusive references to Lang is how little influence he seems to have on the character or the story of Pynchon’s own German film director, Gerhardt von Göll” (220). The reason that von Göll does not resemble Lang after his studio years is because Pynchon and the
Occupied Zone have provided the movie director with new freedom. One question worth asking, then, is what has he done with it? What has von Göll become in the Zone?

No longer officially attached to the German studio system and UFA productions, Gerhardt von Göll needs to win financial support for his independent film projects somehow. He becomes a cagey and mysterious black marketeer with connections to unseen powers. The Argentine anarchist Graciela Portales will appear in a film that von Göll plans to produce but never completes, a literary adaptation of the Argentine poem *Martin Fierro*. Graciela connects von Göll to IG Farben:

Graciela knows the man [von Göll]: there are lines of liaison, sinister connections of blood and of wintering at Punta del Este, through Anilinas Alemanas, the IG branch in Buenos Aires, on though Spottbillingfilm AG in Berlin (another IG outlet) from whom von Göll used to get cut rates on most of his film stock . . . (387)

IG Farben is the multinational chemical cartel that is deeply implicated in the German rocket program, and represents a notable example of Pynchon’s use of historical fact in his fictional novel. And while von Göll would seem to be free of the German studio system, he is still tied to them through his past dealings, and now has forged new, mysterious business relationships. The German studio system may have broken up after the war, but the wider corporate infrastructure still remains. Typically of Pynchon’s novels, the exact relations between von Göll, Spottbillingfilm AG, and IG Farben are never revealed, but this does not make von Göll any less ominous—quite the contrary, in fact. Von Göll’s connections to the business world and the film industry represents the vertical integration that pervaded German industry generally, and the German film industry specifically.
At first, von Göll’s interest in making a film about anarchists would seem to mark him as a movie director with political interests—a voice for the counterculture, perhaps. But his only interest in the political project is that its singing duel allows him to use a new film stock and to indulge in interesting transitions between scenes:

With Emulsion J he could dig beneath the skin colors of the contestants, dissolve back and forth between J and ordinary stock, like sliding in and out of focus, or wipe—how he loved wipes! From one to the other in any number of clever ways. (394)

In a theme that will be later repeated, von Göll is merely interested in developing “clever ways” to use film technology rather than employing that technology to create thematically or socially meaningful films. He wants to “[K]eep the customer happy” (392), and his main concern is whether the film will do well “at the box office” (393). And so, as the anarchist Graciela knows, when von Göll argues that “even the freest of Gauchos end up selling out,” he is really trying to convince himself (393). For this reason, it is humorous that he wants to make a second part to the film, in which the gaucho hero sells out. It is more humorous that second part is never made because von Göll never shows up—presumably because he lost interest in the project (389 – 96; 623 – 27).

The one “independent” film project that von Göll did complete was a film short toward the end of war. He directs an attempt by the Allies’ White Visitation group to undermine the morale of German soldiers by convincing them that Germany employs African soldiers, “Schwartzkommandos,” to fire V-2 rockets. Hilariously, this crazy claim actually ends up being true: members of the colonized Herero African tribe work as
rocketeers, “leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him” (394).

Despite this, von Göll will take full credit, retrospectively arguing that his film short has somehow brought them into being. ‘It is my mission,’ he announces to Squalidozzi, with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, ‘to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation.’ (394)

This is one of the funniest passages in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and it could be interpreted to suggest that Gerhardt von Göll is a lovable narcissist who means no harm. But it is his belief in his own exceptional power—a belief that he will eventually connect to his life as a movie “Director”—that ironically connects him to other characters who believe that it is their fate to direct others behind the scenes and with impunity: those people who are often pejoratively referenced in Pynchon’s vernacular as “unseen powers,” the “elect,” or even more simply, “Them.”

The dangers of von Göll’s egotism become apparent late in the novel. As his nickname “der Springer” (the Knight) suggests, von Göll believes—with good reason—that he can leap unfettered over society, like a chess knight over a chessboard. Von Göll believes in his own exceptional power and metaphorizes it with terminology borrowed from chess and cinema:

One sees how it fits, ja? Learns patterns, adjusts to rhythms, one day you are no longer an actor, but free now, over on the other side of the camera. No dramatic call to the front office—just waking up one day, and knowing that Queen, Bishop, and King are only splendid cripples, and pawns, even those
that reach the final row, are condemned to creep in two dimensions, and no Tower will ever rise or descend—no: flight has been given only to the Springer! (502–503)

The allusion to der Spiegler reminds us of the dangers of this sort of freedom and power, as does the allusion to Hitler’s similar claims of exceptionalism for his so-called master race. More directly, von Göll’s desire for exceptionalism is ominously paralleled by the logic of Germany’s rocket scientist in the narrative discourse, as reported through the free direct thought of rocket technician Franz Pökler: “He [Franz Pökler] thought of himself as a practical man. At the rocket field they [the rocket technicians] talked continents, encirclements, seeing years before the General Staff the need for a weapon to break ententes, to leap like a chess knight over Panzers, infantry, even the Luftwaffe” (408, my emphasis). Here Pynchon insists upon the ideological similarity between the German General Staff, the V-2 rocket scientists, and that so-called independent film director, Gerhardt von Göll, by placing von Göll’s mind-style (Fowler 1977; Shen 2005)—his particular way of thinking—in the consciousness of Franz Pökler.

The egotism of Gerhardt von Göll is related to his disdain of common people. This becomes clear late in the novel, when a group of starving people follow Klaus Närrisch, Tyrone Slothrop, and Gerhardt von Göll as they walk on a Baltic beach. The people follow because Narrisch is carrying a turkey procured by von Göll. To threaten the hungry people, von Göll loads his gun, but they are so hungry that only half of them are deterred. Von Göll replies to Slothrop’s objection by making a sharp distinction between himself and the starving people, “directors” and actors, between the elect and preterite:
Be compassionate. But don’t make up fantasies about them. Despise me, exalt them, but remember, we define each other. Elite and preterite, we move through a cosmic design of darkness and light, and in all humility, I am one of the few who can comprehend it in toto. Consider honestly therefore, young man, which side you would rather be on. While they suffer in perpetual shadows, it’s...always – (503 – 504)

As a movie director, von Göll understands himself as uniquely qualified to understand cosmic designs of darkness and especially light, what he might understand as the technological foundations of cinema. Immediately following this moment, von Göll sings a fox trot in praise of the black market, whose theme is that “Money’s the mainspring, that makes it all tick” (504). Pynchon later has the detestable Lyle Bland sing a “reprise of Gerhardt von Göll’s ‘Bright Days for the Black Market,’” whose theme involves dollar-chasing (595). Such passages confirm Pynchon’s negative judgment of von Göll because the character’s elitism, cynicism, and lack of compassion groups him with other despicable characters, including Franz Pökler, Major Marvey, Edward Pointsman, Dr. Laslo Jamf, and Lyle Bland.

Indeed, the novel’s final episode suggests that Gerhardt von Göll never made anything socially-progressive art or, really, anything positive at all out of the freedom potential within the Zone. He appears high on the sodium amytal that was used by Soviets to interrogate him, and he is sitting on a toilet, “an unusually large infant’s training toilet, up between the sitter’s legs rises the porcelain head of a jackal with what, embarrassingly, proves to be a reefer, in its rather loosely smiling mouth” (760). The jackal image has appeared earlier in the novel, on the ship called the Anubuis that is owned by Antoni Procalowska.
The *Anubis* carried an orgy of people oblivious to the death and suffering literally around them. We know this because, as while the boat’s passengers have an orgy, the narrator reveals that,

Springtime corpses caught in the wreckage twist and flow as the *Anubis* moves by overhead. Under the bowspirit, the golden jackal, the only being aboard that can see through the fog, stares ahead, down the river, toward Swinemünde. (476)

For this reason, it makes sense that we leave von Göll sitting blithely on the jackal-toilet, for the image thematically connects him with the other movie people who unknowingly and unfeelingly party while the *Anubis* blithely sails on over the bodies of the dead. We are also meant to recall the men who raped actress Greta Erdmann in the making of *Alpdrücken*—as von Göll allowed the cameras to continue to play—who were also called jackal men (468). In these ways, the ostensibly agentive and free Director named von Göll is finally associated with the passivity and stultifying glare of the camera’s eye.

This ethical passivity is a serious character flaw in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, one shared by the boy Gottfried and Katje early in the novel. The flaw appears again when Gerhardt von Göll appears one last time in the discourse as a passive character, again in the novel’s final episode. There the external narrator contrasts those who have the necessary “hardon of resolution” to the passive Gerhardt von Göll:

- dark and female, passive, self-abandoning, Issac under the blade. The glittering edge widening to a hallway, down, up which the soul is borne by an irresistible Aether. Gerhardt von Göll on his camera dolly, whooping with
joy, barrel-assing down the long corridors at Nymphenburg. (Let us leave him here, in his transport, in his innocence . . .) (765)

Here Pynchon’s decisions in the temporal ordering of his novel, the relations between his story and discourse, are worth noting. Why should he leave von Göll at Nymphenburg in the discourse, when the director made his film *Mad Kingdom* so long ago in the fabula? The final image insists that, despite his time in the Zone, von Göll was nothing more or less than a studio employee, that he accomplished little with his independent films, despite his egotistical claims. Ultimately von Göll is not an agent for any kind of social change, but rather is moved by unseen forces, an “irresistible Aether,” and he is transported in the sense of being carried out of himself, of losing his identity and his agency. It is an especially troubling image because it occurs immediately before the final ten pages of the novel, in which the boy Gottfried allows himself to be similarly transported by an “irresistible aether” that is the Rocket 00000.

Pynchon chooses to leave von Göll at this point in the fabula because the flashback represents his character at its most essential, which is to say that von Göll is interested in having fun, making money, and cheap artistic tricks, but he is not interested in, or capable of, effecting social change with his films. Like Gottfried, he goes with the flow. As the character Thantaz says as he discusses sadomasochism, “submission and dominance are resources [the Structure] needs for its very survival” (751). That Structure, that Control, is what *Gravity’s Rainbow* teaches its authorial audience to avoid and combat. Just as American cinematic culture was returning to film history to re-think the potential of film directors to make meaningful works of art, Pynchon represented a film director struggling mightily with his ostensible artistic freedom from movie studios.
2. Filmic Belatedness as a Counterforce

Although rock music was arguably the most influential artistic form of American counterculture from the late 1960s on, the new generation of American film directors at this time also took on a veneer of social progressivism due to their celebrity, their own youth, their refashionings of old movies, and the themes of rebellion implicit in movies like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, and *Medium Cool*. As film historian Christie Milliken argues, “Influenced by companies such as American International Pictures, which specialized in cheaply made films explicitly for the youth market, many films reflected the counter-culture and Hollywood’s brief flirtation with overt left-leaning subject matter” (Grant 217). And as film historian Geoff King notes, “It is remembered as an era in which Hollywood produced a relatively high number of innovative films that seemed to go beyond the confines of conventional studio fare in terms of their content and style . . . For others, it was a time when Hollywood made a gesture toward the more liberal or radical forces in American society” (12). As we have seen, Pynchon also reflected upon the present and future of film directors through film history. But while Pynchon seems skeptical about the revolutionary potential of film directors, he explored the revolutionary potential of film in other ways as well.

Film history appeared in American 1960s film culture through the allusions of certain film directors, and the emergence of film schools, but also through television. In the 1960s, Pynchon and his contemporary readers would have likely seen many of the American movies alluded to *Gravity’s Rainbow* on television. Actually, the domination of television in the 1960s American media environment helped the movie industry pivot away from its role as just another part of “mass culture” in the 1950s toward a new self-definition as a “classic”
American medium (Balio, *Television*). When Pynchon alludes to *King Kong* or *The Wizard of Oz*, or has the racist Major Marvy chase Slothrop in a version of a cops-and-robbers scene, or has Jessica Swanlake and Roger Mexico have a Hollywood “cute meet” to start their love story, he offers another view of Hollywood’s “classic” past—a past that was in the early stages of being made classic even as he wrote his novel. But while the rhetoric of “classic” movies on television suggested that these movies were worthwhile due to their relative antiquity and their mere appearance on television, Pynchon practices belatedness to the extent that he uses film conventions and alludes to classic movies for unconventional purposes.

Pynchon’s treatment of *King Kong* exemplifies how he uses his literary adaptation of classic cinema for its countercultural potential. In part two we first meet the literary critic Mitchell Prettyplace, who writes a “definitive 18-volume study of *King Kong*,” a situation that allows Pynchon to offer his own contrasting study of the film (279). *King Kong* is commonly understood as a classic monster movie about a damsel in distress, featuring the actress Fay Wray and directed by Merian C. Cooper. The movie’s premise is that a wildly successful movie director, Carl Denham, wants to travel to an unknown African island to make a move with the creature named Kong and a new actress. But *King Kong* is also about making movies since Denham makes and exhibits his movie about Kong, and so Pynchon uses the movie for its meta-representational qualities, for its function as a movie about movies. For Prettyplace’s exhaustive study, the movie is about “love.” But Pynchon will suggest a different interpretation.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *King Kong* is re-interpreted as a movie that reveals Classical Hollywood’s racist anxieties, imperial fantasies, and desire for control. This is accomplished
with the novel’s epigraph to part two: “You will have the tallest darkest leading man in Hollywood. –Merian C. Cooper to Fay Wray” (181 my emphasis). Although “tall, dark, and handsome” is usually a formula for a white Hollywood romantic lead, the joke is that Cooper is referring to the black Kong. In this way, the epigraph anthropomorphizes Kong as an African man, equivalent to Fay Wray’s other human, white suitor: the sailor Jack. This sets the terms of a racial allegory in Gravity’s Rainbow as Pynchon’s narrator repeatedly emphasizes the blackness of Kong (279) and the symbolic whiteness of Fay Wray by describing her white gown (702), recalling “the lights of electric New York white-waying in to the room you thought was safe, could never be penetrated” (279, my emphasis), and by associating Fay Wray with his white female characters, Jessica Swanlake and Katje Borghesius.

Through this racial allegory, Pynchon represents his characters’ anxiety about blackness and reveals the “classic” King Kong as a movie made by Hollywood to play on its (dominantly white) audience’s fears of a black man sexually conquering a white woman. From this view, King Kong is a film about a white film director who had the financial resources and respect of Hollywood cinema, who then traveled to an African island and subdued its native people for the purpose of capturing the exotic black creature named Kong on film. Like Prettyplace, King Kong blames the movie director’s colonization and the ultimate effects of that colonization on Kong himself, who made things difficult because he “really” loved Fay Wray and terrorized her because his love was unrequited. In general, Gravity’s Rainbow reveals King Kong as a sick and all-too-classic Hollywood fantasy about colonization, domination, and exploiting the racial Other on camera.

Further, Pynchon contrasts the politics and ethics of Gravity’s Rainbow through character associations and judgments which imply his own multiple divergent interpretations
of the movie. So for example, in the novel there is a doomed relationship between the sympathetic statistician Roger Mexico and the girl Jessica Swanlake, who twice does “her Fay Wray number,” which is her imitation of Fay Wray’s famous look of terror in *King Kong*, first in play, when Fay Wray is on the boat, and then in earnest, when she is in “the Fist of the Ape” (e.g. 279). Pynchon’s narrator explains that Roger and Jessica meet in what is called a “cute meet” by Hollywood screenwriting conventions. In a standard Hollywood romance, a couple like Roger and Jessica would end up together, but in *Gravity’s Rainbow* their relationship fails after the war. In this way, Pynchon contrasts his ethics and aesthetics against Classical Hollywood’s formulaic plots, as represented by its cute meets. Pynchon’s “Fay Wray” clearly doesn’t deserve her “Kong,” even though Roger Mexico does love Jessica Swanlake, and in this way too Pynchon offers a revisionary Hollywood story.

