

SECONDARY TEXTUALITIES:  
IDEOLOGY, FORM, AND PERFORMATIVE CINEMATIC AUTHORSHIP

A dissertation

submitted by

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines a multifaceted cinematic form, the Narrative of Character Authorship. Films in this category allow discursive material objects (or secondary texts) created by characters in the diegesis proper (or primary register) to displace, either periodically or perpetually, the illusion of the film itself as closed-off, omniscient, and complete. In other words, whenever a character creates a visual text that seems to take the place of the actual work, or narrates in such a way that scenes from the film play out subordinated to that narration, we are likely in the realm of this form. The crucial, linking element is that the secondary text must form an actual physical artifact that exists and exerts influence upon the events of the primary.

These films, I argue, produce three distinct effects: They demand a reworking of Laura Mulvey's theory, still central to contemporary film studies, that the looks of the viewer *and* the camera are disavowed and subordinated to that of represented characters, and since recording apparatuses are omnipresent in these narratives, characters are constantly aware of their potential as performative and textual subjects; they recurrently result in characters who use textualized performance as a means of shaping their ideological identity in relation to the (often hostile) social order; and, most curiously, they tend to omit representation of an audience within their own diegesis, seldom showing their secondary texts actually being viewed, which I

read as indicative of the failure of textualized spectacle to adequately subjectivize its creator.

My first chapter analyzes the distinctions between mere performance and authorship or *textualized* performance, before analyzing P.T. Anderson's breakthrough work *Boogie Nights* (1997). My second chapter theorizes cinema's turn from silent to sound film in order to stake a claim for the problematics of voice-over, then applies this argument to Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), arguing that voice-over allows the noir protagonist to scapegoat and contain the femme fatale. Chapter three engages with films in which the secondary and primary texts are entirely congruent, focusing on the interplay of banality and anxiety in the two most common types of this subgenre: found footage and mockumentary. My final chapter inverts the framework to explore the disorienting, surveillant effects of films in which the protagonists are the *recipients* of secondary texts, while the authors remain obscured, focusing especially on Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005).

The filmography of this project is intentionally diverse, to the point of appearing nearly arbitrary. The desire to create text, to encapsulate our performative impulses – not for immediate personal gain, but as a means of shaping symbolic identity – appears in various forms in the period epic, *film noir*, satiric mockumentary, found footage horror flick, and postmodern thriller. It is not a genre unto itself, but a narrative form that can shape *any* genre.

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation examines a multifaceted cinematic form, the Narrative of Character Authorship. Films in this category allow discursive material objects (or secondary texts) created by characters in the diegesis proper (or primary register) to displace, either periodically or perpetually, the illusion of the film itself as closed-off, omniscient, and complete. In other words, whenever a character creates a visual text that seems to take the place of the actual work, or narrates in such a way that scenes from the film play out subordinated to that narration, we are likely in the presence of this form. The crucial, linking element is that the secondary text must form an actual physical artifact that exists and exerts influence upon the events of the primary.

In the context of literary modernity, the natural starting point for this exploration is the epistolary novel, the narrative of exchanged correspondence. The epistolary novel troubles the inherent position of the novel as a closed-off aesthetic object existing independently and outside of its own fictional world, as the author gives his or her characters (fabricated individuals, certainly, but ones with fabricated self-interests and motives nonetheless) the power of individual, textualized expression. Characters are thereby invested and actively engaged in the production of material that comes to form the fictional text itself, as their fates largely hinge upon which other characters read these documents, when, and in what context.

In other words, it is not simply the *events* of the novel that bear on the characters; the modes of production of textuality, the encapsulation and expression of those events, are of real concern as well. Epistolary characters like Helen Graham and Walter Hartwright may be no more aware of their situation as characters in novels (or of those novels' material existence as anything beyond the journalistic or legalistic compilation that takes place in their respective diegeses)<sup>1</sup> than characters like Sydney Carton and Maggie Tulliver are aware of novels called *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Mill on the Floss*. But Graham and Hartwright are *intensely* aware of the creation and circulation of documents that ultimately make up those novels. Non-epistolary novels might use the content of a secondary text as a plot device or as a convenient means of transitioning between omniscient and various limited first-person voices,<sup>2</sup> but in the epistolary novel the creation of such documents is central, as they are the texts that, in turn, create the novel itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The Victorian novel simply never reaches this level of postmodern reflexivity, though several cinematic and other visual texts that I will examine come close.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this vary widely in scope and significance. For instance, Jane's advertisement for her services as a governess, and the subsequent reply from Rochester, marks a major plot shift in *Jane Eyre*, but the inclusion of the actual documents as a brief disruption of Jane's narration (rather than simply having Jane say "I wrote a short paragraph advertising my services") would seem to be a simple stylistic choice. And, since *Jane Eyre* is written in first-person anyhow, the inclusion of a document written by the narrator doesn't feel particularly jarring or like a major shift in point of view. In fact, it foregrounds the question that attends all first-person literature: Is this novel meant to be read as something that the narrator has in fact *written*? Are we to understand that *Jane* wrote her experiences as a 500-page memoir and invest in the fantasy that that is congruent with the book we read? At the other end of that spectrum, one might place *Wuthering Heights*, in which the story is filtered through Mr. Lockwood's journal, Nelly's oral account, and a written excerpt from Catherine Earnshaw's diary.

While the epistolary novel is able to introduce its heterogeneous components through relatively simple framing devices,<sup>3</sup> filmic and other visual representations of characters as authors – or, almost as frequently, of characters in the fictional text who are also compelled to perform as characters in the text-within-the-text-proper – span a variety of techniques meant either to call attention to or obscure the division of the film’s narrative proper and the authorship that occurs within it. A fundamental difference between characters-as-authors in the novel and in visual texts is that, outside of two highly-specific genres, it is exceedingly rare for a film to maintain the posture of being character-authored or performed for its entirety. Except for found footage and mockumentary, the particular ramifications of which are addressed in Chapter 3, the cinematic works that I will discuss in this project rely on sporadic shifts between text proper and the secondary text.

The dialogical, secondary-text-driven film can deploy any number of pretexts to portray intranarrative authorship and performance, and thus exceeds the novel in its ability to portray authorship as a multifaceted activity. The cinematic medium allows for the very definition of authorship to surpass the writing of letters, journals, and legal testimony. Furthermore, I will argue, such

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<sup>3</sup> Practically all such novels declare their formal intentions in this regard within the first page or two. In Collins’ sensation novels, there is simply a preface in which a (often judicial) arbiter flatly announces how we are to understand the multiplicity of voices to come. In Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Markham’s first letter to Halford (i.e. the reader) explicitly sets the stage for the doubled layering of narrative by saying “I am now in a very proper frame of mind for amusing you with an old world story . . . there is *a certain faded old journal of mine*, which I mention by way of assurance that I have not my memory alone” (Brontë 10, my emphasis).

cinematic texts not only allow a wider variety of discursive projects, but recalibrate the relationship between characters' subjectivity, the secondary texts that they produce, and the primary narrative within which the secondary is produced.