Similarly, Katje Borghesius first appears a Fay-Wray figure when the White Visitation’s cameraman follows her on camera like Denham had shot Fay Wray, and Katje’s Dutch, “very blond hair,” and her “nearly perfect” white skin contrasts against the frock that has been bought for her, “a rich cocoa shade known as “nigger in this country” (93 - 95). Katje is connected to the legacy of colonialism and racial extermination through her ancestor, Frans Van Der Groov (110 – 115; 554), and Katje’s love of von-Göllian passivity—the kind that the Structure needs to survive—is revealed through her sadomasochistic sex games with characters including Tyrone Slothrop, General Pudding, as well as Blicero and Gottfried. Her passivity is also revealed in the back story of her war work as a double or triple-agent, which eventually lands her in Pynchon’s double-agent hell with Gerhardt von Göll and other ethically-compromised characters. In this way, Pynchon subtly suggests another retelling of *King Kong*, one in which Fay Wray hunted down Kong and asks to be sexually dominated.
Katje plays the Fay Wray role again later in the novel, but this time with the man named Enzian. Characteristically, she tries to seduce Enzian, an African Herero whose people have largely already been systematically colonized and exterminated by Germany around 1904. In this Pynchonian adaption of *King Kong*, Fay Wray/Katje is a confused seductress: “she’s actually flirting with him [Enzian] now, to keep her from having to move into his blackness. Understand it isn’t his blackness, but her own, an inadmissible darkness she is making believe for the moment is Enzian’s . . . ” (674). Yet clearly, this is no attempt to create a straightforward reversal of the Hollywood plot as Pynchon interprets it, a simple reversal in which a “noble savage” is seduced by a wanton or immoral white woman. What brings Katje and Enzian together are their past sexual relationships with Weissmann, that colonizer, murderer, and sadist. Enzian had a sexual relationship with Captain Weissmann in Southwest Africa, a relationship that figures psychological colonization as well. Katje was similarly sexually dominated by Weissmann (now Colonel Weissman) later in Nazi Germany. But Enzian is not a simple victim, and Katje is not simply evil, and she will eventually join the Counterforce at the novel’s conclusion. Instead of a simplistic reversal, Pynchon uses the frame of *King Kong*’s fabula as a starting point to suggest the unforeseen effects and the complex psychologies of colonization, control, and genocide.

Pynchon’s interpretation of *King Kong* becomes even more salient when compared to New Hollywood’s treatment of racism and race. In broad terms, the financial difficulties of the late 1960s encouraged Hollywood studios to market specific movies not only toward young people, but also to African American audiences. While African American filmmakers including Oscar Micheaux had often worked in the background of the dominant white Hollywood film culture, *Shaft* (1971) was the first commercially successful film about a black
detective, and Sidney Poitier won the first Oscar given to an African American person for Best Acting. Only against the long history of racist Hollywood could such steps be seen as progressive. And as John Belton observes,

Hollywood films of the 1960s expose bigotry and racism but do so without exposing their sources. The major studios ignore the politics of racism. Their films contain no sit-ins, no marches on Washington, no campaigns to register black voters, no attempts to integrate schools and colleges, and no exposés of racial discrimination in housing. (283)

Similarly, Shaft was the first of many blaxploitation films, films with violence that were marketed to both African American and some white audiences. But while these films allowed Hollywood studios to cash in on their new market niche, it is debatable whether blaxploitation films were anything but exploitative.

Pynchon was another artist who did not represent contemporary American racism directly, but he used his filmic belatedness to expose racial anxieties and Hollywood’s historical role in encouraging those anxieties. Recently Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued that in Gravity’s Rainbow (and his other novels), Thomas Pynchon disparages cinema and other technological elements of “television culture” to hide his true cultural anxieties regarding gender and race, including the supposedly dehumanizing and feminizing aspects of Technology (75 – 80). But in addition to the ways that Pynchon symbolically connects Technology to the very phallic V-2 rocket, and the ways he connects Nazi thinking to rigid, “rational,” scientific, and thus phallogocentric thought, he also uses cinematic affordances to expose the racial anxiety of his characters and Hollywood cinema more generally. Especially when compared to New Hollywood’s treatment of racism and American cinematic novelists
like Fitzgerald and West, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is progressive in some notable ways: not only in its treatment of racism, but also in its treatment of Hollywood cinema. Even though contemporary Hollywood cinema was not socially progressive, Pynchon drew upon film history explicitly in a way that novelists like Fitzgerald and West could not, or did not.

The novel’s final episode famously reveals the degree to which *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a cinematic novel. There, the 00000 rocket falls toward the Orpheus Movie Theatre in a dystopic Los Angeles circa 1973. The episode opens with the night manager of the Orpheus theatre, Richard M. Zhlubb, complaining about harmonica-playing turning his nightly movies into “a state of near anarchy . . . ever since our Bengt Ekerot/ Maria Casares Film Festival” (770). As the novel’s critics have noted, Zhlubb’s name, characteristics, hand gestures, and prosecution of dissent mark him as an unmistakable stand-in for a caricatured Richard Nixon (Wiesenberger 381 – 82). But in a cinematic context, the allusion is significant because Richard Nixon was on the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the Red Scare, and that committee moved to indict ten members of the film industry for their supposed association with communist activities (88). Often in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and in Pynchon’s corpus more broadly, harmonicas and kazoos represent local but laudable acts of dissent, as they do here (770 - 71), and “anarchy” represents the positive possibility of disorder in a closed system, a kind of political entropy, the antidote to “any System which cannot tolerate heresy” (762). So Zhlubb’s repression of the harmonicas and his litigation against a Hollywood businessman, who entered an “unauthorized state of mind,” (770) shows how cinema can be corrupted by Presidents, “directors,” and “managers”—all those who seek power and control. In their turn, the rebellious moviegoers interrupt the film
festival and other events because they sense Zhlubb’s well-known “contempt for the people” (771).

It is significant, too, that the harmonicas first interrupt Zhlubb’s fictitious “Bengt Ekerot/Maria Casares Film Festival.” As Wiesenberger notes, the festival is imaginary, but the actor’s names are not, and both Ekerot and Carares were biographically real actors who played the role of “Death” in different films (771). Consequently, the Festival’s name anticipates the coming of Blicero’s missile, with the boy Gottfried inside, since Captain Weissmann happily accepted his nickname “Blicero” because it also means Death. This is the second time in the novel’s final pages that cinema is connected to death and Blicero’s missile, since the external narrator has already noted that, “The countdown as we know it, 10-9-8-u.s.w., was invented by Fritz Lang in 1929 for the Ufa film Die Frau im Mond.” Blicero will offer a more authentic version of a launching sequence soon (772–73). While film festivals are often associated today with formally-innovative film and liberal politics, Pynchon associates Zhlubb with the slightly-pretentious sounding festival because they put a commercially-useful artistic gloss on what was essentially, for Pynchon, a commercial and domineering industry.

*Gravity’s Rainbow’s* narration quickly departs from “Manager Zhlubb” and a dramatized “you” on the Hollywood Freeway, leaving them there, and the manner of that departure alludes to one of the great American cinematic novels, Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the most famous scene in *The Day of the Locust* occurs in its concluding chapter, in which the artist-protagonist Tod Hackett hears and imitates the deafening siren of an ambulance. At first Hackett thinks he is making the noise himself, but at the novel’s closing he realizes that his lips were shut: “He knew then it was
the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could” (185). In the conclusion of Gravity’s Rainbow, Manager Zhlubb and “you” also hear a siren:

The sound of a siren takes you both unaware. Zhlubb looks up sharply into his mirror. ‘You’re not holding, are you?’

But the sound is greater than police. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains further than any mortal could ever move . . . could move in time . . .

‘I don’t think that’s a police siren.’ Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the knob of the AM radio. ‘I don’t think--.’ (772)

In West’s famous cinematic novel set in Hollywood, Tod Hackett imitates the mechanical sound of the ambulance siren as an act of despair, a sign that he’s finally becoming a mechanical grotesque like the rest of Hollywood cinema’s creatures, passive in relation to Hollywood’s siren call. In Pynchon’s now-famous cinematic novel which concludes in Hollywood, the siren is just as alarming, just as confusing to the storyworld characters, but ultimately ends up being even more serious. It’s a bomb siren. The siren signals the coming of the S-Gerat 00000, with the boy Gottfried inside it. Inside the rocket designed for him, passive Gottfried has imitated a machine too, as Colonel Weissmann knows well: “Stuff him in. Not a Procrustean bed, but modified to take him. The two, boy and Rocket, concurrently designed. Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully...he fits so well” (765). Both Weissmann and his reluctant, passive, cinema-loving minion, Franz Pökler, spent untold hours ensuring that Gottfried would become one with the machine.
Only the 00000 rocket falling upon the Orpheus movie theatre, faster than any human could otherwise move, could make West’s apocalyptic vision of Hollywood and its effects on American culture seem downright tame. While West allows the sympathetic Tod Hackett to suffer his strange fate to make West’s authorial point about Hollywood cinema, Pynchon implicates his narrative audience with his you-narration, “you” who must die with the final revealing and humbling words, “I didn’t think.” Pynchon’s decision to briefly allude to *The Day of the Locust* at his own novel’s closing suggests that he was as cognizant of the long history of dissenting literary responses to Hollywood cinematic culture as he was of Hollywood history itself, and that he saw himself writing in that great American tradition of cinematic novels.

One way that Pynchon denies New Hollywood’s status as a politically-progressive form of art is precisely through his suggestion that it has taught “you,” “not to think.” However, he softens this harsh claim by also implicating himself in the novel’s final two pages. As the movie audience claps and yells to start the show,

> The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who’ve always been at the movies (haven’t we) to tell which before the darkness swept in . . . But it was not a star, it was falling, a bright angel of death. And in the darkening and awful expanse of screen something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see...it is now a close-up of the face, a face we all know. (775)

A standard common interpretation of this scene points to the association between cinema and book, in support of the reading that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is intended as a kind of film,
perhaps another “World War II situational comedy” (705). But such movie going would not
serve “us” very well at all, for, despite the fact that we are “old fans who’ve always been at
the movies (haven’t we),” the narrator explains that we have not learned to see the close-up
of the face. If we had, we could have seen the famous close-up of the villain Dr. Mabuse, a
famous shot in Fritz Lang’s film by the same name. (Dr. Mabuse’s nickname, “der Spiegler”
also has a visual similarity to Gerhardt von Göll’s nickname, “der Springer,” and both Dr.
Mabuse and von Göll move through society effortlessly and criminally.) The close up could
also be one of the boy Gottfried, who looks passively through his own movie screen in the
Rocket, a four-inch window of artificial sapphire that was grown by IG Farben (766). In this
regard, the parenthetical “haven’t we” is resigned, even self-accusatory. We have not learned
to see this “film”—the imminent reality of nuclear holocaust—because we were always at
the movies, watching and confusing the reel with the real. Like Gottfried and Gerhardt von
Göll and the White Visitation’s cameraman, we were passively watching; like octopus Grigori,
our movie-watching resulted in conditioned responses; like the “you” in the car with movie
Manager Zhlub, we did not think. The screen, which “we” watched like a book, is now only
a “dim page” that is “white and silent,” for the machine has broken.

Meanwhile, while “we” go to the movies one last time, the ideas we need to think
about are in an “out of print” song lyric according to Pynchon’s external narrator, things that
“They” never taught us in this dystopic America (775). That ancient song, which the narrator
explains was originally written by William Slothrop, appears on the last page of Gravity’s
Rainbow, and the song’s lyrics use the same language as Weissmann’s tarot reading, including
the symbolism of lightening, towers, and riders (762). William Slothrop is Tyrone Slothrop’s
ancestor, and he appears as a ghost to Tyrone in “the Zone.”
William Slothrop’s song lyrics indirectly predict the 00000 rocket that has just now come, or even a nuclear holocaust, for they refer to the “lightning” that will strike not just Weissmann, but also everyone else: “Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low / Find the last poor Pret’rite one” (776). Rather than functioning like a movie, as critics suggest, at the last Gravity’s Rainbow’s purpose is to offer, in a new form, wisdom that has previously been printed but ignored: “centuries forgotten and out of print.” In this way, the allusion shows Pynchon following with seriousness the external narrator’s ostensibly grim suggestion that, despite the rocket’s imminent explosion, there is still time to find some comfort. For, through its reference to William’s lyrics, the narration manages to find just a little more time and space that would be other hidden within the “dark and silent frame” that is run by cinema’s 24 fps speed, the intervals in calculus, and cause-and-effect thinking.

If we looked even closer at the interval before the missile struck, we might recall that William Slothrop was also the author of another forgotten, out-of-print text, *On Preterition*, “among the first books to’ve been not only banned but also ceremoniously burned in Boston. Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for these ‘second Sheep,’ without whom there’d be no elect” (565). William was inspired to write his tract on Preterition by his pigs: “They were good company. Despite the folklore and the injunctions in his own Bible, William came to love their nobility and personal freedom, their gift for finding comfort in the mud on a hot day” (564). It is in this humble, forgotten text—not a movie—in which the pith of Pynchon’s implied ethics are concretized, as many a Pynchon scholar has noted (e.g., Hume 39).
As is commonly acknowledged, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the preterite include the lemmings, the dodos—and especially the pigs—the Herero, Kong, the Kirghiz tribes and the Argentine gauchos, the bodies under the sailing Anubis, the London preterite who are targeted by the V-2 rockets, the downtrodden who try to live happily in this world, despite its mud. Against them and above them are the elect, among whom number the Weissmanns, the Pöklers, the von Gölls, the Zhubbs, who scorn the people and try to escape Gravity. The elect’s ethics and failed hopes are concretized in the rocket itself: “This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity. But the Rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape. The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophesy, of Escape” (774). At least, this is what a forgotten text told us centuries before the film broke, well before the missile fell on the movie theatre with us in it. Since that same author, William Slothrop, seemed to predict Weissmann’s coming, we may want to consider its ethical message more closely now.

And if we continue to read in the margins, in the intervals, by paying closer attention to those preterite pigs that William Slothrop loved so much, we will notice that pigs are capable of political action in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “of nobility and personal freedom” that sharply contrasts to the false promises and illusory realities of Gerhardt von Göll and cinema. For example, when William’s descendent Tyrone wears the pig costume and adopts his Plechazunga alter-identity, he successfully defends himself against attacking Russians and does his best to protect old women and children. And just as he’s about to be captured (580–81), Slothrop “providentially” meets an unnamed seventeen-year old girl, whose father happened to be a German printer. As with the representation of William Slothrop, the
narrator’s positive evaluation of the German printers’ union sharply contrasts with the novel’s representations of German cinema specifically and German culture more generally:

...it was a good union. They kept the German Wobbly traditions, they didn’t go along with Hitler though all the other unions were falling into line. It touches Slothrop’s own Puritan hopes for the Word, the Word made printer’s ink, dwelling along with antibodies and iron-bound breath in a good man’s blood, though the World for him be always the World on Monday, with its cold cutting edge, slicing away every poor illusion of comfort the bourgeois takes for real. (581)

Shortly after Tyrone leaves the girl, he comes across Frieda the pig, who leads him to Franz Pökler, who reveals the truth about the origins of Bianca, the young girl that Tyrone thinks he’s infatuated with: “Ilse, fathered on Greta Erdmann’s silver and passive image, Bianca, conceived during the filming of the very scene that was in his thoughts as Pökler pumped in the fatal charge of sperm—how could they not be the same child?” (586). It is as if “providence” or William Slothrop’s ghost, or Pynchon—or all three—were attempting to show Slothrop the truth about Bianca the dangerous movie-child, “still she is there, cool and acid and sweet, waiting to be swallowed down to touch your deepest cells, to work among your saddest dreams” (587). And it is as if, in so doing, Bianca becomes a figure for cinematic culture, just as William Slothrop figures print culture. Like Frieda the pig, Pynchon uses his final reference to William Slothrop to gently remind his authorial audience of the differences and distinctly different histories of cinema and printing, of control and dissent. Pynchon offers many pig paths throughout Gravity’s Rainbow which help us interface with
with other worlds, to learn from the dead and humble and forgotten—a category that comes
to include print culture.

Whether or not Tyrone Slothrop ever fully understood or cared to understand the
message about Bianca is debatable, but that is partly the point. On one hand, the narrator
reveals that Tyrone has previously understood the preterite in Berkshire, that home of the
famous pigs, by looking at the trash of common people “instructing him, dunce and drifter,
in ways deeper than he can explain” (638). For this insight, he was rewarded with a glimpse
of a phallic gravity’s rainbow, again a partly comic gift from providence, William, and
Pynchon, and that is when “[Slothrop’s] chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his
head, just feeling natural” (638). On the other hand, Slothrop’s tarot reading reveals his
mediocrity, his “long and scuffling future” (752), and he has previously impersonated the
actor Max Schlepzig, effectively making a remake of Alpdrücken by having sadomasochistic
sex with Greta Erdmann on the movie set, and later at least fantasizing about sex with
movie-child Bianca. But, to borrow a Conradian phrase, the mediocrity of his future just
makes him one of us. Also, the way that Slothrop disintegrates into the text, the way he is
“broken down” and “scattered” means that he lives in the margins of the narrative discourse,
in those places and spaces that other worldviews, rationales, and perspectives, including
cinema, would miss. That makes him a distinctly Pynchonian creation, a character who
contrasts as sharply as possible with the visible characters of cinema, including “a face we all
know” (775).

Despite his novel’s pattern of sharp conflicts between cinema and print, Pynchon
does offer a few rare glimpses of cinema’s political and ethical potential. The pies-in-the-face,
the bit supporting roles imitated by Pig Bodine, the playful rebelliousness of Slothrop in his
cops-and-robbers chase with Major Marvy, even the novel’s movie-inspired songs suggest that even movies, if you look closely enough, if you look low enough, show mini-rebellions, little counterforces, hints of dissent. The best example of this strain is Osbie Feel’s *Doper’s Greed*, an allegorical film message for Katje that Osbie splices onto the end of the videos of Octopus Griorgi having his responses conditioned (542–45). The preterite, drug-addled Osbie uses song lyrics of swine in his opening song and has a tattoo of Porky Pig on his belly. What is remarkable about Osbie’s film is that in a novel, even an entire authorial corpus filled with missed messages, from the opening of *The Crying of Lot 49* on, Osbie’s message gets through to Katje, and allows her to join the Counterforce.

The real success of Osbie’s film, however, is that it leads both Katje and Pynchon’s authorial audience to important texts. Once they meet, Osbie leads Katje to a backroom with corporate histories and *An Introduction to Modern Herero*, which are among the many source materials for *Gravity’s Rainbow*. It is Pynchon’s version of a suggested reading list—another pig trail. And it’s in that backroom that Katje has her own epiphany, “Dialectically, sooner or later, some counterforce would have had to arise...she must not have been political enough: never enough to keep faith that it would...even with all the power on the other side, that it really would...”(545). In contrast to the professional Gerhardt von Göll’s final movie, *New Dope*, Osbie Feel’s movie succeeds because it is political, didactic, and made surreptitiously, without official sanction, without claims to being “high art,” and it leads its viewer to important texts.

Like Osbie’s *Doper’s Greed*, Pynchon’s compositional choices and narrative techniques in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which reveal his ethics and aesthetics, shine brightest when contrasted against the negative ways that film and film history are consistently represented in the novel.
Against Gerhardt von Göll’s three-minute propaganda film short involving the Schwartzkommando, his supposed masterpiece, Pynchon offers a subtle and affecting account of the Herero tribe that, though fictionalized, reflects meaningfully on the legacies of Western European colonialism. In contrast to von Göll’s camera tricks to achieve verisimilitude in his film short, Pynchon offers an immense amount of backstory regarding the Herero tribe which connects to the fabula of his first novel, V., and introduces nonfictional accounts like The Modern History of the Herero. Against the conventional ended, protagonist-driven, movie-star plots that dominated both German cinema and New Hollywood, Pynchon offers elliptical narration, some 400 characters, and a disintegrating and disappearing protagonist so that those minor, preterite characters can be developed.

Perhaps most strikingly, Pynchon details stultifying, passive, director-oriented relationships between artists/audiences in cinema through characters including von Göll, Bianca, Franz Pökler, Greta Erdmann, Ilse, Zhlubb, and his American film audience which clamors to “Start-the-show!” at the novel’s closing. Against this, he offers an intellectually fulfilling author/reader relationship which includes you-narration that dramatizes and directly addresses his readers, often challenging their ethics and politics with his demeaning characterizations of “you,” the reader. In the context of literary history, the narrative techniques and compositional choices of Gravity’s Rainbow are remarkable enough. But through his filmic belatedness, Pynchon used his literary rhetoric to focus his authorial audience on just how remarkable his own choices were, and to implicitly argue for the continued cultural relevance and artistic superiority of his novel and chosen medium.

In its interest in film history, Gravity’s Rainbow represented a pig path for Thomas Pynchon’s later fiction. Although Pynchon did not substantively engage film history prior to
Gravity's Rainbow (not in V. and only occasionally in The Crying of Lot 49), most of his novels after Gravity's Rainbow do engage film history. For example, in Vineland (1990), Pynchon will represent 1970s film history through his representation of two film collectives, Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Collective and 24fps. He will also describe Hollywood’s infamous blacklist period as “complex court dances of fuckers and fuckees, thick with betrayal, destructiveness, cowardice, and lying, [that] seemed only a continuation of the picture business as it had always been carried on, only now in political form” (81). In Against the Day (2006), Pynchon will return to the pre-history of cinema to suggest that most of the film industry’s technological innovations have been stolen rather than developed within the industry (1050). And in Inherent Vice (2007), the psychedelic detective Doc Sportello is a play on the classic film noir detective, and the novel’s plot evokes a similarly noirish worldview of unseen forces conspiring against individuals.

Gravity’s Rainbow also represents a pig path for later American cinematic novels. During the time of New Hollywood, movies emerged as potential works of art and cultural products, and more than ever ambitious movie directors were compared to ambitious literary authors, “auteurs” with “authors.” But if this encouraged Pynchon to react sharply to cinema at a thematic level, it also encouraged him to see the history of Hollywood cinema similarly to the way that some contemporary film directors saw it: as a rich artistic resource to be used, manipulated, and engaged. Later cinematic novels like Don DeLillo’s Underworld (1997), Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves (2000), and David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest would take different attitudes to the affordances that cinema provided, but they would also embrace the belatedness found most prominently in Gravity’s Rainbow.
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Geoff King offers an important qualification, however: “The films of the studio era had, in general, been targeted to a wide-ranging audience. It is not true to say that they were aimed
at a single entirely undifferentiated ‘mass’ audience. Recent studies have argued, convincingly, that such claims had more to do with the industry’s attempt to present itself as a fount of democracy, a strategy designed at least partly to deflect attention from its restrictive industrial practices” (29).

2 I am grateful to the bibliographies of Pynchon criticism created by Steven Weisenbruger, Clifford Mead; Beverly Lyon Clark and Caryn Fuoroli, respectively.

3 Vladimir Nabokov wrote *Lolita* as a screenplay well after he published the novel, although he saw the projects as distinct. He collaborated with Stanley Kubrick on the film, but Kubrick mostly used his own version.

4 However, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa and Metzger watch a WWII war movie on television, one of the films that Metzger made as a child actor. This is an early example of Pynchon’s tendency towards filmic belateness, one that becomes infinitely more salient in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. 
Chapter 5: Divinity and “You”: Moving Images, Cinema, and the Novelist-Priest in *Underworld*

When Don DeLillo published *Underworld* in 1997, the American media environment had been considerably altered by a series of multinational media mergers such as the 1990 merger between Time, Inc. and Warner Communications and the 1993 merger between Viacom and Paramount Communications. Media historians note that these mergers created unprecedented degrees of media synergy, the ability of a corporation to market a story or product across several media platforms (e.g., Prince, Lewis). *Underworld’s* epilogue suggests that DeLillo is in some ways anxious about these changes: “Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions . . . the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of things” (785). But while DeLillo privileges individual artifice over mass culture in *Underworld*, he also embraces trans-media influence in a way that previous cinematic novelists did not. At the level of story, DeLillo represents a positive trans-medial synergy among individual artists often, as when a graffiti artist is admired by a performance artist who befriends a painter before seeing a (fictional) movie called *Underwelt*. And at the level of discourse, DeLillo insists upon his own cultural relevance partly through his adaptations of moving images, including his engagements with *Underwelt*, the Zapruder home movie, and the Texas Highway Killer Video on television.
*Underworld* is productively understood as a capstone of the twentieth-century American cinematic novel because it goes beyond filmic belatedness to define itself as literary through its interactions with moving images. On one hand, DeLillo goes beyond only representing traditional Hollywood cinema to also include moving images in home videos, television movies, avant-garde cinema as they existed at the time of his story, from October 3, 1951 and 1997. On the other hand, he locates his novelistic project most closely to Sergei Eisenstein’s *Underwelt*, the film project that most closely represents traditional cinema even as it exemplifies an act of communication between an artist and his intended audience.

*Underworld* is an important case study in the American cinematic novel because it draws upon the rich resources provided by various historical forms of “cinema” and argues for its own cultural relevance, its nuance, through its productive antagonism toward these forms.

More precisely, DeLillo engages with moving-images to establish his authorial persona as a poet-priest who offers his authorial audience glimpses of transcendence with his authoritative voice and through his representations of American media. To show this, section one discusses the intersections between *Underworld*’s narrative technique and its engagement with 1990s moving images. Section two reveals how DeLillo relies on moving images and media history to represent American cultural history. Section three analyzes the *Texas Highway Killer Video* to show how DeLillo depends upon “cinematic” technique to accomplish risky artistic effects without distancing his intended audience. And in section four, I show why DeLillo’s embrace of the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein is crucial to understanding the novel’s closing and DeLillo’s self-defined role as our spiritual guide.

1. *Underworld, Cinema, and the 1997 American Media Environment*
In “The Power of History,” the New York Times essay published to accompany Underworld (1997), Don DeLillo writes about how he came to write his novel, the relationship between history and fiction, and the role of the novelist in the contemporary American media environment. He sets the figure of the singular, novelist against “the evanescent spectacle of contemporary life,” “the fast-forward nature of the decade,” “a period of empty millennial frenzy.” Over the course of the short essay, he slyly suggests that what Underworld is about is also what it will shortly become: an object of history, one of those ancient documents with “a claim to permanence” and a “precious integrity.” Indeed, DeLillo’s description of the novel comes to sound very much like the passage in Underworld’s closing, in which Nick Shay talks about “the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging” (809). But of course, even as DeLillo essays about the dangers of celebrity and media he promotes his own. It is after all in an newspaper article promoting his new novel that he frets about “an entire movie that’s everywhere, with enormous feature stories about special effects and global marketing and tie-in merchandise.” This is to say that DeLillo is a part of the media environment he finds it useful to caricature, but also that he expertly negotiates the rhetorical challenges it offers him. In “The Power of History,” and, I shall argue, in Underworld, DeLillo particularly excels at defining his authorial brand by contrasting his idiosyncratic authorial voice against the media synergy of the 1990s American media environment, and moving images especially.¹

Of course, historically speaking there is little about DeLillo’s problem or solution that is unusual. Literary modernists were famously adept at portraying themselves as elite artists crafting innovative, idiosyncratic artifices of lasting cultural value against the dominant

1
popular culture of their time. But DeLillo positions *Underworld* against the media synergy that emerges with new force in 1980s and 1990s America when he offers his movie example in “The Power of History,” and when he begins the novel’s epilogue with this passage:

> Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that electronic and sex that’s cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of customer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices. (785)

As I’ve suggested, these are descriptions of media synergy, of vertical integration, of multinational media conglomerates formed through business mergers in the mid-1980s and early 1990s: Time and Warner Communications, Paramount Communications and Viacom, Disney Corporation and Capital City/ABC, Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting. In this media environment, stories are simultaneously marketed across multiple media platforms: book, television, movie, action heroes, radio, internet, comic book, children’s books, Happy Meals, etc. Characteristically, DeLillo makes his point here stylistically as well as thematically, by following his powerfully terse, declarative topic sentence with a long list of parallel phrases which suggest the quantity but also the speed of media synergy, the fast-forward culture and the “empty millennial frenzy” against which he contrasts his historical novel about Cold War America.

Although the very point of media synergy is that it spans across media platforms, DeLillo’s choice of a movie example in his “Power of History” essay was well-chosen. Major film studios finally achieved a version of the vertical integration that was prohibited in the
1948 Paramount court decision with their theatre purchases in the mid-1980s (Bordwell and Thompson 682), and eventually all the major studios were owned by media empires (Lewis), which allowed them to market across media platforms as well. Media synergy could also be seen in movies. As film historian David Bordwell notes, “The New Hollywood had been raised in old Hollywood and 1960s art movies, but the Newest Hollywood brought TV, comic-book, videogame, and pulp-fiction tastes to the movies, and a free approach to narrative came along” (Bordwell 74). Besides product placements and adaptations, movies, especially independent films, were often influenced by, and targeted toward, fans of other entertainment media. Films such as Quentin Tarantino’s influential Pulp Fiction made smart, self-conscious allusions to other media, including literary fiction, building upon the pattern of “belatedness” that intensified after 1960 in American film (Bordwell).

The popular emergence of American independent films, “indies,” was a commonly observed phenomenon in the 1990s (Lewis, Holmlund, Bordwell and Thompson, 679 – 705). And although it is impossible to quantify, it is likely that the most popular independent filmmakers were competing against formally-ambitious American novelists for market share and cultural prestige. Certainly, the obvious artistic ambition, eclectic influences and popularity of indie films allowed them to attract a younger, college-educated demographic that has traditionally also bought contemporary and formally-ambitious narrative fiction. Independent films attracted audiences who understood allusions to cultural history and appreciated narrative experimentation like paradoxical time schemes, hypothetical failures, digressive and dawdling action lines, stories told backwards and in loops (Bordwell 73). Most of the “independent” films were actually produced and marketed under the auspices of the major film studios (Bordwell and Thompson 695), which allowed the movies to reach a
wider audience and allowed the film studios to target a demographic they might otherwise miss. Despite this, “‘independent film’ took on an outlaw aura, with *Pulp Fiction* and *Killing Zoe* (1995) marketed as the last word on hipness” (ibid.). For the first time since New Hollywood, popular independent directors were commonly recognized as formally-innovative artists with real cultural relevance, at the same time as media empires like Borders and Barnes & Nobles were causing smaller bookstores to go out of business (Holmlund 19). Given these facts, it is no wonder that Don DeLillo conceded in “The Power of History” that the novel “may seem to be wearing an expiration date that takes effect tomorrow” (“Power”).

At the same time that American independent cinema was capturing the interest of young, college-educated people, Classical Hollywood cinema was getting a fresh veneer of cultural prestige. The National Film Preservation Acts of 1988, 1992, and 1996 “formally recognized film as part of the nation’s heritage” (Klinger 124–26). As Barbara Klinger argues, the movie studios had initiated highly-public film preservation efforts, promoting what she calls a “nostalgic revisionism” that connected film history to American history, a process that continues today. By 1997, that process was further encouraged by three classic movie channels on television: American Movie Classics (AMC), Turner Classic Movies (TCM), and Movies from FOX (FXM) (Klinger 93). More than ever before, Hollywood cinema was seen as an essential and valuable part of America’s past and present culture. As Klinger notes, cultural memory is contested territory, and by the 1990s it was once again one that film was winning quite well.

From this perspective, the prominence of film in DeLillo’s *Underworld* needs to be understood in the context of the 1990s American media environment in which the author
competed for book sales and cultural prestige. Many critics have drawn upon postmodern theorists and theories of the postmodern to analyze the novel, but surprisingly little critical work follows DeLillo himself in showing how the novel replies to its media environment.\(^3\)

One way that the novel indirectly privileges the contemporary American novelist is to portray many laudable artist-figures working on the margins of dominant culture in Cold War America, artists like pop artist Klara Sax and graffiti artist Ismael Munoz who come to function as surrogates for DeLillo himself. Through these artists, DeLillo guides the ethics and aesthetics of his authorial audience, including the privileging of singular, marginalized artistic voices at a time when technological systems rule: by representing the “grip of systems” during the Cold War (825), DeLillo also indirectly discusses 1990s media synergy. The “intersecting systems” of media synergy are also discussed more directly in the Epilogue (826). Often, DeLillo particularly relies on thematic representing and formally adapting different historical forms of American cinema to develop his mode of literary rhetoric, one which insists upon the “nuance,” power, and relevance of his singular authorial voice in a cluttered and frenzied media environment (“History”). In this regard, DeLillo’s use of film complements his major compositional choices with *Underworld* regarding narration, focalization, and temporality, as I shall now explain.