This relationship results in three distinct effects. The first of these is a reshaping of the Mulveyian view of spectatorship from which contemporary psychoanalytic film theory has formed and continued to develop. In her famous essay, the primary concern of which is the act of looking, Mulvey identifies three distinct instances of this act: (1) the camera recording the film itself, (2) the audience watching the finished work, and (3) the characters who look at and interact with one another diegetically. Crucially, Mulvey argues that "the conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third."<sup>4</sup> While this principle is unassailable when applied to typical omniscient cinema, it is complicated by the interplay of primary and secondary text, whereby performance and the look of mechanized production result in material texts. In all of the character-author films that the first three chapters of this project explore, characters' *awareness* that they are in a state of performance within the primary text (enshrined in the secondary) destabilizes Mulvey's triad of the look.<sup>5</sup> The primary narrative is always infiltrated by recording and

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 594

<sup>5</sup> It is not my intention to impugn or dismantle Mulvey's extremely important work; rather, I consider the principles she lays out to be a starting point for my theorization of secondary textuality and performance in cinema, to explore a narrative structure outside her essay's

textualizing apparatuses, and the possibility of characters' acts (whether theatrical or mundane or both) being captured and transformed into text is always present. The fantasy of film's closed-off nature relies on the idea that characters don't know that they are in a film, do not recognize their own status as performing subjects. The typical character in this subset of films, however, behaves in reaction to the omnipresent possibility of being recorded.

But while the profilmic camera's look is interpolated into the film's diegesis, the look of the audience finds no such corresponding representation: The second effect, in fact, is the erasure of audience within the primary text. Although all of the films in the first three chapters are primarily concerned with the production of texts, and these texts – and the fact that they are or will be *viewed or heard* – is extremely important to the primary-level plot of their respective films, the actual act of reception is omitted.

Finally, I read the desire and compulsion to turn intranarrative performance into text as a distinctly ideological gesture, a means of constructing and maintaining a sense of (often delusional) identity relative to a hostile social order. I contrast this particular act with performance in and of itself, which more often aligns with attempts to gain advantage or simply deceive. The act of textualization is, we will find, an act of presenting oneself to the world, of trying to find stability through an imaginary sense of self, the function of the ego. In

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purview. "Visual Pleasure" concludes with a vague acknowledgment that certain "radical filmmakers" have highlighted film's dependence on "voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms," but how such films are constructed to accomplish this is left unexplained. Narratives of Character Authorship and Performance are, in their various permutations, simply one such example.

these films, a character's creation of text is at once his manifesto and fantasy. That the third term of Mulvey's framework – the look of spectators – is, as noted above, absent from many primary texts' diegesis is, I argue, an indication that textualization as a means of forming identity to be consumed and approved by the social order is, ultimately, a futile enterprise, merely an amplified version of attempts to create subjecthood outside of textualization.

Chapter 1 investigates this idea through Paul Thomas Anderson's 1997 film *Boogie Nights*, and begins by introducing a key distinction: The difference between *performance* and *textualization*. While the former is most frequently used by fictional characters to deceive or to gain some small advantage in a particular situation – cinematic examples of this would go on for many pages – the latter is, in the film's addressed in this project, a distinctly ideological gesture, an action that characters undertake in order to communicate something about themselves, their relationship to the social order as they see it (or at least as they wish to). It is a means of constructing identity. The middle section of this chapter discusses the aesthetics of the primary versus secondary frame and the plot-driven shifts from one to the other, essentially claiming that the frequent turn from "professional" in the primary to "amateurish" in the secondary effects a viewerly disruption as it calls attention to cinema's manufactured nature. *Boogie Nights* is a natural choice of text for exploring these issues, as it is the most fundamental kind of film about characters who make movies that in turn take up a substantial quantity of the actual film's running time.

Chapter 2 begins with an historical overview of the transition from silent film to sound before embarking on a theorization of a specific narrative device that arrived with sound: The voice-over. Whereas this much-derided convention typically occurs extradiegetically, simply emanating from the soundtrack with no narrative pretense for its existence (much like the Dickensian omniscient voice in the novel), I examine the implications of this device's presence in a classic film noir, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). The voice-over that guides the film is created in a primary register, but dramatized in the secondary by being captured in a specific text that exists within the film's narrative. My reading of the film finds Phyllis Dietrichson, an archetypal femme fatale, relegated to being a "character" within Neff's oral primary narrative, revealing textuality's capacity both to create and contain elements of monstrosity.

Chapter 3 turns to films that are *fully* secondary, meaning that the entire movie is diegetically presented as an artifact existing in the characters' non-diegetic reality. There are two sub-genres in this category, mockumentary and found footage, both of which introduce issues of *perpetual* performativity and textualization. Whereas a typical character-authorship film, as discussed in Chapter 1, will alternate primary and secondary textual representations, and thus show characters both in moments of theatricality as well as their "regular" lives, these fully secondary characters are generally depicted *solely* as though they recognize that their every word and action is (or may be) being captured. While found footage and mockumentary forms have found increased popularity

and critical response in the past decade or so,<sup>6</sup> little attention has been paid to the ramifications of characters who are “always on.” With this truism of the genre as a point of departure, I address the intertwining of banality and anxiety, as well as those concepts’ clear relation to cringe comedy, through *The Office* (2005), Christopher Guest’s *Best in Show* (2000), Rusty Cundieff’s *Fear of a Black Hat* (1993), and J.J. Abrams’ *Cloverfield* (2008).

Finally, Chapter 4 examines a reversal in this dynamic through films in which central characters are the recipients of surveillant texts that seem to appear from a sort of authorial void. Taking Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997) and, especially, Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), as exemplars of this form, I argue that it engenders a reversal of the ideological project of self-definition explored in the previous three chapters. Whereas authorship allows characters to mold a particular performative identity in relation to the social order, in Lynch and Haneke’s films, the direct and intended recipient of a text of unknown authorship lays bare the *reality* of his subjecthood, as the video texts function in the role of the superego. Furthermore, whereas the discursive boundaries between primary and secondary in the films examined in the first three chapters are, almost without exception, clear and distinct, in *Caché* they are ambiguous, easily confused, often bleeding into one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Or, at any rate, the former has been consistently deployed since *The Blair Witch Project* demonstrated its formidable narrative power, even – or *especially* – when produced on a low budget, and the latter has been a go-to television format in the wake of *The Office*.

Secondary text and character authorship have most recently seeped into the critically-lauded realm of so-called “Prestige Drama.” For instance, the first season of biker melodrama *Sons of Anarchy* (2008) hinges upon a memoir written by the father of motorcycle club president Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam). Not only is Jax markedly influenced by what he reads, and not only is the secondary text a literal manifesto through which the father tries to perpetuate an ideological identity, formed out of late 60s counterculture idealism, as a rebuke to the club’s involvement in gun-running and murder-for-hire, but the physical manuscript of the memoir comes to play a significant role in the story proper as other characters intercept and attempt to destroy it.<sup>7</sup>

In *True Detective* (2014), the entire first season’s story unfolds as a textual product of testimony given by the two key characters, detectives Rust (Matthew McConaughey) and Hart (Woody Harrelson), seventeen years later, and thus invites comparison with *Double Indemnity*, as an attentive viewer must ask to what extent one narrative plane corresponds to the other and consider the problematic of the unreliable narrator. In one pivotal scene, this problematic is made explicit, as the characters’ voiceovers describe a “by the book” approach to finding and arresting a drug kingpin/kidnapper, while the events on screen (ostensibly the “real story”) depict typical television “rogue cop” tactics. The

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<sup>7</sup> This particular aspect, in which access to the textual/secondary object is near-fetishized as a key to power and advantage by several characters in the primary narrative, is especially similar to Richardson’s *Clarissa*.

juxtaposition of the two hints at a skepticism that ought naturally to arise in any voiced over filmic scene: Why should I trust the narrator's version of events?