DeLillo draws attention to his technical prowess as a writer and his authority as a historian of American culture through his major compositional choices: his external narration with multiple focalization and networked characters, his refusal to rely upon a homogenous narrative voice, and his frequent time shifts without transition or explanation. The dominant narrative technique in *Underworld* is external (Genette’s “heterodiegetic”), retrospective narration with variable focalization from a large host of characters including
Klara Sax and J. Edgar Hoover, Matt Shay and Manx Martin. These characters touch each other’s lives in ways only DeLillo’s authorial audience can see fully, and the author achieves a stunningly rich representation of American history through their represented minds and lives.

But while countless of novels like Middlemarch and War and Peace also employ its dominant narrative technique, Underworld differs in its frequent departures from the norm it establishes. It includes the authorial intrusions for which nineteenth-century novels like Middlemarch are famous, but it adds second person narration, shifts of temporal order without transitions, and Nick Shay’s retrospective, internal narration (Genette’s “autodiegetic”). While previous novels, such as Dickens’s Bleak House, have alternated between external and internal narration, the combination is unusual, and the addition of second person narration and the time shifts make it more so. Underworld’s frequent shifts, without transition or explanation, with respect to focalization, temporal order, and grammatical tense resist the coherence traditionally found in classic examples of externally-narrated novels with multiple focalization, and make it more difficult for readers to naturalize the novel by “hearing” a single anthropomorphic voice telling them the story. In this regard, Underworld resembles a more accessible version of Joyce’s Ulysses, which changes narrative techniques from episode to episode and lacks a singular anthropomorphic narrator. Or, to put the same point differently, positing a singular anthropomorphic voice other than DeLillo’s for the novel’s heterogeneous narrative techniques cannot help us better interpret Underworld.

The ambiguous role played by Nick Shay’s narration only adds to the novel’s sense of narratological fragmentation. It is only on Underworld’s final pages that DeLillo suggests that Nick retrospectively narrates his story when he lives in Phoenix, Arizona in 1997 as a 63
year old man. This is suggested when Nick shifts from his habitual past tense to the present tense as he discusses his current life “In Phoenix now . . .” (803). Even then, Nick’s narration is never naturalized; we are not told to whom Nick speaks or writes or the degree to which he is conscious of telling his story to his undefined audience. Further, the relations between the narrating-Nick and the experiencing-Nick, their respective ideological orientations and judgments, are never made clear. Like Joyce, DeLillo draws attention to his role as author by using a mélange of narrative techniques and by discouraging readers from attributing narrational agency to a particular character or even an external narrator. In other words, what agency DeLillo concedes in voice, he gains in authority: his narrative discourse reveals the consciousness of many characters, but all artistic decisions must be attributed directly to DeLillo himself, and not a mediating consciousness such as a character or narrator. Philip Nel has argued that, “One representational benefit of DeLillo’s approach in Underworld is precisely its resistance to a univocal, clearly directed message: it leaves spaces from which others can speak.” It is true that DeLillo does represent the interiority of many characters, but this is different from allowing others to “speak” in Nel’s sense. Through his unexplained shifts in narrative technique and temporal ordering, DeLillo draws attention to his writing throughout Underworld, and at the novel’s closing he frequently uses intrusive commentary to deliver his messages that are clearly directed if not “univocal” in Bakhtin’s sense.

Underworld’s most prominent narrative technique is another one often associated with classic modernist novels from The Sound and the Fury to Mrs. Dalloway, from Remembrance of Lost Time to Ulysses: its time shifts, the sharp differences between the order of events in the storyworld (fabula) and the order that they are presented (discourse). Excepting very
unusual narratives, events in all storyworlds, in fabulas, unfold the way they do in our world,
from beginning to end: in the order of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and so on, and *Underworld* is no
exception. But while most narratives alter the temporal order of events in the telling (in the
discourse) to some degree (see Genette), *Underworld* does so radically and without transition.

The novel’s major parts are presented in the order of 1, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 7, as the novel begins
in Fall of 1951, and then shifts to Spring-Summer 1992 before gradually delving deeper into
the past with each new part: mid- 1980s – early 1990s (Part II), Spring 1978 (Part 3),
Summer 1974 (Part 4), Fragments from the 1950s and 1960s (Part 5), Fall 1951 – 1952 (Part 6). The novel concludes with an epilogue set in 1997, the “present” for both the flesh-and-
blood DeLillo and the protagonist Nick Shay. Further complicating the novel’s structure is
the Manx Martin 1951 plotline, which appears in pieces at the ends of Part 1, Part 3, and
Part 5, respectively.

DeLillo gains several effects through this system of temporal ordering. One effect is
that the novel’s title takes on a temporal and psychological valence, as we meet older
versions of characters like Nick Shay and Klara Sax early in the discourse, but slowly learn
more about them through the gradual revelation of their secret pasts, their Underworlds.
Another effect is that the temporal ordering recalls DeLillo’s diverse set of artistic influences:
famous literary modernist novels, Sergei Eisenstein’s cinematic technique of dialectical
montage, and the Dadaist collage technique of photomontage. While individual critics have
helpfully elucidated individual strains of this pattern, it is more important to see that DeLillo
invites all these connections through allusions within Underworld’s narrative discourse: his
important literary allusion to *The Great Gatsby* (discussed later), his allusion to Eisenstein in
chapter three, part 4, and his allusion to the Dada through the performance art in chapter 4,
part 5. In so doing, DeLillo promotes his novel as an innovative synthesis of novelistic, intermedial and transmedial influences. While many critics have argued that Underworld uses postmodern literary techniques, in interview the biographical DeLillo has preferred to emphasize its modernist influences. In any case, I believe that this critical crux partly derives from the fact that Underworld insistently draws attention to the innovative choices made by its author, but does so partly through its obvious willingness to incorporate and even imitate many different minds and media within it.

2. Film and Media History in the Marriage of Nick Shay and Marian Bowman

While writing his “version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography,” DeLillo privileges the quotidian, as does Father Paulus, and cultural waste, as does Klara Sax, Nick Shay, and others. As many characters in the novel suggest, artifacts of the everyday and garbage provide effective ways of constructively writing a counter history of American culture. So both thematically and formally, DeLillo was drawn to popular media including newspapers (“The Shot Heard Around the World”), radio (Russ Hodges), graffiti (Ismael Munoz), garbage art (Klara Sax), and most of all the dominant popular entertainment of the American twentieth-century, film. This interest offered an added advantage, too, for DeLillo could contest and rewrite nostalgic accounts of American film history. However, Underworld’s references to film history and other media history do not denigrate film as much as write a psychological history of American culture through its popular media—a psychological and less optimistic take on Marshall McLuhan’s influential thesis that media are “extensions of man.”

The marriage between Nick and Marian Shay exemplifies DeLillo’s use of media history generally, and film history in particular, and Underworld’s composition marks this
relationship as special, particularly worthy of our notice. Nick Shay is the Italian-American character who grows up in the Bronx and eventually becomes an executive in the waste industry, an industry charged with keeping “the best kept secret in the world”—waste (281). He has a privileged place in Underworld as the only character DeLillo allows to retrospectively tell his own life story in the first person. As a character in the storyworld, experiencing-Nick kept dangerous secrets and refused to share his past with his wife until very late in their marriage. Nick will finally share his past with Marian only as a sixty-three year old man in Phoenix, at which time he explains,

Marian and I are closer now, more intimate than we’ve ever been. The serrate edges have dulled away. We go to Tucson to see our daughter and granddaughter. We redecorate our house, building new bookshelves all the time, buying new carpets to set on top of the old ones, and we walk along the drainage canal in the twilight and tell each other stories of the past. (803, my emphasis)

Timothy Parrish has argued that Nick Shay lacks self-consciousness and that DeLillo judges against his character accordingly (719), but this passage suggests a more complicated scenario. DeLillo makes his audience understand that Nick has changed for the better, even though Nick’s narration (as narrator) records his change (as character) without commentary or reflection. So, for the most part DeLillo chooses not to distinguish between narrating-Nick and the experiencing-Nick, but he does suggest that Nick Shay progresses as a person in at least this demonstrable way. And this is a significant and laudable change. We know this because of the parallel between the way that Nick Shay eventually reveals his past to his wife, and the way that DeLillo eventually reveals America’s past to his authorial audience. That is,
when Nick finally talks about his own past, he follows Underworld’s pattern of reaching deeper and deeper into the past. Even if Nick is an unconscious narrator, even if he isn’t consciously sharing his story with us, he does consciously share it with Marian, and in this regard he follows the implied author’s aesthetics and ethics in a way that he is incapable of earlier in the story, when he refuses to share his past with a trained therapist (the prison psychologist) or his wife. This makes Nick Shay and his relationship with Marian Shay particularly noticeable to DeLillo’s authorial audience, a point that critics of the novel have missed.

From the beginning, DeLillo tells a story about American media history through the Shay marriage, and a history of the Shay marriage through media history. However, to see that story we must reconstruct that part of the fabula, the path of the Shay marriage, through the discourse. At the beginning of the Shay relationship, DeLillo metaphorizes their communicatively-challenged relationship through descriptions of communicative media such as telephones and radio. Marian first tells her parents about her relationship with Nick on October 18, 1967 (part five, chapter six), and her mother accuses her of “keeping secrets.” This dialogue alerts DeLillo’s authorial audience to notice the secrets Marian that keeps from Nick and herself. When she calls Nick from her parent’s house, Marian doesn’t mention the demonstrations against Dow Chemical that were happening outside of her house. She also fails to tell Nick about her father’s callous indifference to the students’ injuries that are incurred even as the bourgeois Bowman family dines upon poached bass (603 - 604). Through his report of Marian’s direct thought, DeLillo shows that she doesn’t fully recognize how these circumstances affect her. The confusing world that Marian tries desperately to ignore is represented through the external commentary that, “People
everywhere listened to the radio, to the dialogue between what was real and what was spliced and mixed and processed and played” (601). This is one example of dozens in the novel in which mediated reality figures the surreal experiences of characters in a tumultuous historical moment. By representing radio in this way, DeLillo offers a suggestive account of Marian’s subjectivity while suggesting that her vertiginous feelings were partly generational, part of the zeitgeist.

At the end of the same chapter, DeLillo uses a telephone motif to indirectly reveal Marian’s particular mode of discontent. Her confusion is revealed through her phone conversation with Nick, when she blurts out that “She wanted to marry him and live with him, anywhere, wherever he wanted, and not have kids and not have friends and never to go to dinner with her parents” (604). Marian isn’t conscious that her impromptu marriage proposal is an act of rebellion against her parent’s values and her own sheltered existence, and she is vaguely angry at both Nick and herself that he cannot read her half-conscious thoughts. Only DeLillo’s narrative audience knows that Nick doesn’t see himself as “the marrying type” as recently as November 9, 1965, and that he failed to call her when similarly confused on his trip back to the Bronx (618). As with the radio, DeLillo chooses to indirectly represent Marian’s interiority through a direct thought report involving another communications medium, the telephone. While waiting for Nick’s answer to her impromptu marriage proposal, Marian reflects that telephone silence is difficult because “There’s nothing in the silence but the deep distance between you” (604). DeLillo never represents the couple’s subsequent marriage in 1968 because this 1967 scene is much more revealing. While Nick conceals his secrets from Marian, revealing nothing of his checkered past (604), Marian hides her existential discontent from both Nick and herself. Thus these two
communicative media, radio and telephone, quickly figure the Shay’s communicative problems, the distance between them, and Marian begins what will become her characteristic cycle of repression followed by small rebellions: after she concludes her awkward conversation with Nick, she resolves to seek “hygiened perfection” even as she rebelliously sneaks a cigarette by her bedroom window (604).

When we meet Nick Shay again, he is attending a waste conference in Mojave Springs in the Spring of 1978. Because this was approximately the moment in American film history when pornography became popular (Belton 288, 341 – 42), DeLillo turns toward the pornographic idiom to continue his subtext of communicative problems in the Shay relationship. At the conference, Nick will meet a swinger named Donna, and before he has sex with her he will reveal his past that he cannot or will not share with Marian. Among other anecdotes, Nick will reveal one of his deepest secrets, the fact that he went to jail from age seventeen to twenty-one for accidentally shooting his friend, George Manza, with a gun George declared unloaded.

Even before Nick and Donna meet and go to the hotel room to have sex, however, he sees her in a specifically cinematic and pornographic idiom. When Nick tries to focus on his conversation with his colleague Sims, he notices women dressed strangely and one with an “accent he couldn’t place” and men with “Chest hair, mustaches, bushy sideburns, great heads of Hollywood hair—real hair that resembled toupees in bad taste, wish-fulfilling rugtops, sort of spit-curled and heavily surfed” (281). At first, these observations seem like the typically surreal and droll descriptions for which DeLillo is well known. They are that, but movies are mentioned again on the next page when Nick “carefully” watches a man and woman walking across the lobby, and suggests that the reason for his attention is “Maybe . . .
the hip-sprung way she moved, high-assed and shiny, alert to surfaces, like a character in a B movie soaked in alimony and gin” (282). The two allusions to cinema heighten the surreal situation: it is as if Nick went from watching a porn film (the men with Hollywood hair) to seeing a femme fatale in a film noir. That sense of surrealism is attractive to Nick, however, and he will later meet and flirt with “the character in a B movie,” the swinger named Donna. After sex with her, he will later describe his first perception of Donna as “the woman of the movietone aura in the lobby” (300). This allows DeLillo to insist upon that the cinematic motif is crucial to understanding Nick’s affair with Donna.

Through his treatment of Nick’s affair with Donna, DeLillo suggests that Nick cultivates his sense of being in a movie so that he can finally tell someone his buried secret. On some level of consciousness, it is Nick’s realization that he just told Donna his secret, but not his wife, that leads him to have adulterous sex with Donna. Even as a narrator, Nick describes his conversation with Donna in cinematic terms that allow him to imagine himself a character in a scene, and not a human about to commit adultery:

> These were movie scenes, slightly elliptical in tone, with the shots maybe a little offhand, slurped by incidental action. First the wordless moment in the exhibit space, where the characters trade looks amid the truck bodies. The poolside exchange with close-ups and pauses, the people a bit detached from their own dialogue... (292)

Detachment is precisely what Nick seeks. When he is in bed with Donna, experiencing-Nick continues the cinematic conceit for that purpose. After Donna jokingly refers to his favorite book as “porno,” he replies, “You’re porno and your friends are porno. You have your own magazine, right? Like any business” (298). Of course, DeLillo is also shooting a kind of
porno scene through his description of Nick having sex with a swinger on a hotel bed. Right after Nick confesses his crime, and right before he has sex with Donna, he creates one more cinematic fantasy, just to feel safe: “I had a rash inspiration then, unthinking, and did my mobster voice. ‘In udder words I took him off da calendar.’ A voice my wife had never heard and a story I’d never told her and how strange this was and how guilty it made me feel. But not right away” (300). Interestingly, the mobster voice also gives a cinematic veneer to the 17-year old Nick Shay who shot his friend, as if the younger version of Nick was also being cast into a movie by his older version. The identities of narrating-Nick, experiencing-Nick in 1974, and 17 year-old Nick collapse in the protagonist’s effort to distance himself from the painful but psychically-necessary effort of revealing his secrets.

Nick thought that he was achieving genuine intimacy with Donna, but DeLillo uses the cinematic motifs to suggest otherwise. On the bed, Nick suggests to Donna that “sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering” and Donna answers, “‘Don’t take it into the open, you’re saying’” (297). But assuming that is Nick is right about sex’s spiritual side, this makes him even more culpable for his affair with Donna.

In 1970s America, video pornography made sex much less of a secret, and Nick unwittingly accuses himself of violating sex’s “exalted state” when he calls Donna “porno” and discusses “home movies through the mail” (298). Shortly after Hollywood cinema adopted its current rating system on November 1, 1968, the studio film Midnight Cowboy (1969) explicitly showed sex in a mainstream picture exhibited in mainstream theatres for the first time. By 1976, videocassette recorder was sold in America, and around 1977 Matushita
was selling a home-recording machine that used VHS format (Belton 288, 341 – 42).