Finally, a scene from the episode "Confessions," from the final season of *Breaking Bad* (2008), has methamphetamine kingpin Walter White (Bryan Cranston) attempting to threaten his DEA agent brother-in-law Hank (Dean Norris) to stop investigating him by recording a DVD of his "confession," wherein he spins an alternate narrative in which Hank is in fact the mastermind, and Walt was manipulated and coerced into participating. In the still below, Hank and his wife Marie watch, in precise, symmetrically-composed mise en scene, as Walt delivers a confessional narrative on their television screen. This shot embodies what one might imagine to be the secondary text's structural and visual essence: Characters within a primary frame watch a secondary text (to them, simply a text) with great interest, knowing that it bears upon their own lives and desires.



But it turns out this is *not* always its essence: In the films that I will primarily discuss in the first three chapters, such a moment of viewership simply does not occur. Horner's/Dirk Diggler's pornos, Neff's confession, and the

mockumentaries and found footage of the fully secondary subgenre are never shown being viewed. They are, at least in terms of what is directly represented in primary text, performances without audience, personal statements of characters' sense of self and place in the world that, despite being addressed to some legitimizing big Other, can be just as easily read as the author-character simply speaking to him or herself.

## Chapter 1

### Textuality, Ideology, and Fetish in *Boogie Nights*

“We are what we pretend to be.”

-Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

“Ideology is essentially the belief that perspective is truth.”

-Paul Fry, Yale University

### Narratives of Character Authorship

Films that fall under the definition of Narratives of Character Authorship share a formal affinity for diegetically representing the act of textual creation. Most narrative films work to conceal the means of their production. Something as minor as a boom microphone or the shadow of a camera operator drifting visibly into the frame would be regarded not only as a “goof” but as a blow to the film’s ability to involve the spectator in its fantasy. More severely, a character acknowledging his or her performative status within the fictive text would essentially *destroy* the fantasy.

Some iconoclastic filmmakers will go to extremes to destroy such safeguards of viewer credulity, whether through fourth-wall-breaking conceits or simple non-adherence to established principles of film language. Peter Greenaway, for instance, projects pages from the shooting script for *8½ Women* (1999) onto the screen during the film’s opening sequence and blithely allows an equipment van to drive across the set during a scene from his 17<sup>th</sup>-century

period piece *The Draughtman's Contract* (1984). *Wayne's World* (Penelope Spheeris 1992) ends with its characters self-consciously taking control of the film in order to present a variety of conclusions. Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) is, of course, known mostly for selectively allowing some characters, but not others, to recognize that they are acting in a film and to directly address the audience. Meanwhile, on the level of form, auteurs of the Italian Neorealism and French New Wave movements introduced excessively long takes, jump cuts, and disjointed shot-reverse shot patterns, all of which undermine the carefully constructed principles of continuity editing and, in turn, remind viewers that what they are experiencing is manufactured.<sup>8</sup>

The painstaking maintenance of the diegetic fantasy, so much more common than its willful destruction, enables narrative cinema to exist as what Laura Mulvey calls "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience." The audience must believe in its own essential invisibility, an invisibility without which "fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness, and truth."<sup>9</sup> In an essay contemporary to Mulvey's (and nearly as iconic), Jean-Louis Baudry similarly delineates films that are closed off from those that are not: "Is the work made evident, does consumption of the product bring about a 'knowledge effect' [Althusser], or is the work concealed?"

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<sup>8</sup> While Greenaway and Spheeris' motivations for such blatant fourth-wall breaking can likely be attributed to postmodern playfulness, the formal tics of De Sica, Rossellini, Godard, and Truffaut were explicitly ideological and political in nature, a calculated rebuff of Hollywood aesthetics.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 839.

If the latter, consumption of the product will obviously be accompanied by ideological surplus value.”<sup>10</sup> The fundamental idea is that viewers delude themselves into believing that they have achieved subjective mastery through a simple one-way voyeurism, and this view depends entirely on the assumption that characters, within their sealed fictional world, do not understand themselves to be either performers or authors. The presumed mastery of the spectator, Mulvey and Baudry contend, allows the filmic work itself to operate ideologically.

However, even if a character “performs” intra-narratively, the spectator’s investment in and attachment to that character need not necessarily be disrupted. For instance, in the “plumber’s daughter” scene of *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra 1934), Peter (Clark Gable) and Ellie (Claudette Colbert) put on an impromptu and uproarious (in spite of the pall of casual spousal cruelty that hangs over it) performance of a bickering working-class couple in order to throw off the police officers’ discovery that Ellie is in fact the wealthy heiress whom they’re looking for. More recently, the third act of *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996) involves Albert (Nathan Lane), who makes his living as a cabaret performer to begin with, dressing in drag and improbably passing as a matronly older woman in order to conceal from a hypocritical right-wing politician (Gene Hackman) the effeminate qualities that essentially define his character.

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Ed. Philip Rosen (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 287.

One could surely recall dozens of similar cinematic moments. In such scenes, we see not just familiar actors playing characters, but those characters engaging in performance relative to the fictional events of the film. But we must note two crucial things: first, these performances are not captured for posterity by any intra-narrative apparatus that then reinserts them into the filmic whole. Second, such performances tend to occur with characters that have already been established as protagonistic, sympathetic, and, in spectator theory terms, as audience surrogates. In this context, we are likely to take enjoyment in the character's intra-narrative performance, to admire his or her ability to deceive and to advance his or her interests. Intra-narrative performance is a necessity to characters that rely on it in order to negotiate hostile or unfamiliar terrain. At times, an entire film can revolve around such performance, transforming intranarrative theatricality from episodic to nearly all-encompassing. For instance, the little-seen heist thriller *The Score* (Frank Oz 2001) depicts a young thief named Jack (Edward Norton) who is so committed to robbing the Montreal House of Customs that he spends months masquerading as a mentally-handicapped janitor in order to study the building's security systems. The duplicity of this performance is so central to the film's story – and so anticipatory of the “twist ending” that the genre demands – that critic Rob Gonsalves remarks “*The Score* is less about its plot (Nick and Jack grudgingly team up to nab the scepter) than about deception, acting, the theater of subterfuge.”<sup>11</sup> In other

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<sup>11</sup> Rob Gonsalves, Review of *The Score*, eFilmcritic.com, 2001.

words, the simple fact of performance within performance takes precedence over the vagaries of plot itself. If such sequences of performative deception tend to create elaborate, exhibitionistic, at times histrionic, scenes within otherwise realistic films, we might note their affinity with what Joseph Litvak describes as theatricality's "pragmatic overdetermination, its perverse capacity for doing more than just serving the interests of whatever political ideologies or cultural dispensations happen to have appropriated it."<sup>12</sup> In all of these cinematic examples, performance is expedient and aesthetic, but drained of ideological urgency. The characters essayed by Lane, Norton, Gable, and Colbert benefit by their intra-narrative performances, but they do not create their secondary characters (matronly aunt, handicapped maintenance worker, blue-collar couple) as a means of creating commentary on those cultural roles or of shaping and defining their relation to the social order. This is not to say, of course, that such intra-narrative performances cannot be interpreted ideologically. Surely, the final act of *The Birdcage* can be read through any number of queer theory lenses, and seems, for instance, to rather simplistically argue that an effeminate gay man should have little trouble performing convincingly in drag. Peter and Ellie's ruse, meanwhile, succeeds precisely *because of* an ideological compulsion on the part of the police officers and innkeeper to stay out of a domestic dispute, to essentially respect the husband's

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<http://www.efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=5476&reviewer=416>

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992) xi–xii.

right to be abusive (it's 1934, after all). The crucial point is that although intra-narrative theatrics, along with all aspects of cinema, may be interpreted ideologically, they are typically not performed by the *character* as an ideological gesture.