Therefore, DeLillo’s decision to place this scene in 1978 further strengthens the textual link between Nick Shay and his pornographic imagination. Nick uses his pornographic perspective to reject whatever intimacy they may have had, to imagine Donna and himself as characters in a porno film. He does so because he needs the emotional distance that a pornographic imagination gives him, the sense that what he is doing is not real. And if the narrational description of how 1960s radio spliced and mixed bits of reality with fantasy was not just an index of Marian’s consciousness, but an objective correlative for the confusion of 1960s America, then Nick’s pornographic imagination also figures generationally. Nick Shay’s cinematic imagination figures a national attitude toward sex and emotional distance in the 1970s that is represented and encouraged by the availability of pornography on video. In Underworld, pornography is figured as an underworld of 1978 America, a deep national secret that replaces sexual intimacy with emotional distance, and DeLillo uses his novel to retrospectively expose the limits of that kind of imagination.

When Nick first confesses this affair to Marian later in 1978, DeLillo offers further information about his future unreliability as a focalizer. Nick believes that Marian dealt with the news “fairly well . . . There was an air of tact in the room, a sensitivity to feelings ” (342). Several days later, the Shay family goes to visit ancient ruin, and when they enter the car Marian cries, suddenly and unprompted. DeLillo uses this scene to show that experiencing-Nick tends to ignore his wife’s grief, and that Marian tends to represses her feelings until she can do so no longer.

As a consequence, between 1985 and the early 1990s, Marian begins an extramarital affair of her own, with Brian Glassic, Nick Shay’s colleague and friend. DeLillo first uses
Marian’s pattern of smoking to reveal the trauma her uncommunicative marriage has caused her. As we have seen, in 1967 Marian snuck a cigarette at her mother’s house after her awkward conversation with Nick. Around the late 1980s (part two, chapter two), Marian has to struggle just so that she doesn’t smoke until she’s ten miles from town, and this brief and apparently unusual demonstration of “control” makes her feel good, “controlled and disciplined and clean deep through” (161). When she accidentally meets Brian Glassic in town, she drinks with him and smokes again: “Once she ordered the drink she knew the facade would crumble” (163). Early in the 1990s (part two, chapter nine, 252), she has already had sex with Brian several times and she’s smoking again—but this time, heroin. She has sex with Brian because he’s easy to talk to, and she talks to him on the bed like Nick did with Donna in 1978. And when Brian suggests they have sex one last time and end the affair, Marian’s response recalls Nick’s psychological tactic during his 1978 marital affair: “She [Marian] listened to the traffic and wondered what she would say in the movie version” (260).

One advantage of DeLillo’s shifts in time and focalization is that he can show how similarly Nick and Marian act, how both seek the emotional refuge of imagining themselves characters in a movie, seeing their own actions and lives in the third-person.

By 1992 (part one), cinema plays a different role in the Shay marriage. In one of the more painful scenes of their marriage, Nick Shay makes a poor and belated effort to communicate with his wife Marian over the alienating hum of a bad TV movie (114 – 17). As Marian watches the movie, Nick tries to probe her for information about her sexual interest in Brian Glassic and the problems that their son Jeff is having. However, Nick reveals his continuing lack of commitment to Marian and this particular conversation by standing in the doorway, at the threshold of the room, as if to signal that he is not willing to
share the same space with Marian for long, and can leave at any time. In this way, Nick physically affirms with his body language in 1992 the emotional distance that drove Marian to commence her own extramarital affair in 1991: “the little flicker of distance he’d perfected, like turning off a radio” (261). For her part, Marian uses the movie playing on television to maintain emotional distance from Nick and their conversation. Nick seems to partially understand the symbolism, and for this reason offers to watch the movie with her. But as Marian explains, the movie is not important enough to summarize for Nick, but he is not important enough to justify the interruption of her movie. That’s why she tells him, “You’re interfering by watching” (116). And he is interfering, for Marian is avoiding him by watching TV, “body and soul” (117) and using it for companionship, “the integrated company of the box.” Unwittingly, Marian has provided a sort of response to Nick’s pornography movie in 1978 by creating emotional distance through her use of a movie made for television in 1992. This is the lowest point in the Shay marriage, a period of maximal emotional distance between the couple.

As we have seen, the Shay marriage changes radically sometime between this scene in early 1992, placed in the first section of the novel, and their shared and newly intimate lives in 1997, placed at the novel’s conclusion. Although we are not told exactly what caused the change, two chapters later the couple will communicate through a different medium: Klara Sax’s art installation (part one, chapter seven). Nick takes Marian on a hot air balloon ride to see the installation from the sky. Klara Sax’s art installation of two hundred and thirty B-52 bombers is an object with an accumulated past, influenced by all the artists whose work Klara has seen, including Sergei Eisenstein, Moonman, and Acie Greene. The list also
includes the anonymous artist who painted the nose art on the B-52, “Long Tall Salley,” which Nick calls “the ordinary life and lucky sign that animated the work” (125).

Like Don DeLillo, Klara Sax is interested in ordinary life and the past, and like him she appreciates and draws inspiration from many kinds of art. DeLillo’s narrative audience will only discover this information gradually and piecemeal, as we delve deeper and deeper into Klara Sax’s past through the discourse. But just as Underworld will not end in the past, but in the 1997 present, Nick observes that Klara Sax’s installation is not just about the history of the Cold War. Awestruck by the installation, Nick reflects that the planes “were great things, painted to remark the end of an age and the beginning of something so different only a vision such as this might suffice to augur it” (126). For Klara Sax it was not enough to create an idiosyncratic vision of the past: she also wanted to create a vision of more peaceful future. She accomplished this by repainting the B-52 bombers and keeping their nose art, to reflect the humanity of the men in the bombers (a gesture that Underworld also makes through the dialogue of the bombers, Charles Wainwright Jr. and Louis T. Blakey), and that they did come home safely. If we are to judge from Klara’s installation, meaningful art uses the refuse of the past to create a new vision for the present.

There is evidence to suggest that Marian is as affected by Klara’s art installation as Nick. After the couple enjoy a night with friends, they talk about their day and Marian goes to sleep. Perhaps still affected by seeing Klara Sax’s installation, and remembering his affair with the artist in his own past, Nick will wake up and holding the baseball that is a physical connection to his past and America’s past, “the people’s history” (60), the baseball from “The Shot Around the World” baseball game on October 3, 1951 that connects many characters in the novel. As Nick sits with the ball, Marian wakes up, expresses concern for
him, and says, “I want you next to me” (133). This concludes their dialogue—we never learn Nick’s subsequent response—and it is the penultimate paragraph of part one. Marian’s words here appear ordinary, but they are extraordinary in context of the couple’s previous conversation over the TV movie, and given the fact that she is still cheating on Nick with Brian Glassic. Both Marian and Nick, it seems, were affected by Klara Sax’s art installation, by her provocative representation of the past and the present. Although they still have a long way to go, this scene initiates an “instability” (Phelan 2010), a plot question that will be developed, pursued, and eventually answered: Will the Shay marriage recover from the couple’s secrets, deceptions, and infidelities?

As DeLillo concludes part one, he also continues to build his dialogue about effective American art, artists, and media by distinguishing between singular, powerful artistic voices which recall us to the past, on one hand, and those which whitewash the past, on the other hand. The final paragraph contains Nick’s boyhood memories of listening to the singular voice of radio announcer Russ Hodges and seeing the baseball stadium from his house’s roof: “I imagined the field and the players, the crisp blues and elysian greens on that great somber-skied day—great and terrible, a day now gone to black and white in the film fade of memory” (134, my emphasis). But like Klara Sax’s art—and in sharp contrast to the “film fade of memory”—Underworld turns back toward a very vivid past at this point in the narrative discourse, including Nick Shay’s personal history and the baseball: it shifts from 1992 (part one) back in time to the Manx Martin 1951 plotline and then mid-1980s – early 1990s (Part 2), and it will continue to turn back in time from that point. Indeed, DeLillo’s publishers insert a black, blank page after part one in the Scribner paperback edition, as if to graphically parody the emptiness of film memory. In contrast, the black and white memory
of the novel (black type on white page) will dive into the past for some 650 pages before finally, in the Epilogue, advancing forward in storyworld time, beginning shortly after 1992. Unlike film’s tendency to glorify and blur the past, Underworld delves into a vivid and provocative re-vision of the past, as Klara Sax does with her art, and as Nick must to save his marriage.

The reason that Nick and Marian eventually improve their marriage by 1997, then, is because of their experiences with singular artistic voices who recall them to the past and the future, specifically Klara Sax and Russ Hodges. As we have seen, Underworld does this as well: it prefaces with a 1951 ballgame; it begins in 1992; its long middle slowly turns toward the past; and it ends with an epilogue set in the late 1990s. That is why DeLillo seems to be talking indirectly about his own novel and media environment when he has Nick reflect upon his improved relationship with Marian in 1997 in the two passages that appear in the Epilogue:

The intimacies we’ve come to share, the belated exchange of childhoods and other ferocious times, and something else, a firm grip of another kind, a different direction, not back but forward—the grasp of objects that bind us to some betokening. I think I sense Marian missing in the objects on the walls and shelves. There is something somber about the things we’ve collected and own, the household effects, there is something about the word itself, effects, the lacquered chest in the alcove, that breathes a kind of sadness—the wall hangings and artifacts and valuables—and I feel a loneliness, a loss, all the great and stranger when the object is relatively rare and it’s the hour after sunset in the stillness that feels unceasing. (808)
Maybe we feel a reference for waste, for the redemptive qualities of things we use and discard. Look how they come back us, alight with a kind of brave aging. (809)

It is not enough for an object to be “relatively rare,” as that can produce only a vague, false nostalgia. What Nick needed from Klara Sax’s art was a way to reflect on his past and make it meaningful for the future. Klara Sax’s artifice with repurposed airplanes drives Nick and Marian to live in the contemporary world; it helps them envision a future together through their stories about the past. The sequence of events helps us infer that Klara’s airplanes helped Marian see Nick when he was seventeen, as his lover Klara Sax saw him at seventeen: a confused person with passion and rage. Like Klara Sax’s art, Underworld synthesizes lessons from artists in other media and reflects upon the past but stays relevant to the contemporary world. Like that art, Underworld is made from previously discarded materials—popular media designed to be ephemeral, including cinema. Through the story of Marian and Nick’s evolving marriage and their response to Klara Sax’s art—and by contesting a nostalgic version American film history—DeLillo models appropriate responses to his novel: responses that prompt one to live differently in the world.

This close reading of the Shay marriage suggests that cinema is a diachronic motif that DeLillo turns to often as his own version of media as “an extension of man” (McLuhan), a heuristic introduction to American culture at a particular time. It is probably no coincidence that Nick perceives sex cinematically around the same time that pornography becomes popular in 1970s America; it is probably no coincidence that Marian uses TV movies to ignore her husband in the late 1980s. Like the Shay’s themselves, various moments in film history can easily figure American culture at large.
DeLillo also goes beyond the Shay plotline to suggest that Cold War Americans looked to Hollywood cinema to fill two related absences in their lives: sex and spirituality. Evidence of the first absence comes from the Jesuit named Andrew Paulus S.J., who refers to Hollywood cinema to confess his repressed sexual desires to Bronzini: “I would like to screw a movie star, Albert. The greatest, blondest, biggest-titted goddess Hollywood is able to produce” (672). The connection that Father Paulus makes between Hollywood cinema and sexuality is thematically paralleled by the character of young Eric Deming. Eric masturbates to a picture of Jayne Mansfield, a minor Hollywood actress and a Playboy cover girl. The condom that Eric masturbates into is one example of the novel’s many references to the prophylactic American Cold War culture that seeks to repress and contains sexual desire just as it does communism. But if a condom is a technology that you wrap around your penis, as Brian Glassic will eventually tell Nick Shay (part one, chapter five), then Hollywood cinema functioned as that kind of technology in the 1950s: it provided a cultural outlet to encourage and then subvert “unhealthy” sexual desires into the safer imaginary realm. Both Father Paulus and Eric Deming look to Hollywood for their “safe” sexual fantasies. As the artist Acie Greene will eventually intuit, however, sometimes Hollywood’s sex symbols worked too well. In the 1970s Acie Greene will become interested in making Jayne Mansfield the subject of her art because, although the actress was used as a conventional sex object, “She was uncontainable in a movie” (474). DeLillo’s unavoidable suggestion is that the sexual desires that Hollywood cinema tried to contain in the Cold War eras sometimes leaked out, like the semen out of Eric Deming’s condom.

For DeLillo, the way that some characters view Hollywood cinema in the 1950s represents their desperate search for spirituality and magic, a search that also leads them to
science, technology, and religion. Shortly before her death in the early 1990s, Sister Edgar still has in her closet “the old fan mags she’d stopped reading decades ago when she lost her faith in movie stars” (251). This talk of losing faith is not just a turn of phrase, for young Matt Shay goes to the Loew’s movie palace theatre, aptly named “Loew’s Paradise,” when his father first abandons the Shay family in the 1950s. Like many movie theatre palaces of the 1940s and 1950s, the Loew Paradise was so lavishly decorated and painted that it resembles a church, and is for young Matt “a thousand times more holy than a church” (407). Matt’s thoughts here anticipate Sister Edgar’s observation at the novel’s closing that the miraculous billboard is so well crafted that it is “the equivalent . . . of medieval church architecture” (820). In both cases, secular objects are so well-crafted that they offer some admirers spiritual contemplation. For DeLillo, Classical Hollywood cinema became, at the height of its popularity and cultural relevance in the 1940s and 1950s, a particularly attractive secular vehicle for some Americans’ spiritual longing because of the aura of its movie stars and its movie palace theatres.

Drawing conclusions about media causation in Underworld is a delicate matter, however. These examples suggest that DeLillo prefers not to specifically associate cause or effect with either Americans or their entertainment media, respectively. So, on one hand, DeLillo does not specifically suggest that video pornography emerged in the American media environment in the 1970s because there was a specific consumer demand for it at that particular time. On the other hand, he does not specifically suggest that pornography changed the relationships between American couples like Nick Shay and Marian Shay. This is not a simple story about cinema as cause or effect.
Instead, close attention to the Shay marriage in *Underworld* reveals how DeLillo uses media, and especially moving images, as “extensions of man.” The influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan uses his titular phrase to suggest that media are not necessarily in opposition to humans. Rather, media help humans to become more human by allowing them to achieve and perceive in ways that they otherwise could not. I borrow McLuhan’s phrase not to suggest any direct influence on DeLillo, but to suggest that *Underworld* represents intimate but complex relations between an epoch’s forms of media and its zeitgeist. If we want to write a cultural history, DeLillo suggests, then we could do worse than reflect upon media history, for the two are closely intertwined in twentieth-century America. For this reason, pornography emerges in America when Nick Shay psychically desires to pretend his adulterous reality is a fiction; boring TV movies represent a routine feature of American life right when Marian wishes to avoid communicating with her husband, and so on. Like McLuhan and others, DeLillo rejects a simple opposition between humans and machines. Furthermore, DeLillo concedes that movies and moving images were crucial to twentieth-century American culture. But he insists that we look at how these media allowed us new ways to emotionally distance ourselves from other humans, and to see that this is not the fault of any media, but our own. If there is a problem with media like moving images, it is that, precisely, they were “extensions of man” and so they allowed us to extend our failings as well as our strengths.

3. Second-Person and the Texas Highway Killer Video

At first, the *Texas Highway Killer Video* (henceforth, simply the *Texas Killer Video*) offers further evidence that moving images in *Underworld* need to be understood in the context of media history. The video is first represented in the opening chapter of Part II,
“Elegy for Left Hand Alone,” which is set in the mid-1980s – early 1990s. Through second-person narration, we learn that on the highway a young girl was playfully videotaping a man driving in the car behind her, from the backseat of her parent’s car. As she was shooting the videotape of the man, he was actually shot, and purposely murdered, by another passing motorist. So, by pure accident, the girl captured on videotape one of many murders by the so-called Texas Highway Killer, later revealed as a man named Richard Henry Gilkey. Certainly, this scene and the other chapters involving Gilkey can be understood historically in the same way that the Shay marriage can. For instance, the improving cost and technology of home video equipment around 1985 – 1993 allowed for an unprecedented invasion of privacy and provided the opportunity for any given moment to become a media event. We must recall that the L.A. riots occurred in 1991 after an anonymous citizen covertly videotaped four white policemen brutally beating a helpless black man, Rodney King, and those officers were not convicted of the crime. Indeed, DeLillo recalls the event through Jeff Shay, who dresses differently after the L.A. riots. And certainly, it says something about early 1990s culture that Gilkey is able to experience a greater sense of human community when he talks to the television anchorperson, Sue Ann Corcoran, than when he talks to his so-called friend Bud Walling or his mother and father.