Authorship is something else entirely. If such impromptu performances as discussed above are pragmatic, improvised, and circumstantial (relative to the film's plot), then the character-authored and -performed texts in *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson 1997), by contrast, romanticize performativity itself and fetishize the material result. The fetishization of the textual object is most explicitly pronounced through a relatively minor character, club owner Maurice (Luis Guzman). At a pool party, he beseeches Amber (Julianne Moore) to convince porn-auteur Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) to give him an audition, and plaintively lays bare his motivations for wanting to perform in this way:

I'm just this poor fellow from Puerto Rico. I got this club here, that's one thing. But soon, that goes, I die, and what do I have? I got nothing. I want something I can send home. Something I can send to my brothers and say "Look at me. Look at me and all the beautiful women I've been with."

We see here not only the enjoyment and satisfaction that characters in the primary register presume to be related to erotic performance, but also that those enjoyments are *explicitly linked* to their textual productions. It's not enough for Maurice to enjoy, whether sexually or through his ownership of the

club; what matters is that it be recorded, made into a simple material object that can be easily transmitted to his brothers back home. Note Maurice's wistful choice of grammatical tense in this appeal to Amber: he is anticipating a future in which films of him having sex will exist (conditional upon Jack's approval). But the reality of his having been with many beautiful women is ambiguous; he may or may not already be doing this. The emphasis is clearly on the resulting *object*, not on the erotic act itself. This preoccupation with the presentation of the stylized sex act illustrates perfectly Slavoj Žižek's claim that "jouissance is torn between the Symbolic and the Real . . . On the one hand jouissance is private, the kernel which resists public disclosure. On the other hand, jouissance 'counts' only as registered by the big Other."<sup>13</sup> In Maurice's and Žižek's view, the big Other exists to validate enjoyment and to consume our carefully-constructed textual accounts of any act that puts us in a particular light, to view and thus validate our ideal version of who we are relative to the social order.

The act of creating text is regarded, justifiably or otherwise, by those creators as imbued with personal, social, and artistic value as a pretext for their ideological goals. Authorship and performance exist, at least in these characters' imaginations, as romantic endeavors, as the culmination of calculated artistry. But, as in all of the films to be examined in this project, the secondary texts

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<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 1997), 179. Žižek proceeds to recall a "low-class joke" about a man who finds himself on a desert island with a beautiful woman, has sex with her, and then, despite claiming to be "fully satisfied" (having fulfilled the "private" component of sexual enjoyment), asks the woman to dress as a man so that he can tell her, "with the obscene smile of complicity," about the boast-worthy sexual encounter (registering it with the big Other).

should be read as records of their fictional creators' attempts to construct an ideal subjectivity through narrative. Characters in *Boogie Nights* perform, record, and thus make finite, not just laughably badly-acted porn films, but fantasies about their position within the social order. Hilary Neroni describes the close link between ideology and narrative fantasy as follows:

To express this imaginary relationship [of individuals to their real conditions of existence], individuals and the social order as a whole need to *narrativize* their identity and society's expectations of them. These narratives provide meaning and identity.<sup>14</sup>

Though the social subject's relation to ideology is closely linked to the production of narrative[s], the connection is typically not a matter of creating text, but rather an almost-reflexive process resulting in meta- and micro-narratives: totalizing stories that rationalize historical outcomes and ideologies.<sup>15</sup>

As Terry Eagleton puts it, "[Ideology] is far more subtle, pervasive, and *unconscious* than a set of explicit doctrines: it is the very medium in which I 'live out' my relation to society, the realm of signs and social practices which binds me to the social structure and lends me a sense of coherent purpose and identity."<sup>16</sup> The Cinema of Character Authorship, however, takes *literally* what

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<sup>14</sup> Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979).

<sup>16</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 149. My emphasis.

Eagleton and Neroni describe by showing characters who sublimate their ideological narratives of self into *actual* narrative texts.

*Boogie Nights* is exemplary in its dramatization of this process as an organized and creative enterprise through the production of a textual commodity that encapsulates that same emergence of spectacle. Correctives to the dissatisfactions and frustrations of their “real” lives, and their relationship to a social order that becomes increasingly bureaucratic, authoritarian, and prohibitive as the film’s timeline progresses, consistently find expression in the secondary texts. The devastating juxtaposition of the primary text within which the characters perform and create, and the secondary register of the finished products themselves, exposes the essential futility of attempting to situate oneself within ideology through narrativization.

Narratives of Character Authorship also operate in between the extremes of concealment and exposure discussed above. On the one hand, they portray the creation of text, but *not*, at least not in the style of *Wayne’s World* or *8½ Women*, the meta-creation of the film being viewed. Instead, a Narrative of Character Authorship shows a character creating a text, and then allows (or seems to allow) that text to displace the film proper. Of course, this displacement is illusory; the secondary text is the work of the director who has created the whole film, just as is the primary. So we actually *are* seeing the fictional creation of a part of the film proper, but the film proper does not recognize that this occurs. Even though we are instructed to accept the

transition from primary to secondary text through the real filmmaker's preferred device – whether a hard cut, fade, intertitle, or simply the depiction of a character turning on a camera or other recording device – we accept the premise, the illusion, that we are now in the subjectivity of the character, that the filmmaker has ceded narrative control. That we buy into this, that we are willing, for instance, to think of the video images of Nicole Kidman in *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant 1997) as the product of her character's zeal for televisual textuality rather than Van Sant's representation of that zeal, testifies to the power of our investment in Mulvey's hermetic seal.

The viewer's relationship to a Narrative of Character Authorship, then, splits the difference between that of a typically closed-off film that enables voyeurism and that which radically breaks from its own diegetic logic. While the spectator may be able to invest in the tragedy/comedy/drama of Anderson's filmic fabula – the story itself – and its traditional themes of ambition, loss, and family dynamics, the constant breaks from primary to secondary text, and the characters' attention to constructing those texts – the organization of the story into discrete units of primary and secondary – limits our ability to distance ourselves from the characters. We are too aware of their awareness that they are performers; their sense of self is too deliberately constructed. One criterion of Mulvey's schema for diegetic containment is the negation of the look of the spectator and the camera, their arrogation by the looks of the characters themselves. Furthermore, Mulvey introduces a paradox at the end of her essay:

although mainstream ideological film relies on its own closed-off nature for audience investment, a disruptive intrusion (by definition, according to Mulvey, an eroticized objectification) will always find its way into the projected image. This intrusion “endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Porn Problems**

In *Boogie Nights*, of course, the genre of the secondary texts is conventionally understood to be the quintessence of static and one-dimensional fetishism. In this context, then, the film’s diegetic sealed-offness is punctuated not just by the characters’ materially-encapsulated performativity, but by a version of performance that is the apex of narratively disruptive acts. This view is by no means limited to theories of visual culture. Novelist Jonathan Franzen, for instance, has remarked that

Over the years, I’ve come to dread the approach of sex scenes in serious fiction . . . Often the sentences begin to lengthen Joyceanly. My own anxiety rises sympathetically with the author’s, and soon enough *the fragile bubble of the imaginative world* is pricked by the hard exigencies of naming body parts and movements—the sameness of it all.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mulvey, 847.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Franzen, “Books in Bed.” *How to Be Alone* (New York, NY: Picador Publishing, 2003), 283 (emphasis is mine).

In other words, narrativized eroticism is dismissed not merely as distasteful or monotonous (though it may also be both of these things) but, contradictory though it may be, as necessarily a *divergence* from the precepts of narrativity itself, an eroticized nod to the fiction's constructedness. This may be linked to the first attempts to narrativize pornography. As Linda Williams explains, "Whereas the one-reel stag [film] gets down to its sexual business very quickly, assuming that the act (or show) of sex is significant or fulfilling in its own right," post-1972 narrative pornography "problematizes satisfaction itself."<sup>19</sup> I will take this observation as a guiding principle in my discussion of *Boogie Nights*, though from a slightly different perspective. While Williams discusses the problematized satisfaction of the *Deep Throat* viewer relative to the immediately-gratified stag consumer, I will focus on the performative and authorial dissatisfactions inherent in the secondary texts that permeate the primary.

In "Big Red Son," a characteristically hyper-detailed, pseudo-journalistic commentary on the state of the late-1990s pornography industry, David Foster Wallace remarks on a variety of non-porn industry celebrities who are rumored to be attending the 1998 Adult Video Awards in Las Vegas:

There are also rumors that *Boogie Nights* auteur Paul Thomas Anderson possesses a ticket to the gala and might show up. Despite the fact that the movie presents everybody in porn as cretinous, pathetic, or both, the

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Frenzy of the Invisible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 110.

adult industry has evidently embraced *Boogie Nights* [. . .] and the Anderson rumor, which never comes to anything – if P.T. Anderson ever shows, it’s deeply in cognito – generates the least cynical enthusiasm of the evening.<sup>20</sup>

This commentary seems almost intuitively to read *Boogie Nights* as an indictment of pornography, as scornful at the notion that pornographic representation and compelling narrative could coexist. Yet, P.T. Anderson’s own reflections on his work contradict such a reading, at least if we put stock in his artistic intent. Responding to an interviewer’s suggestion that he cannot possibly have expected genuine artistic value from the 1970s-era films whose production he dramatizes, a presumption that seems to imply that critiquing porn’s artistic failings is simply too easy, Anderson claims:

There are those – like *Thee A.M. at the Jade Pussycat*, *Amanda by Night*, and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* – that get an A for effort and have their heart in the right place. With genuinely wonderful moments of intent, of storytelling approach or shot choice – or cinematic approach to shooting a sex scene [*sic*].<sup>21</sup>

Though this is hardly reverent praise, Anderson concedes the possibilities of appending the trappings of “respectable” cinematic technique and what we

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<sup>20</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Big Red Son,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Little, Brown & Co.), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Thomas Anderson, “Night Fever: Interview with Gavin Smith,” in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Jim Hiller (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 172.

might term “sincere” narrative to the sort of explicit depiction of human sexuality that is stereotypically regarded as fare for seedy urban men in trench coats. Like his surrogate fictional auteur Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds), Anderson insists that there are surely ways of capturing sexual acts on film that are compatible with compelling drama *and* with titillation.

He furthers his case by remarking on the possibilities for narrative and character development such scenes might have on a quintessential “family film”:

We can’t see Forrest Gump fuck Jenny Curran, to make that kid. But God, wouldn’t that be a great scene? *Not just because I want to get off* watching Tom Hanks fuck Robin Wright, but think what we can be told about Gump through watching him have sex. Here’s this big long movie investigating this guy – well, what’s he like in bed? What’s that like for him? That’s a big human question.<sup>22</sup>

The word “just” in Anderson’s third sentence is telling. Though perhaps a facetious choice in regard to *Forrest Gump*, it indicates a dual investment in erotic enjoyment for its own sake *and* in thematic narrative value. Of course, what Anderson seemingly ignores here is that sex scenes are ubiquitous in mainstream Hollywood and independent cinema. The complaint seems to be neither about the narrative fact of whether characters sleep together nor whether they are actually depicted in the act.<sup>23</sup> Rather, as it is aligned with a

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson, 173.

defense of 1970s “art house” pornography’s aesthetics, the complaint appears to be aimed at arbitrary standards of what – or more specifically, *how much* – may be shown, and the degree to which adherence to or flouting of such standards dictate a film’s artistic worth.

Indeed, Anderson goes on to add: “My romantic notion is that if porno films had been allowed to breathe, and the stories eventually did come first, then we would have been able to see an actor playing a role and then being able to try on a new way of having sex in a scene . . . which would do away with the gratuitous obligatory sex scene that each movie has to have.”<sup>24</sup> Anderson’s view of filmic sexuality iterates two fundamental points: First, that depictions of sexual encounters are essentially wasted when they are deployed simply to provide plot points; they might instead be treated as an untapped resource for exploring the complexities of character, not just through the narrative *fact* that he or she has had sex, but through the specific manner in which he or she actually behaves in that context. And second, given the specific articulation of his “romantic notion” – it is not that narrative cinema should be saddled with gratuitous sex scenes, but rather that pornographic representation be allowed to

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<sup>23</sup> The problematic of such representations, or even of verbally confirming that sex has taken place, especially in the era of Hollywood’s puritanical Production Code, is encapsulated perfectly by debate over the “lighthouse scene” in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz 1942): a shot of Bogart and Bergman in romantic embrace dissolves to the ubiquitous lighthouse, and then back to Bogart smoking a cigarette and wearing a dinner jacket, while Bergman reclines on a sofa. For an exhaustive analysis of whether this does or does not constitute a “sex scene,” see Maltby, “A Brief Romantic Interlude: Dick & Jane Go to 3½ Seconds of Classical Hollywood Cinema.” *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Ed. Noel Carroll and David Bordwell (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 434-459.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, 173. He goes on to characterize such obligatory scene as genre film’s inevitable “bullshit moment.”

develop as its own sub-type of narrative cinema – that it is not unreasonable for an auteur to begin with 1970s pornography’s approach to sexuality and work toward narrative development, to fill in the gaps around the sex scenes, rather than vice-versa.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this is exactly the route that Anderson’s Horner character follows in his drive to construct himself as a filmmaker.