However, DeLillo will also not hesitate to thematize cinema, video, or other moving images as synchronic, monolithic, and universal entities. In the Shay example, DeLillo historicizes various incarnations of cinema, engaging cinema as a diverse set of cultural practices which change over time. In contrast, the example of the Texas Killer Video (part two, chapter one) reveals that DeLillo also occasionally reflects upon the inherent properties of home videos as a medium. Here are a few key examples:
It is unrelenting footage that rolls on and on. It has an aimless determination, a persistence that lives outside the subject matter. You are looking into the mind of the home video. It is innocent, it is aimless, it is determined, it is real.

(156)

It is the jostled part of your mind, the film that runs through your hotel brain under all the thoughts you know you’re thinking. (156)

You sit there and wonder if this kind of crime became more possible when the means of taping an event and playing it immediately, without a neutral interval, a balancing space and time, became widely available. Tape-and playing intensifies and compresses the event. It dangles a need to do it again.

You sit there thinking that the serial murder has found its medium, or vice versa—an act of shadow technology, of compressed time and repeated images, stark and glary and unremarkable. (159)

The use of second person narration compliments DeLillo’s stylistic insistence on the universal characteristics of moving images. As a narrative technique, second person narration lends itself particularly well to authors trying to achieve particular kinds of epistemological ambiguity (Richardson). “You” can reference a character, an undramatized narratee, an actual reader, or it can refer to a vague universal, functioning as a synonym for the English pronoun “one,” such as in a sentence that begins “One knows that...” This ambiguity also touches the relation between the specific and the general, between the specific case of the *Texas Killer Video* and the general category of home video and cinema. So, even when the undramatized speaker isn’t making claims about “the mind of home video,” DeLillo can use this passage to hypothesize about the universal characteristics of moving images, including
video and cinema. Further, he can employ second person narration to playfully insist that these universal claims are not his, but “yours” in the first place.

Many universal claims offered in the *Texas Killer Video* passages are echoed and thereby reinforced in other parts of *Underworld*. For example, consider the vague claim that the violent clips of the *Texas Killer Video* resemble the “jostled part of your brain,” that there is something about those clips’ relationship to one’s consciousness that is familiar, almost primordial or archetypal. Versions of this claim are represented in other sections of *Underworld* with respect to other incarnations of moving images, including the Army training video for the atomic test. In free indirect thought, Matt Shay asks himself a series of questions and then recalls his Army training:

> And how can you know if the image existed before the bomb was invented? There may have been an *Underworld* of images known only to tribal priests, mediums between visible reality and the spirit world, and they popped magic mushrooms and saw a fiery cloud that predated the image on the U.S. Army training film. Watched from a safe distance, says the narrator, this explosion is one of the most beautiful sights ever seen by man. (466)

Through his constant juxtapositions, DeLillo more easily achieves connections like this, where the suggestion of cinema’s archetypal properties in the *Texas Killer Video* seems confirmed by Matt Shay’s musings hundreds of pages later. If certain violent images existed before the atomic bomb was invented or before the Texas Killer was caught on video, in a sort of Jungian underworld, for example, then that would explain why characters cannot stop watching the *Zapruder* film (part four, chapter five) and why advertising executive
Charles Wainwright insists that whoever controls your eyeballs controls the world. Such a theory would explain why images and cinema are so culturally powerful, and also why we need novels like *Underworld* to verbally reflect upon the image’s cultural power: this *Underworld* defamiliarizes archetypal images by remediating them. The idea of powerful archetypal images also appears in second person narration in the *Texas Killer Video* passages. The same technique is used to confirm other claims about cinema’s universality set forth in the *Texas Killer Video*: that video appears realer than real, that it is repetitious, and that it causes you to repeat the violence you see. But here again there is a sort of underlying playfulness to DeLillo’s use of video: what does an “Underworld” of images really mean when the novel describing that Underworld is named *Underworld* and alludes to a film named *Underwelt*?

Play is also an important element within DeLillo’s use of the *Texas Killer Video* to achieve some startling, even potentially offensive effects without distancing his flesh-and-blood reader. The key to these effects is again DeLillo’s use of what Brian Richardson (30) calls “autotelic” second person narration, in which there is “a direct address to a ‘you’ that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction.” At the start of the *Texas Killer Video* chapter (part two, chapter one), “you” refers to a person watching a video in the storyworld, but we do not know if we should identify with or distance ourselves from that “you.” This is a characteristic of much second person narration. This discourse tension is gradually intensified as an anonymous narrative voice posits what “you” know. First “you know” that children quickly learn to use cameras to investigate different subjects, and “you know” how children will catch adults in embarrassing moments, like getting off of the toilet. After these fairly innocuous suggestions,
the stakes rise. We are told that “you” look at the tape because you know something bad will happen and you want to see it. As several critics have observed, eventually the reader becomes implicated in the double “shooting” of the man, who is shot by a video camera and a gun. We are implicated because we want to see something horrible, because we consume the perfect medium for serial murder, videotape.

But if we try to take DeLillo even halfway seriously, if we at least consider the idea that repetitious representations of murder may encourage copycat murders, then we have to consider the source. After all, it is DeLillo’s mode of literary narration that has forced “you” to participate in a murder, at some remove. With every sentence that DeLillo declines to characterize “you,” the epistemological uncertainty increases, but also the sense that “you,” the reader, are complicit and implicated. A few pages into the chapter, therefore, “you” are eventually identified as Matt Shay. This finally gives DeLillo’s flesh-and-blood readers the option of attributing to a fictional character these evil thoughts, instead of uncomfortably associating them with our fictional avatar or surrogate. But Matt is still addressed as “you,” and his thoughts and actions become increasingly disturbing:

You don’t usually call your wife over to the TV set. She has her programs, you have yours. But there’s a certain urgency here. You want her to see how it looks. . . And maybe you’re being a little aggressive here, practically forcing your wife to watch. Why? . . .

You don’t want Janet to give you any crap about it’s on all the time, they show it a thousand times a day. They show it because it exists, because they have to show it, because this is why they’re out there, to provide our entertainment.
The more you watch the tape, the deader and colder and more relentless it becomes. The tape sucks the air right out of your chest but you watch it every time. (158 - 60)

For the most part, critics are accurate when they note that “DeLillo implicates the reader in the serial reproduction of the Texas Highway killer” (Parrish 710) and the Texas Killer Video passages suggest “our desire to see into the privacy of others” (Green 595). But DeLillo’s game here is pretty subtle. On one hand, yes, to some extent we may have been caught in DeLillo’s trap. By delaying these more objectionable assumptions about “you,” DeLillo encourages his readers to tentatively identify with Matt Shay and the thoughts DeLillo ostensibly attributes only to him. If we object to these later passages, then we must retrospectively question why we identified at all, even in the beginning. Although of course flesh-and-blood reader experiences will vary, DeLillo has much to gain if we fall into his trap. For example, I hypothesize that some flesh-and-blood readers may think more about the possibly deleterious effects of videotapes in their lives; some readers will be impressed that a novel can produce such interesting affects; and some readers will admire DeLillo’s cleverness in catching them and his formal dexterity. Not many novels or other media play such games so well.

But DeLillo also has much to lose, namely the trust and goodwill of some of his flesh-and-blood readers. Assuming the flesh-and-blood DeLillo wished Underworld to attract a wide and varied readership (and it did), then he would have to assume that some readers would be put off by the very games with second person narration that attracted others. Such readers might object, at varying levels of consciousness, to the assumptions made about them. The Texas Killer Video chapter offers an interesting two-part solution that reveals much
about DeLillo’s wider use of cinema. As I’ve suggested, the first part of his solution is to eventually introduce Matt Shay as the grammatical antecedent for “you,” and so to suggest that flesh-and-blood readers are not (ultimately) implicated. But the second part of his solution is to blame the medium of home video for the effects that DeLillo has actually created with his prose. You are not looking, of course, but rather are reading about you looking through DeLillo’s manipulations of second person narration. But if we feel uncomfortable with some of the passages in Underworld concerning the Texas Killer Video, well, home videos are to blame and DeLillo is just describing a cultural phenomenon supposedly inherent to home video that occurs to many of us. Many novelists have employed second person narration, with notable examples including Thomas Pynchon’s fearlessly confrontational use of second person in Gravity’s Rainbow and Italo Calvino’s playful use of second person in If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler. But when DeLillo chose to represent home video with second person narration, he managed to create startling artistic effects while furthering his larger argument in Underworld: the superiority of his idiosyncratic authorial voice over other entertainment media.

To put DeLillo’s purposes and achievement with the Texas Killer Video chapter into still greater relief, we can recall another insightful observation made about second person narration by Brian Richardson. In his book chapter on this unusual technique, Richardson notes that “second person narrative is an exclusively and distinctively literary phenomenon, its only nonfictional analogues being the pseudo-narrative forms of the cookbook, the travel guide, and the self-help manual” (35). While other exceptions will surely be identified in the future, this is an interesting observation when applied to Underworld. It is precisely within his cinematic representations that DeLillo finds his most interesting, innovative, and insistently
literary techniques. I emphasize this point because even otherwise admiring readings of Underworld have struggled with the question of media imitation. While often considering DeLillo’s imitation of other media an admirable and identifiably postmodern gesture, critics have wondered how Underworld can be considered great if it imitates other media so openly and often. Doesn’t this presage the “death of the novel” so often predicted, even by DeLillo himself? But as the Texas Killer Video passages exemplify, there is no contradiction. DeLillo knows that some of the most famous and idiosyncratic novels are also its most capacious and “imitative,” from Don Quixote to Tristam Shandy, from Ulysses to U.S.A. to Gravity’s Rainbow. And just in case we aren’t familiar with that aspect of novelistic history—or the more specific history of the American cinematic novel—he makes Klara Sax, the most sympathetic artist-figure in Underworld, also the artist-figure most receptive to work in other media, as evidenced from her appreciations of the artifices by Acie Green, Sergei Eisenstein, Moonman, and even the less serious independent film projects of her lover and friend, the appropriately named Miles Lightman.

In fact, DeLillo’s use of second person narration helps him contrast his authorial voice with the repetition he posits as inherent to both the cinematic image and the synergistic American media environment of his time. Repetitions characterize the moving image: “serial murder has found its medium” because even though there is only one video of the Richard Gilkey murdering a tourist, his many murders are replicated and imitated when viewers like Matt Shay (and “you”) watch the same video repeatedly. They are also replicated through a simple example of media synergy: the home video is shown repeatedly on television. In many ways, the Texas Killer Richard Gilkey personifies this trait, whether it is his habitual sandwich eating, the fact that he always shoots left-handed even though he is
right-handed, or the fact that he cannot handle the unpredictable in his former job at the 
grocery store. This is also why DeLillo sets the Zappruder viewing in an 1970s video studio 
with hundreds of televisions showing the same image (part four, chapter five): to emphasize 
that repetition is an inherent quality of video and its popular allure.

From this perspective, the suggestion that the Texas Highway Killer has a copycat is 
one of DeLillo’s most provocative gestures to his narrative audience. In his conversation 
with the TV anchor Sue Anne Corcoran, Gilkey insists on his own originality while 
confirming that he did not commit one of the murders. DeLillo purposely leaves the identity 
of the copycat killer unresolved to challenge his authoritative audience. Gilroy spares one 
moment of his mental life for the copycat killer, and the effect is chilling. He thinks to 
himself, “I know who I am. Who is he?” (272). DeLillo attributes this thought to Gilkey 
precisely because he is an obsessive-compulsive serial killer. It is ironic, but also finally 
unsettling that Gilkey is the one challenging the originality of his copycat because “you” 
have been implicated as a serial killer by watching the video. In this way, DeLillo suggests 
that viewers of serial killings are partly culpable for copycat killers, and in a way they are, for 
copycat killers would probably not kill without the media attention and the repetition of the 
original killing. Of course, media attention is itself driven by audience interest.

If those who watch videos are partly culpable for copycat murders, it may be that 
those who consume more original narratives are also ethically superior. In this regard, flesh- 
and-blood readers all of a sudden have a vested interest in appreciating the originality of 
DeLillo’s experiments with cinematic writing, but also his novel as a whole. If DeLillo’s 
novel is original and idiosyncratic, then we readers are far removed from those flawed people 
who repeatedly consume homicide narratives—in other words, those people like you.
4. Underwelt, Underworld, and the Novelist-Priest

Second person narration is also a prominent technique in the passages concerning the fictional Underwelt, a “legendary lost film” directed by Sergei Eisenstein. Along with a group of enthusiasts gathered by Miles Lightman, Klara Sax views the film in the Radio City Music Hall in 1974 (part four, chapter three). Before the movie, Klara remarks that there are many homosexual men in the lobby, and Miles explains that Eisenstein’s film “deals on some level with people living in the shadows,” the inference being that American homosexual men in the mid-1970s might have some familiarity with the theme. In a mixture of external and second person narration, we learn that the film has “no plot” (430) and a kind of “formalist excess” (443), and that it concerns a mad scientist and men being “hunted and ray-gunned” (430). Those men were “persecuted and altered . . . they were an inconvenient secret of the society around them” (443). These men seem to figure victims of nuclear radiation poisoning, “irresponsible science,” and homophobic societal attacks, and we learn that Eisenstein was reputedly homosexual himself. The film is well received, due in part to the campish elements like the Rockettes that Miles orchestrated for its exhibition. It affects Klara Sax particularly. Not only is she struck by the lyrical beauty of the confusing scenes, but when she leaves the theatre she also sees the movie playing around her in New York City as she looks with new eyes upon the city’s many citizens who must live underworld, due to factors like sexuality and appearance.

Throughout the Underwelt chapter (424 -33), DeLillo will employ second person narration so that we experience the film like one of its audience members, and sometimes like Klara Sax herself. While second person narration eventually estranges DeLillo’s authorial audience from the Texas Killer Video, in the Underwelt passages the same technique encourages
our positive reactions to the film and our identification with the audience. The author has already laid the foundation for this response, of course. The crowd at the Underwelt screening in 1974 shares the same kind of desirable human community seen in the novel’s opening scene during the baseball scene, when “People wanted to be together” (94). As they watch the film, the Underwelt crowd experience “a rediscovered surprise and delight... not the last such emotion that people would share this evening” (427). Second person narration plays a crucial but intermittent role. For example, we are asked to care about the victims in the movie when we are told, “You study the faces of the victims as they take off their hoods” (443). Eventually, “you” will merge with the identity of Klara Sax, so that she embodies “your” responses: “Klara was moved by the beauty and harshness of the scenes. You could feel a sense of character emerge from each rough unhooding, a life inside the eyes” (443). Here, Klara becomes the grammatical antecedent for “you,” which suggests that Klara has transformed, momentarily, into the surrogate for DeLillo’s authorial audience. When Klara Sax finally leaves the theatre and brings the film with her into the world, we are asked to do the same.

As its title suggests, and as critics have seen, Underwelt represents Underworld’s cinematic doppelgänger. Through his presentation of Underwelt, DeLillo reinforces some of his own themes: the importance of seeing marginalized people and listening to singular artistic voices, the dangers of Big Science and the atomic threat, and the desire and ability of a government to suppress its own people—a theme that DeLillo develops through his focus on J. Edgar Hoover throughout the novel. It is also for this reason that while the Underwelt audience takes an intermission halfway through the movie, Underworld’s narrative audience momentarily switches to the story of Ismael Munoz (aka Moonman 157), a brilliant graffiti
artist who is bisexual. This juxtaposition provides DeLillo’s authorial audience even more incentive to valorize Moonman 157 as an important artist who American society tries to ignore—or, alternatively, tries to channel into a commercial product. Klara Sax’s agent, Esther Winshop, convinces Klara to help her find Moonman 157, but they never do. It is also through *Underwelt* that DeLillo teaches us to appreciate and understand his literary juxtapositions and diverse allusions:

> You were here to enjoy the contradictions.

> Of course the film was strange at first, elusive in its references and filled with baroque apparitions and hard to adapt to—you wouldn’t want it any other way. . .