But of course, Anderson, and by extension Horner, is working against the grain of conventional wisdom that marks “pornographic narrative” as at best an oxymoron and even more commonly as an object of popular ridicule. For instance, *Boogie Nights’* contemporary *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen 1998), the plot of which also heavily involves the pornography industry, at one point depicts Maude (Julianne Moore) showing The Dude (Jeff Bridges) a scene from a porn movie titled *Logjammin’*. Embracing the porn cliché in which a blue collar male comes to the home of an upper-class woman (Tara Reid) and is immediately seduced, the male performer (Peter Stormare) announces that he has arrived to “fix the cable.” As the scene builds toward an inevitable *ménage à trois*, Maude disgustedly turns if off:

**Maude:** You can guess what happens next.

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<sup>25</sup> The distinction that arises here, the difference between sexualizing narrative and narrativizing sexuality, bears a curious resemblance to Walter Benjamin’s infamous differentiation in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) between the fascist and communist approach to art and ideology: that the former “aestheticizes politics,” thus draining pressing social issues of their ideological urgency and that the latter “politicizes aesthetics,” thus forcing the consumer to *confront* such issues through texts that might otherwise have been banal, escapist, or otherwise politically neutral. While both versions of this transitive verb/noun configuration feature a dyad of essentially identical terms, the inversion of which word represents the action and which represents the text/direct object puts them at odds with one another – so much so, as Benjamin shows us, that they represent diametrically-opposed systems of thought.

**The Dude:** He fixes the cable?

**Maude:** Don't be fatuous, Jeffery.

What Maude marks as “fatuous,” of course, is the ostensibly reasonable (albeit sarcastically expressed) expectation that a narrative scene will play out in such a fashion that the ostensible conflict (the cable having gone out) will be addressed and resolved. It is only through the culturally-produced understanding of how the porn genre functions – all narrative elements inevitably serve as pretexts to choreographed intercourse – that this expectation would be regarded as naïve, ludicrous, or ironic. And of course, to suggest that the intercourse itself is displayed for any reason other than the one-dimensional enjoyment of the consumer (for instance, to make a point about Stormare and/or Reid’s characters through their conduct in producing the porno-within-the-film and their specific relationship to sexuality or to each other or to the world), would be fatuous as well. This appears to be precisely the cultural perspective from which Wallace issues his befuddlement at the “irony” of Anderson’s potential presence inspiring non-cynical enthusiasm. But then, of course, contrived narrative and by-the-numbers plot development is hardly the exclusive province of adult film. Rote predictability and mechanical performance in Hollywood cinema is perennially mocked, but not at the level of withering sarcasm that the Coens reserve for *Logjammin’*. Clearly there is something else, something related to the very nature of enjoyment and spectatorial involvement, that compels a

dismissal of narrative's pretenses of realism, verisimilitude, or capacity for viewer identification, when it functions in the service of explicit sex.

And yet, on its surface, this seems like a reactionary stance. If a widely-respected filmmaker such as Catherine Breillat can represent human sexuality as a manifestation of neurosis (*Romance* 1999), as inherently abusive (*A Ma Soeur* 2001), or as darkly comic (*Sex is Comedy* 2002) through depictions so explicit as to require the hiring of pornographic rather than mainstream actors, one might reasonably ask why it shouldn't also be represented as pleasurable – or at least as something positive and innately human. Indeed, in the above examples from Breillat's oeuvre, as well as in relatively mainstream American fare such as *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick 1999) or semi-mainstream art house European cinema such as *Antichrist* (Lars Von Trier 2009)<sup>26</sup>, the more explicit the *representation* of sex, the more degraded and inherently negative it will inevitably be located within the storyline.

But it is the means of representation, an adherence to Mulvey's "hermetically-sealed" version of cinema, that seem to dictate a film's capacity to viscerally affect the viewer. In a now-renowned article on so-called New French Extremity, James Quandt compares the "comparatively safe, bourgeois terrain of *Romance*" with Virginie Despentes' *Baise-Moi* (2000), and suggests that the

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<sup>26</sup> Both Kubrick's and Von Trier's films were released amid substantial critical and moralistic contention, and in both cases this contention was related to relatively graphic depictions of sexuality (though Von Trier's film was also contentious for various other reasons). It is perhaps unsurprising that, in both films, the controversial sex scenes were aligned with exceedingly negative and thanatotic plot elements – cultism and the death of a child, respectively – that are not in and of themselves sexual.

distinction to be made, what allows the utterly non-mainstream *Romance* to nonetheless be characterized, even relatively speaking, as “safe,” is simply a matter of the cinematographic professionalism’s veneer: “Where *Romance*’s every image of abasement is lovingly lit and photographed, the long take master [of *Baise-Moi*] is grottilly shot in handheld digital video.”<sup>27</sup> In a comparison of two films that could both be described as “extreme” in their depictions of human sexuality, then, Quandt finds that it’s the *amateur* nature of *Baise-Moi*, its unabashed disinterest in concealing its textual nature through traditional means of continuity editing and camera control, that puts that film over the top. The disruption of narrative cohesion, which Mulvey sees as a function of the emergence of a fetishized object in classic Hollywood cinema, is induced instead through a deliberate debasement of form. Michael Haneke’s *Benny’s Video* (1992) provides further evidence of this dynamic. While the majority of the film is a primary narrative shot with Haneke’s usual austere precision, the moments of brutality are reserved for secondary texts – and the brutality, indeed, is dramatically heightened by the transition from sterile professional filmmaking to the “grotteness” of the fictional character’s textual contribution.

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<sup>27</sup> James Quandt, “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema,” in *The New Extremism in Cinema*, eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 20.

*A controlled, composed primary narrative frame in Benny's Video.*



*A chaotic, violent secondary textual frame in Benny's Video.*



In other words, following Quandt's discussion, it's not merely the execution of a pig – or, later, an adolescent girl – in *Benny's Video* that resonates as “disturbing.” It's the move from a composed and “professional” visual frame to an uncertain and “amateur” one as a means of capturing the abject moment. Despite their consistently and unabashedly poor quality of filmmaking, these texts become fetishized encapsulations of performance for their creators and viewers in the primary text, and thus crucial elements of the primary text's fabula. Benny's titular video, the record of the murder he commits (as opposed to the pig execution pictured above), for instance, becomes an omnipresent

threat once his parents elect to destroy the evidence and protect him from the legal consequences.

Similarly, the disruptive effect of the secondary texts in *Boogie Nights* is noteworthy not just for the fact that these texts are pornographic, but because their appearance occurs through a jarring transition from the slick, expensively-produced primary text to the washed-out, low-budget aesthetic that is indicative of that genre. In spite of the tell-tale shittiness of the final product, porn is the textual mode upon which every major character hangs his or her aspirations and understanding of his or her self-worth. And for all of these characters, these aspirations and understanding of self are connected to a fantasy of some other, totally non-porn-related, social identity. Buck Swope (Don Cheadle) wishes to be a legitimate businessman specializing in high-fidelity stereo equipment. Reed Rothchild (John C. Reilly) sees himself as a different kind of performer, either a rock musician or a magician. Amber Waves, who is in fact a biological mother, forms an erotic/neurotic attachment to the idea of motherhood in spite of her clear failure as an actual parent. Jack Horner wishes to be recognized as a “real filmmaker” in spite of his reluctance to abandon the porn genre. And ingénue Dirk Diggler/Eddie Adams (Mark Wahlberg) conceives of himself as a Renaissance Man, and slips into various identities throughout the film; at one point, in a text-within-text documentary that hardly aligns with what we see of him in primary, Amber dubiously describes Dirk as “having many interests: film, poetry, music, karate, dance . . .”