> In Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic.

> Arguments are raised and made, theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter—there’s a lot of opposition and conflict. (429)

While there are clear differences between *Underworld* and the fictional *Underwelt* (as it is described in the novel), DeLillo uses the film to valorize experiments with form, difficulty, contradiction, and juxtaposition. Less obviously, the brief discussion of Sergei Eisenstein’s biographical life evokes another allusion for fans of the famed Soviet filmmaker—that of James Joyce. Although I believe no critic of the novel has pointed out this connection, it is well known that Joyce was an admirer as well as a contemporary of Eisenstein, and Joyce remarked that if *Ulysses* were ever to adapted to film, he would only accept Eisenstein as the film’s director. The allusion fits well in this novel that owes much to *Ulysses*. DeLillo has admitted in interview that his short story “Uniforms” was a literary adaptation of the Godard film *Weekend* (Osteen), noting that the relationship was usually one-sided: thousands
of films have adapted literary works. With *Underworld* he created a more sophisticated literary adaptation, of course, since he invented Eisenstein’s film before he adapted it, and thus created and remediated the film’s effects through his novelistic language.

The most important connection between *Underwelt* and *Underworld* is Eisenstein’s attempt to communicate directly to his authorial audience at the end of his film. In the *Underwelt* chapter, DeLillo gradually rises fully to the challenge of imitating Eisenstein’s famous shot rhythm and filmic pace with his prose. The end of the *Underwelt* chapter is a tour de force in this regard, and DeLillo draws our attention to his imitative writing through Klara Sax’s perception. She observes how *Underwelt*’s “shots begin to engage a rhythm, long shot and close-up, landscape and face, waves of hypnotic repetition, and the music describes a kind of destiny, a brutish fate that bass-drums down the decades” (443). Notice that even in this sentence, the parallelism, meter, alliteration, and periodic quality of DeLillo’s prose provide the rhythm in *Underworld* that Klara feels in *Underwelt*. By the end of the chapter, both DeLillo’s prose and the crowd’s reaction to *Underwelt* has reached a fevered pitch. The film and DeLillo’s imitation of it end with this passage:

The march lasted only a minute and a half but how dark and strong, what fatedness in the rolling brass, and then there was a long silence and a white screen and finally a face that transfigures itself in a series of multiple-exposure shots, losing its goiters and gnarls, a seamed eye reopening, and it was awfully mawkish, okay, but wonderful also, *a sequence outside of the action proper, a distinct and visible wish connecting you directly to the mind of the film*, and the man sheds his marks and scars and seems to grown younger and paler until the face finally dissolves into landscape.
The orchestra began to rise into the pit and the music now was Shostakovich, you are sure of this, how spacious and skysome, lyrically wheeling, bird-wheeling over the wide plain.

Then it ended. It didn’t end, it just stopped dead. (444 – 45, my emphasis)

This closing scene of Underwelt prefigures the penultimate scene of Underworld’s closing—and the most remarkable scene in the novel—which I call the miracle of Esmeralda. There, Sister Edgar and Sister Gracie and a gathering of people believe that they see the face of a murdered girl named Esmeralda on a commercial billboard when it is lit by the lights of a subway car. After the miracle of Esmeralda, DeLillo challenges you in intrusive commentary:

And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an even that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt? (824)

The Underwelt closing prefigures the Esmeralda miracle in two connected ways: a clear gesture of an ambitious artist to his audience and an aesthetic moment so remarkable that it turns spiritual, miraculous, otherworldly. In his monograph on DeLillo’s fiction, Mark Osteen persuasively argues that moments of spiritual transcendence are an important part of DeLillo’s fiction, and this explains why so many of DeLillo’s novels end with a miraculous event. This is certainly the case in Underworld, as I shall show, but I will go further and suggest that DeLillo insists that artists such as himself have cultural relevance, even today,
because they are capable of making visible and legible transcendent moments amid ordinary life and in this way changing how their audiences live. This is what happens to Nick and Marian Shay when they view Klara Sax’s art installation in 1992; this is what happens to Klara Sax herself immediately after she sees Eisenstein’s film in 1978; and this is the opportunity that DeLillo offers us after the Esmeralda miracle—the chance to see.

*Underworld* suggests that this sort of artist-audience relationship isn’t even possible without unmediated authorial communication and powerful artistic voices. In addition to the ending of *Underworld*, DeLillo communicates this fact through the book that Nick Shay defended to the swinger Donna right before he has sex with her in the Mojave Springs hotel room in 1978. Committing to tell Donna secrets he cannot tell his wife, Nick tells her about a fourteenth-century book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which DeLillo chooses as the title of *Underworld*’s part three. What impressed Nick about the book is the first sentence:

> It made me feel I was being addressed directly by the writer, whoever he was, a poet maybe, a poet-priest, I like to imagine. ‘Pause for a moment, you wretched weakling, and take stock of yourself.’ See, that was me, sort of incisively singled out, living in a state of pause and stocktaking . . . This was my wretched attempt to understand our blankness in the face of God’s enormity. This is what I respected about God. He keeps his secret. And I tried to approach God through his secret, his unknowability. Maybe we can know God through love or prayer or through visions or through LSD but we can’t know him through the intellect. (295)

Like the poet-priest that Nick describes, DeLillo uses second person narration and intrusive commentary, especially at the novel’s closing, to make “you” feel as if you were “addressed
directly by the writer.” Further, he represents a world—the storyworld of *Underworld*—that cannot be fully comprehended by characters living inside it, but a world that nevertheless has organization, purpose, and authorship. For instance, no characters know where the title *Underwelt* comes from (426). It only makes sense to flesh-and-blood readers who recognize the parallels between Eisenstein’s fictional *Underwelt* and DeLillo’s book of fiction, *Underworld*. Similarly, Sister Edgar feels that, “The serenity of immense design is missing from her life, authorship and moral form” (817). But Sister Edgar helps us better understand J. Edgar Hoover and 1950s American culture through her role in the connections and juxtapositions in *Underworld*. This is to say that there is an immense design in Sister Edgar’s life: it has been authored by Don DeLillo for reasons that Sister Edgar cannot know through her intellect, but for reasons that exist nevertheless.

In contrast to DeLillo’s omniscient control over his narrative world, cyberspace provides Sister Edgar connections but no purpose. Cyberspace is where Sister Edgar exists after her death, an online existence that is not too different from that led by Nick Shay’s son, Jeff, who lurks on the internet but does not communicate (825). This is because in *Underworld*’s cyberspace there are connections but “only connections”: it is like the meaningless media synergy that allows vendors to sell “flowers, soft drinks, and live kittens” (823) as people look desperately for the Esmeralda miracle. So, DeLillo does allude to E.M. Foster’s famous formulation to “only connect” when he writes that there are “only connections” in cyberspace. But he does so to suggest that cyberspace cannot add anything to those connections: for instance, it cannot represent moments of spiritual transcendence like the Shay’s experiences with Klara Sax’s art installation or Klara Sax’s experiences with Sergei Eisenstein’s film. In this regard, cyberspace fails to “only connect the prose and the
passion,” which is what Foster actually calls for in his famous quote. In *Underworld*, DeLillo suggests that only gifted artists like himself can do that.

For this reason, DeLillo’s use of second-person narration and intrusive commentary are only a logical extension of his narrational strategy of omniscience throughout the novel. In a timely and important article, “The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction,” Paul Dawson briefly discusses *Underworld* along with other examples of omniscient narration in contemporary fiction. As he explains, the very category of omniscient narration has been a critical crux in recent narrative theory, as some have found it valuable to talk about the “god-like” powers of external narrators who offer intrusive commentary (e.g., Sternberg and Olson), while Jonathan Culler has most clearly articulated an opposing position, that an analogy between narrative powers and god-like powers does not help us understand fiction any better. For his part, Dawson explains that contemporary fiction like *Underworld* has found a new use for this old technique, using it to argue for “extraliterary claims to knowledge or expertise in postmodern culture” (149). More specifically, Dawson connects the emergence of contemporary omniscience to the (supposed) decline of literary authority brought by conditions including “the competing claims of cinema, television, and new media” (Dawson 150). While Dawson only uses *Underworld* as one of many examples, he is right to see it as employing a version of omniscience as one of many methods of distinguishing itself from cinema and the new media environment.

However, two other previous studies that are mentioned in Dawson’s article provide even greater insight into DeLillo’s mode of omniscience. Whereas Dawson prefers to discuss omniscient narrators, Richard Walsh provocatively argues that there are not any omniscient narrators in narrative fiction, only authors who use omniscience as a narrative strategy.
Unlike Walsh, I find it useful to discuss omniscient external narrators in texts like War and Peace or Middlemarch. But as I have argued, Underworld is an exception to this rule. DeLillo promotes and uses omniscience as “a quality of authorial imagination” (Walsh 73) instead of adopting an omniscient external narrator because he wishes to establish the most direct mode of authorial communication possible, as at the end of Underwelt and the opening sentence of The Cloud of Unknowing. DeLillo wishes to provide his reader with precisely those elements that Sister Edgar once missed before DeLillo heard her complaint: “the serenity of immense design . . . authorship and moral form” (817).

And while Dawson does not pursue the theological valences of omniscient narration, Barbara Olson has shown that sometimes flesh-and-blood authors use “omniscient narration” precisely for its connection to god-like powers. So while Dawson suggests that Underworld uses a mode of omniscience consistent with a “social commentator,” I have argued that much of DeLillo’s social commentary is his observation that contemporary culture ignores spirituality. DeLillo adapts the role of “omniscience” playfully sometimes, but he believes that he can point out moments of transcendence and spirituality that are missed or ignored by other media, including cinema.

This role of poet-priest differentiates DeLillo from earlier cinematic American novelists, a fact to which he draws our attention with his treatment of the Esmeralda miracle. The billboard in Underworld, which may or may not show a miracle, recalls perhaps the most conspicuous advertisement in twentieth-century American literature: the famous billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. As I describe in my first chapter, in The Great Gatsby that worshipper of Hollywood commercial culture, Myrtle Wilson, lives and dies for the glamour that Hollywood implicitly promises but never delivers to her, for the serious
and consequential acts of misperception caused by the Hollywood version of the American dream. *The Great Gatsby* suggests that she learns to dream and perceive from Hollywood, and that is why Myrtle Wilson has to die as a symbol of Hollywood celebrity culture, now permanently blind, with the amoral and commercial eyes of Dr. Eckleburg gazing dimly upon her. In Fitzgerald’s novel, any artistic purposes of billboard’s creator are completely irrelevant and, we may assume, nonexistent, for the billboard has been forgotten long ago and was intended solely as a base commercial act, to attract commercial business to Dr. Eckleburg, who also is forgotten in the Valley of Ashes. Only Fitzgerald allows the dim eyes of Dr. Eckleburg to signify, and they signify the dim perception of American commercial media culture which encourages similarly dim perceptions in naive American consumers like Myrtle.

But in *Underworld*, we at least know someone who envisioned a layer of the palimpsest billboard at the novel’s closing: Charles Wainwright. At least as far back as December 19, 1961, Wainwright senior had imagined a Minute Maid ad similar to the billboard advertisement that one that Sister Edgar and the gathered crowd stare at in the novel’s epilogue, set in the early 1990s (532 – 33, 820). Wainwright believed that “Whoever controls your eyeballs controls the world,” and he wanted the Minute Maid account specifically because he knew how it should be advertised: he believed that women in particular would be excited by visual representations of the orange beverage. The prediction is proven true decades later. DeLillo’s authorial voice tells us that, on the billboard, “it is the juice that commands the eye, thick and pulpy with a ruddled flush that matches the madder moon” (820). In contrast to Fitzgerald, who pays little attention to the rhetorical power of advertising, DeLillo suggests that Wainwright had a sort of genius and that commercial
advertising deserves his attention and our attention, for it is a much more powerful entity in DeLillo’s 1997 American media environment than it was in Fitzgerald’s.

It is even more interesting, perhaps, that while Fitzgerald disregards and diminishes the failed vision of commercial advertising as an intentional aesthetic and commercial practice, DeLillo not only emphasizes the individual agents who make commercial advertising successful, he also refuses to oppose the profane to his sacred, to oppose commercial advertising to his novelistic art. That is, Fitzgerald’s commercial billboard signifies vague, unconscious cultural and systemic forces: Hollywood celebrity culture in a wide sense, and 1920s billboard advertising in more specifically. In contrast, DeLillo emphasizes not only the individual agency of the commercial artist, but also the individual agency of the individual consumer. He suggests it is not in the billboard’s power to convince us whether an event is profane or sacred, explicable or a wonder.

In this way, DeLillo frames the contemporary American media environment as a challenge, even an opportunity. It would be easy to dismiss the miracle of Esmeralda as a simple irony, as DeLillo’s way of suggesting that Americans have been tricked into perceiving even spiritual transcendence from empty symbols of capitalism like a commercial billboard. But throughout Underworld, DeLillo suggests that we can find the transcendent in everyday events generally, and especially in commercial culture. To Fitzgerald, DeLillo would probably say that the view of Hollywood celebrity culture as an oppressive presence is wrong because it fails to give characters like Myrtle Wilson enough credit, agency, and humanity.

Fitzgerald also fails to see the magic and the art in commercial media and the human agents who create it. It is true that Underworld’s billboard creates a miracle which was unintended by its creators. But Charles Wainwright and others like him are part of a bigger picture that they
cannot see, and their rhetorical skills with their chosen medium eventually contribute to the miracle. DeLillo despises the base capitalist act of advertising, but he also sees a beauty and a virtue in “Underworld” art that Fitzgerald missed completely. This is the beauty and virtuosity that Sister Edgar also notes: “What a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared—the equivalent, Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture” (820).

Of course, erasing the modernist boundary between high and low art is a common practice of postmodernist art. But that postmodern act of erasure should not be understood in the case of DeLillo as idealistic or disinterested, but as one that allows a form of novelistic rhetoric that is arguably more persuasive to DeLillo’s more contemporary readership. Fitzgerald’s primary rhetorical move was to dismiss commercial art as base, unintentional, commercial, exploitative. DeLillo’s primary rhetorical move is to suggest that he can show his authorial audience how to see the sacred and beautiful in the commercial art they think is base—if we only accept his challenge. This is why Sister Edgar rejects Gracie’s too-simple thesis about the evening news exploiting a child’s murder (819). In a broad sense, reading Fitzgerald before DeLillo reveals a historical shift from “the novel as high art” to “the novel as museum curator”: an act of artistic appreciation of commercial art, a gateway. While DeLillo’s form of rhetoric could be understood as a sort of capitulation to the facts of contemporary life, it is also an expression of DeLillo’s confidence about the novel’s place in a complex media environment.

This confidence becomes even more legible when Underworld is compared to The Day of the Locust. As I have shown, Nathanael West contrasts his character’s unnatural, mechanized, and Hollywood-inflected voices with his authoritative voice of external narrator. In contrast, DeLillo associates and even unites his own omniscient voice with the techniques
in Eisenstein’s fictional film, *Underwelt*: “a sequence outside of the action proper, a distinct and visible wish connecting you directly to the mind of the film” (444). Again, while West makes as sharp a contrast with film as possible to establish his authoritative voice, DeLillo finds his voice through Eisenstein’s fictional film, to the extent that both DeLillo’s book of fiction and Eisenstein’s fictional film share the same title. On one hand, it is difficult to imagine how *Underworld* could depart more sharply from the cinematic novels of Fitzgerald and West. On the other hand, with *Underworld* DeLillo also followed the examples of Fitzgerald, West, and other American cinematic novelists to a logical conclusion, finding his distinctively literary voice in and through his engagement with Hollywood cinema.

References


Nel, Philip. “‘A Small Incisive Shock’: Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of


In this connection, see Dawson 2009: (151): “It is possible, then, to establish a discursive continuum from narratorial commentary in a work of fiction to critical pronouncements in a work of nonfiction which establish mutually reinforcing claims for an author’s cultural capital.”

The scale of these media mergers was unprecedented and previously outlawed. For the best discussion of media synergy and its relation to cinema in the 1980s, see Prince 2000. For a brief introduction of cinema and 1990s media synergy, see Lewis.