## The Wholeness of Dirk Diggler

To begin at the end, Dirk's relation to ideology and the social sphere is perhaps best captured in the film's notorious final shot, when Dirk exposes his penis to a mirror and recites the mantra-like line "I am a star. I'm a star, I'm a star, I'm a star. I am a big, bright, shining star." The psychoanalytic implications of this moment are clear. In his famous essay on the development of Self, Jacques Lacan writes that the mirror stage "turns out fantasies that proceed from a *fragmented* image of the body to what I will call an 'orthopedic' form of its *totality*."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the first half of the film not only showcases a desperate drive to embrace totality and to accede to some sort of societal expectation of "well-roundedness" as a marker of personhood and value, but does so almost exclusively through secondary textual production. The non-tenability of this approach, its delusional component, is best articulated by Jan Campbell, who, in a discussion that specifically stages a convergence of Althusser's ideology and Lacan's imaginary, writes: "this reflection [seeing the self as totalized] is a misrecognition, a *deluded fantasy* of selfhood and mastery, which *hides the narcissistic fragmentation* of unconscious or psychic life."<sup>29</sup> This misrecognition is clearly dramatized in the film's final moments. The scene is shot so that we audience members see only his torso and genitals reflected in his dressing room mirror. The contrast between our view, carefully limited by Anderson to

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 78.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Campbell, *Film and Cinema Spectatorship* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 26. Emphases are mine.

highlight the phallic organ that has caught so many characters' interest throughout the film, and Dirk's own view of his body in its entirety, underscores this distinction.

This approach to representing Dirk's body as a reflection that he inspects meditatively, that allows us to see his fragmentation while ostensibly giving him a view of himself that suggests totality, is in fact a running motif through the film. It first occurs immediately after he is first approached by Jack and offered a role in porn production and again as he tries to maintain an erection (and thus his ability to perform) despite the adverse effects of a crystal meth habit.

*In the film's final moments, Dirk prepares to expose the organ whose "specialness" has defined his role in the social order.*



*Dirk admires his body immediately after being approached by Jack.*



*Dirk berates himself for his drug abuse-related inability to perform.*



As the mirror represents a visual text unto itself, our spectatorial and primary view is the narcissistic fragmentation, while Dirk's ostensible secondary view is of his penis relative to his entire body, a view that forms the delusion of completeness and mastery that animates his character through the primary text film. This final scene is only the most dramatic and memorable in a film that is filled with moments of self-misrecognition in the face of a secondary representation. This curtain-dropping moment is remarkable not just for its Lacanian subtext, but because the fact that Dirk has a different "view" of himself than does the audience or anyone else is made particularly clear.

But the camera's approach to Dirk is thematized much earlier than this. The film opens with a night club scene that introduces all of the major characters, but gives special attention to Dirk (at this point, he goes by his real name, Eddie Adams), a busboy who supplements his income through sexual performance. He casually informs Jack that he charges \$5 for men to look at his penis, and \$10 "if you want to watch [him] jack off." We, along with Horner,

learn that Eddie is already in the business of exhibitionism and prostitution, and that Jack, who makes “adult films, exotic pictures,” is very much in a position to capture and commodify it: to turn Eddie’s sexual performativity from repetitive masturbation for the look of a single man (the gender of his clientele is emphatically yet casually specified) in the back hallway of a nightclub, to a level of creative and discursive authorship, to turn *performance* into *text*. To return to this chapter’s thesis: the former element, the masturbation-for-money enterprise, contains no ideological pretext for Eddie; his involvement with Horner quickly changes this, as the production of text becomes for Eddie a project of defining himself relative to his actual social conditions of existence.

For a film that thematically hinges so heavily on transitions to secondary representations that by design approximate low production values, the opening scene is one of exuberance and cinematic sheen. Gavin Smith describes Anderson’s sequence in these terms: “Its uninhibited exuberance and will to cinematic mastery allow you to glimpse something we can’t get enough of at the movies: the *erotic* abandon of cinematic form, pure or impure as it gets.”<sup>30</sup> The scene, whose clear intertext is Scorsese’s Copacabana scene from *Goodfellas*, follows Horner and Amber into Maurice’s (Luis Guzman) night club and explores

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<sup>30</sup> Gavin Smith, “Night Fever: Paul Thomas Anderson,” in *American Independent Cinema*, ed. Jim Hiller (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2001), 171. Emphasis on “erotic” is mine.

the setting with a sense of free-floating autonomy rarely seen in narrative cinema.<sup>31</sup>

One of Dirk's first acts of self-definition, the adoption of the nom *du guerre* Dirk Diggler, occurs before he has even participated in his first filmed sex scene, and also constitutes the sole moment of *Boogie Nights* in which the delineation of primary and secondary text is not completely clear. At the end of a pool party, which has functioned as Eddie's introduction to Jack's stable of actors and crew members, there is a moment that is not part of the film's primary diegesis, but rather a representation of Eddie's dialogue and imagination. In a discussion with Horner and Reed about what his stage name should be, Eddie says "When I close my eyes, I see this thing, it's like this big sign. And the name is in like bright blue neon lights with purple outline; and this name is just so bright and so sharp that the sign blows up because the name is so powerful!" On this note, Anderson cuts to a visual representation of exactly what Eddie has described, a neon sign reading "Dirk Diggler" that sparks and catches fire. The imposition of this cut is bizarrely excessive and, like the slow-motion and iris-in trickery that precedes it, highly interruptive of the diegetic flow. It is clearly a secondary register of narrative, but it seems to be solely a product of Eddie's imagination, and not a concrete text. The symbolic taking-up of a new identity, a new position within the social order, for Eddie/Dirk, is distinctly accompanied by dissonance in the film's primary-secondary logic, as

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<sup>31</sup> In *Goodfellas*, although we get a full tour of the Copacabana, our visual perspective is still hitched to that of Henry and Karen.

though to reflect the fledgling nature of Eddie's transformation. He has assumed a symbolic label, but has not yet put his new persona into action.

The filming of the first porn scene in Jack's basement is a key transitional scene. It is the first moment in which we are explicitly compelled to recognize the relationship between primary and secondary text as an ideological endeavor, and myriad shot compositions and lines of dialogue add to the thematization of this dialectic. The scene begins with a shaky handheld shot zooming slowly on the film-within-the-film's set, a minimally-furnished office. The shot's departure from the slick professionalism of the previous scene suggests that we have at last entered the secondary register, and indeed this is a view from the fictional camera, Jack's proxy authorial eye. In the primary text that has led to this moment, sexuality has been exhibitionistic and individuals' desires have been either articulated or made clear through Anderson's visual language, or both. Finally, we will see the process through which Horner codifies and textualizes it.

The initial shot resolves quickly to primary text to show the accoutrements of the shoot. Various assistants, cameramen, and other personnel (100% male) scuttle around the low-budget set making adjustments like figuring out how to "deal with some tough shadows" in the secondary mise-en-scene. Reprising their earlier conversation at the club about the "minimalism" of their work at his point, Little Bill and Jack go over the scenes to be shot. Reading from a clipboard, Little Bill summarizes the entire film they are about to make:

You want to go over this? The setup is – okay, here we go: One, Amber talking to Becky. They make the telephone call to the agents to send over some actors. Two, enter Reed to audition for Amber. They go at it. Becky watches. Three, Becky goes to the bathroom to jack off. She gets interrupted by Amber. They go at it. Four . . . who’s Dirk – Dirk Diggler?<sup>32</sup> [. . .] Anyway, enter Dirk. He meets Becky. They go at it.