For good discussion of the critical crux of whether DeLillo is a modernist or postmodernist, see Nel. For a strong argument that DeLillo is a postmodernist, begin with Parrish. Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s 2006 book, The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television, is a notable exception. Fitzpatrick argues that DeLillo is anxious about the age of television because it threatens the cultural prestige that he believes he’s entitled to as a white, male novelist.

My analysis of Underworld’s temporal structure is deeply indebted to Genette’s method.

For excellent discussion of DeLillo’s engagement with the avant-garde and Dada, see Nel.

For different takes on the modernist/postmodernist debate, see Modern Fiction Studies’ special issue on DeLillo 45:3 (1993).
Waste is one of the most frequently studied themes in Underworld’s criticism. Begin with Todd McGowan’s “The Obsolescence of Mystery and the Accumulation of Waste in Don DeLillo’s Underworld.” Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction. 46:2 (2005): 123 – 45.

On reading conventions and “rules of notice” see Rabinowitz.

Begin with Parrish for good discussion, but this tendency is often salient when DeLillo’s critics discuss his postmodernism and his imitation of media.

Begin with Baron and Werner, respectively, for discussion of Joyce and Eisenstein.

“Only connect . . . “ is the epigraph to Howards End. In chapter 22, Margaret thinks, “Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.”
1. Looking Back

Now that I have worked through my case studies of individual novels, I would like to resituate this dissertation in current conversations about the relations between Hollywood cinema and twentieth-century American novels. There are strong convergences among the particular studies within the categories, but they all adopt as one of their dominant methodologies what I call the traditional, the Hollywood novel, or the literary periodization approach.

Traditional approaches brought much-needed attention to the fact that many fictional writers were influenced by film, and they provided biographical and formal evidence to suggest this influence (e.g., Magny 1972 [1948], Spiegel 1976, Cohen 1979, and cf. Seed 2009). However, traditional approaches tended to essentialize or dehistorize cinema, identifying as “cinematic” elements like montage, the close-up, and objective or passive point-of-view. While novelists almost certainly were influenced by cinema in these ways, it is also true that novelists writing before cinema, like Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert, could also be said to use “montage” or an objective point-of-view before the existence of camera. But if we resort to calling such writers “proto-cinematic,” then we have not really explained how twentieth-century novelists engage with cinema. If anything, we have explained what cinema learned from early novelists—an observation that the director D.W. Griffith conceded long ago.
Classical discussions of “camera-eye narration” within narrative theory also fall under the umbrella of traditional approaches. When Norman Friedman defined “camera-eye narration,” he was making an analogy between a passive, objective, affect-less narrative perspective and a camera lens. This usage of the term appears, more or less unchanged, in the classical narratological texts of both Franz Stanzel and Gérard Genette. This usage also appears in more contemporary narrative theory (e.g., Fludernik) and in many articles on Ernest Hemingway and other authors that supposedly use “neutral” or affect-less narrative perspective. The problem with this usage of “camera-eye” is that there is no historical connection made between literature and cinema: it is an analogy only. Cinematography can be passive and affectless, but many cinematographers use a moving camera to suggest affect, judgment, or any number of artistic effects.

Much more recently, critics have employed the Hollywood novel approach to broaden our understanding of the popular novels that were written about Hollywood and Hollywood cinema (e.g., Chipman 1997, Springer 2000, Rhodes 2008). These critics have persuasively argued that many hundreds of popular novels were written about Hollywood cinema, and that canonical texts like The Day of the Locust were responding to this literary tradition of popular novels as well. While extremely valuable in their own right, however, these scholars purposely avoid focusing on formally-ambitious American novels, those novels that, rightly or wrongly, often figure centrally in most accounts of twentieth-century American literature (Springer 2008).

Critics practicing the literary periodization approach focus on cinema as an important part of modernity or postmodernity, that is, one of the cultural and material conditions in which the transatlantic movements of literary modernism (from 1890 – 1945) and literary
postmodernism (after 1945) flourished. For example, David Trotter (2007) and Laura Marcus (2007) have each diverged from the former traditional or “analogic” approach to historically situate the cinematic engagements of American writers like H.D. and T.S. Eliot in the context of transatlantic literary modernism. And most recently, David Seed’s *Cinematic Fictions* (2009) discusses how most major American writers engaged with cinema between 1910 – 1945. But while these studies have shown how American modernists were influenced by elements of the cinematic medium like its automatism, montages, and visual qualities, they do not attend to the significant ways that Hollywood changed over the twentieth-century or the changing literary responses in kind.

*American Cinematic Novels* is distinctive because it attempts to attend equally to the dynamics of authorial agency, on one side, and to the dynamics of film and media histories, on the other side. Instead of reducing authors, films, novels, or various media to stock characters in a familiar story, I have tried to show how the only constant over the twentieth-century has been that these characters are all, to repurpose Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s memorable phrase, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together in a single garment of destiny.” To demonstrate this claim, I adopt a more restrictive definition of “cinematic,” and I crosscut the history of the American cinematic novel with the histories of Hollywood cinema and the American media environment from 1925 – 2000. In addition, I follow the American cinematic novel across the 1945 boundary between modernism and postmodernism, and I have focused on Hollywood cinema as a set of dynamic artistic practices. Consequently, my case studies show how American novelists also engaged with cinema in an ongoing and specifically *national* dialogue about the changes in Hollywood cinema over time. Indeed, we can safely assume that American cinematic novelists engaged
with Hollywood cinema and previous cinematic novels partly as a way of establishing their cultural relevance to their domestic readers.

The changing artistic conventions and cultural status of Hollywood cinema provided its own opportunities or “affordances”—and perhaps even its own soft limitations for interested authors (Ryan, Narrative). This can be seen through a comparison between my first and last example of American cinematic novels. While drafting *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald was not a film critic like James Agee nor involved in movie production like H.D. Still, Fitzgerald had already written a cinematic novel and representing Hollywood’s role in American celebrity culture was one way that he could establish his cultural relevance. While some of his contemporaries could draw formal inspiration from avant-garde cinema or the medium of cinema, Fitzgerald chose to repress evidence of Hollywood’s formal influence on his novel, probably because Hollywood cinema was still largely an entertainment for the lower economic classes in America. Fitzgerald’s anxious response to Hollywood cinema was encouraged by its reputation as entertainment for the lower classes and its new popularity in the American media environment.

But when Don DeLillo published *Underworld* in 1997, he was writing not just in the context of the history of cinema and the American media environment, but also partly in the tradition of previous American cinematic novels like *The Great Gatsby*. That is, even if the biographical DeLillo did not have specific knowledge of cinematic novels like *The Great Gatsby* or *The Day of the Locust*, he knew that many novelists had responded harshly to Hollywood cinema over the years. To the extent that every formally-ambitious novelist seeks to “make it new,” a more simplistic response to Hollywood would be much less attractive to DeLillo and his audience because such novels had already been written. In other words, both
the history of Hollywood cinema and that of the American cinematic novel encourages more sophisticated literary responses to Hollywood.

The turn toward “belatedness” in later American cinematic novels is another consequence of these accumulating cinematic and novelistic histories. This is because even as later American novelists struggled to write fresh literary responses to cinema, film history accumulated. In comparison to DeLillo, for example, Fitzgerald had a relatively easier time of writing about Hollywood cinema in a fresh way because he only had to distinguish his novel from the twenty-five year history of cinematic novels, approximately. But in comparison to Fitzgerald, DeLillo could draw upon many more facets of film history, offshoots of traditional cinema, and cinematic technique. So, for example, DeLillo represents Sergei Eisenstein’s montage effects, home movies, pornography, 1940s movie palaces, and 1980s movies on television.

To summarize, then, the case studies in *American Cinematic Novels* illustrate how the novelists drew special inspiration from transitional moments in Hollywood cinema, that is, the artistic and cultural changes in Hollywood cinema that happened shortly before they wrote their novels. Transitional moments allowed them to implicitly argue for their contemporary relevance because these were changes in Hollywood were ones that American readers may have noticed also. This is why Nathanael West engages talkies in the 1930s and why Vladimir Nabokov engages Hollywood’s role in mass culture in the 1950s. However, I have also argued that, over time, American cinematic novelists drew increasingly from the history of cinema, especially as new media emerged. No longer as “anxious” about cinema, twentieth-first century American cinematic novelists drew upon cinema’s rich history and varied artistic traditions like Frank Norris and F. Scott Fitzgerald would not, and indeed
could not. I will argue that this observation has special implications for our understanding of the contemporary American novel in new media environments.
2. Looking Ahead: the Future of the American Novel in Media Environments

Previous studies of how American novelists engaged with media after World War II, in both postmodern or contemporary fiction, often purposely conflate their discussions of entertainment media. So for example, Jack Johnson’s often brilliant book, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (1998), argues that while modernist authors distinguish among media like film and radio earlier in the twentieth century, later postmodern authors like Don DeLillo show how these media are partially connected, and so create “media assemblages.” Similarly, when Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses media in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (2006), she uses “television” to alternately discuss cinema, television, the internet, and other electronic media, or all of the above. I have suggested that there are good historical reasons why critics and authors might create these media conflations, including the increasing currency of the term “mass media” after World War II, the media synergy that occurred with media mergers in the 1980s and 1990s, and the “convergence culture” that new media theorists like Henry Jenkins have argued characterize today’s American media environment. But there are better reasons, I shall argue, for literary critics to carefully distinguish among media when analyzing literary representations of entertainment media.

For example, consider how, in *Underworld*, Don DeLillo engages with various forms of cinema, on one hand, and the internet, on the other hand. Like cinema, the internet is represented both thematically and formally, but briefly in both cases, and there the similarity
stops. Nick Shay’s son, Jeff, lives at home as an adult, works in the mall in the food court, and uses the internet. DeLillo engages with the internet to further reveal Jeff’s lack of initiative: “Jeff is a lurker. He visits sites but does not post. . . The real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at once, and he is there among them, unseen” (808). Just as DeLillo asks us to judge Jeff negatively because he does not communicate with people on the internet, he asks us to judge the medium negatively because it encourages a lack of communication. Later, Sister Edgar will die and will end up “in cyberspace, not heaven” where “There are only connections. Everything is connected” and she will feel “the paranoia of the web, the net” (825). To underscore his negative evaluation of the internet, DeLillo has Sister Edgar see a Soviet bomb in cyberspace: “the largest yield in history, a device exploded above the Arctic Ocean in 1961, preserved in the computer that helped build it” (826). In this way, even as DeLillo uses the keystrokes of Jeff online to structure his closing paragraphs, he identifies the internet’s history with the propagation of atomic war, and he suggests that it will help people to avoid human communication—just as Nick Shay used pornography in the 1970s.

Underworld’s contrasting representations of cinema, on one hand, and the internet, on the other hand, provides a snapshot (synchronic) of a pattern that I have already suggested appears when my case studies are placed together over time (diachronic). In comparison to his protean and eclectic representations of various cinematic forms, including video tape, DeLillo is reactive, even “anxious” in his dismissive treatment of the internet. While Underworld is thematically concerned with the topic of media synergy and “the grip of systems,” formally it represents, conceptualizes, and judges entertainment media on an individual basis. For this reason, I argue that it is a mistake for literary critics to discuss the
novel as a “media assemblage” or as a response to “the age of television,” for this approach risks conflating distinctive artistic responses to different media or media environments. In *American Cinematic Novels*, *Underworld* exemplifies the last of five progressive case studies of how cinema went from being a young medium in the 1920s to an older medium in the 1990s, and how, as a group, the American cinematic novelists in this study became more nuanced, ambivalent, and discerning in their treatment of Hollywood cinema over time.

The distinction I am making between “new” and “old” media refers to the way that media were popularly perceived at the time a cinematic novel was published. Of course, as Bolter and Grussin have argued, “What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges from new media” (15). But the question that *American Cinematic Novels* has sought to answer is, what happens when the relations between two media changes over time? After all, in 1925 Fitzgerald engaged a new medium called cinema, and in 1997 DeLillo engaged an old medium called cinema. Again, the case studies in *American Cinematic Novels* suggests that the accumulation of previous artistic responses to cinema discouraged more recent formally-ambitious novelists from treating cinema dismissively—unlike the way Norris treats that new medium called “cinema” in 1899, and unlike the way DeLillo treats the relatively new medium called “the internet” in 1997.

This historical pattern offers an excellent predictive model for understanding how formally-ambitious American novelists will engage with electronic media in the future. A biological paradigm might predict that the American novelists’ engagements with new media would ignite, intensify, and diminish. But the pattern I have identified predicts that after an initial period of inspiration, anxiety, and disdain of new media, American novelists will
increasingly interact with the history of new media and the transitions in the American media environment that come with them. As *Underworld* exemplifies, “new media” will become “old media” if they stick around long enough, and formally-ambitious novelists will advertise their “literariness” through their complex representations and adaptions of them.
3. Directions for Future Work

Recently Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued that white, male novelists engage with “the age of television” after 1960 to mask their “ill-disguised” anxieties regarding race, gender, and the rise of minority novelists. So for example, while novelists like Pynchon and DeLillo engage with cinema (and other emerging media) due to their various anxieties, she argues, novelists like Toni Morrison do not feel an urge to do so because they never had a dominant role in white culture to defend. The case studies in *American Cinematic Novelists* show that, by 1960, novelists like Pynchon and DeLillo were far less anxious about cinema than their predecessors like Fitzgerald and West because cinema was established as an older medium. But Fitzpatrick’s study nevertheless suggests important questions for my study: why are all my examples of cinematic novelists all white males? And if the only examples of American cinematic novels are written by white males, why do minority writers resist extensive engagements with cinema?

A partial answer is that I have defined “american cinematic novels” with a narrow definition, so that far fewer novels written by all demographics would qualify under my definition than in previous studies. By requiring a “substantive” engagement with cinema at the level of both thematic representation and formal adaption, I have ruled out many novels that in other studies are traditionally considered “cinematic.” For example, David Seed recently argues in his 2009 *Cinematic Fictions* that novels like *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Grapes of Wrath* qualify as cinematic fictions, in part because Faulkner uses the organizing principle of montage to structure his novel and because Steinbeck was influenced by
documentary filmmaking for his narrative perspective. I consider neither of these novels cinematic under my definition. Similarly, Seed points out in his chapter on African American cinematic fictions that there is an important film scene in the original manuscript version of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and he argues that Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* experiments with narrative perspective in a cinematic way. I do not consider these cinematic novels either, although their authors may have been influenced by cinema or cinematic cultures in some ways.

A better answer is that the subject of American cinematic novels written by minority novelists requires further study. On one hand, it is difficult to find an example of a canonical African American novel, for example, that engages with cinema as thoroughly as *Gravity’s Rainbow* or *Underworld*, or even as thoroughly as the lesser but still substantive cinematic engagements of, say, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1997) or Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). On the other hand, recent criticism has identified several possible exceptions to this rule. For example, David Mikics argues that Ismael Reed’s novel, *The Terrible Twos* (1982), is a “filmic double” of the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, and that this is a more extended version of Reed’s “sampling” of Hollywood cinema that occurs in his famous *Mumbo Jumbo* and other novels. James Baldwin’s autobiography *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) offers theories about film spectatorship and Baldwin’s experiences as a film critic. And while this work is nonfictional, scenes of black spectatorship figure in several of Baldwin’s novels, including *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *In Another Country*. In addition, the Filipino-American novelist Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dog eaters* (1990) offers several important scenes including Filipino and Hollywood films.
If it is the case, upon further study, that minority American authors resist substantive engagements with Hollywood cinema, this too deserves further explanation. Since the 1970s, critical race studies in American film have detailed how cinematic institutions exclude African Americans from the screen or render them stereotypical and thus invisible (Friedman 393), a point that Ralph Ellison also makes in *Invisible Man*. And to the extent that minority novelists see Hollywood cinema as just another part of oppressive mass culture, this might begin to explain any ultimate reticence to engage Hollywood cinema substantively. Certainly, any discussion of African American cinematic authors must include *The Birth of a Nation* as a touchstone, for the film furthered Hollywood’s claim to cultural relevance and artistic expression even as it worked as hateful racist propaganda. From this perspective, *The Birth of a Nation* could have created the foundation for a hegemonic American cinematic novel even as it delayed or suppressed African American cinematic novels. In any regard, the convergences between minority literatures and the history of the American cinematic novel provide the richest avenue for future research.
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