At this summary of the last scene, Jack interrupts to request that it be changed to pair Dirk with Amber instead of Becky. Little Bill simply replies “Got it,” makes a quick note on the clipboard, and exits the frame. Just before this dialogue, which theoretically portends a major change to the film-within-the-film’s narrative structure, we have learned from another of Jack’s assistants that shooting will begin in 20-30 minutes, a timeline that is not revised in light of the script change.

This preparatory pre-authorship moment highlights some important aspects of the nature of Jack’s textual creations. First, we are clearly made to understand that the film being produced in this scene is precisely the sort that Jack earlier expressed a desire to depart from. The clear interchangeability of Amber and Becky in the fifth scene demonstrates the distinct disconnect between the explicitly-rendered sex act and the narrative that justifies it. We are nowhere near Anderson’s ideal of pornographic material as being supported by and necessary to the development of traditional narrative elements. That

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<sup>32</sup> Jack interrupts here to explain who Dirk is, and Little Bill, in one of the film’s most understated humorous moments, replies with total sincerity: “Good name.”

even Little Bill is able to make this change with a mere slash of his pen and an indifferent “got it,” testifies to this. To return to Anderson’s example above, this ease of interchangeability would be akin to, in the climactic moment in which Forrest Gump and Jenny Curran might be shown having sex, a completely different actress, representing a different character, being introduced for the purpose of that scene. Clearly, since Jenny represents for Gump not merely a sexually objectified body but an absolute idealization of femininity and friendship, an idealization that is crucial to the fullness of the film’s story, this substitution would fail dramatically. Even before we see its actual production, then, we understand that Horner is at this point producing a film that does not meet his (or Anderson’s) criteria of artistry and narrative merit. Furthermore, we know from Little Bill’s summarizing monologue that the film they are preparing to shoot has some basis in narrative storytelling, but that each plot element is punctuated with the at once blunt and euphemistic “They go at it.” Finally, note that the film they are shooting is rooted in a narrative in which the female performers are casting some sort of play or film or television show. The pretext for the sex scenes is that Dirk and Reed are “auditioning.” We thus have a third level of narrative: Anderson’s film is about Horner making a film that (in this case, at least) depicts performers “auditioning” for a film. There is apparently no discrete limit to the layering of text. In the drive to create narrative around the erotic action that propels Horner’s particular film genre, there is an almost instinctual recourse to narrativizing the creation and

textualization of performance. Slavoj Žižek points out that “Two key features of pornography are repetition and look. First there is the urge to repeat the same scene again and again,”<sup>33</sup> and while this assessment is undoubtedly accurate, this scene in *Boogie Nights*, the preparation for a production that fails to live up to its author’s articulated standards, shows also the repetition of the very structuring of narrative pretense that precedes and underlies the repetition of sexual behaviors to which Žižek alludes.

I raise these issues not to belabor the banality of Horner’s work, or even the way in which that banality flies in the face of his declarations of artistic ambition – that observation is too central to *Boogie Nights* to really warrant explication – but to underscore the circularly repetitive nature of the performative structure through which Dirk attempts to assert his ideological role. During the shoot itself, we are at last shown character-authorship in action – not just the finished product or the ostensible eroticism of sexual performance, but the mechanistic work that accompanies it. Dirk confirms his “specialness,” so pointedly hinted at in the primary diegesis prior to this scene, by giving a performance that receives immediate, candid praise from his crew and co-stars. The scene intercuts two different perspectives of the primary and one of the secondary. For the former, Anderson will show Moore and Wahlberg from an essentially omniscient and unmediated variety of angles. Though they are performing for the cameras within the film, and all that they say and do, we

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<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 178.

understand, is being captured by Jack's proxy look, we will often see them in close-ups and from angles that are clearly not subordinated to the secondary text. Continuing the earlier pattern of supporting characters looking with great interest and curiosity at Dirk/Eddie, various reverse shots show the cast and crew as they watch the scene unfold, their subtle facial expressions clearly reacting to Dirk's fabled genitals. By contrast, when Anderson cuts to the actual secondary perspective, the mise en scene is flattened, the typical three-point lighting of Hollywood cinema reduced to a garish high-key, and, tellingly, the image itself is shown as though through a camera's eyepiece. We are seeing not just what will become the final product, but the exact view of the character author. In the scene's most theoretically compelling moment, during one of the reverse shots, the head cameraman moves away from the camera's eyepiece as though to confirm that Dirk's phallus is in fact real, that it is not merely some illusion of the camera's mediating presence, that the creation of their fictional text has not somehow exaggerated it in the same way that it exaggerates the sexual nature of everyday life.

*Jack and his crew see Dirk's "special gift" for the first time.*



*The view of the secondary camera, one of many images to later be edited into a secondary textual whole.*



The momentousness of Dirk's phallus is the fundamental concern of the film as a whole, as a symbolic presence in *Boogie Nights* itself and as a tool of commerce in the secondary pornos, and in this case "phallus" is an operative term in both the biological and psychosexual sense. Dirk himself is frank at the beginning of the film about having been blessed with "something special," but as the film progresses and his phallic "gift" transitions from mere performance or casual sexual encounters to the creation of text, he begins to conceive of his life in terms completely detached from his real conditions of existence as a porn star (albeit a successful one). His self-appointed identities include musician, actor, and martial artist, and all of these somewhat juvenile aspirations – what child does not fantasize about being a ninja or a rock star? – stem directly from his success in porn, which itself was enabled by the impressiveness of his penis. Contrary to the figurative nature of the phallus in psychoanalysis, the biological phallus functions here literally as the master-signifier from which other *ex post facto* elements of Dirk's complete constructed identity emerge. The actual

phallus works narratively as the Lacanian phallus, the root of all of Dirk's ever-changing symbolic signifiers.

The first inkling that Dirk has begun to reshape his ideological relation to the social order occurs after an ecstatic montage showing his tremendous professional and financial success. Despite the internalized critical praise of his early work, the following scene, at an awards show – perhaps simply the 1977 edition of the Adult Video Awards gala that Wallace attends for his 1997 essay – finds Dirk promising his adoring associates that: “These movies we make, they can be *better* . . . We can always do *better*. I’m going to keep trying if you guys keep trying.” This preoccupation with improvement brings us back to two key points from the beginning of this chapter. First, the problematics of modifying pornographic material so as to accommodate compelling narrative, and second, the impulse toward narrative creation as a mediation between real and perceived conditions of existence, or ideology. The following scene shows Dirk and Reed pitching an idea for a new film series to Jack, and it is significant that the emphasis throughout is on a “real story.” Though Dirk has received accolades for his performances and has been shown thoroughly enjoying the riches and privileges that accompany such approval, his and Reed’s drive to “do better” is suffused with an obvious lack. The creation of literal narrative to underwrite the sex scenes in the form of the *Brock Landers* series becomes intertwined, almost interchangeable, with the metanarrative of social and artistic respectability in which all of the principal characters are invested:

**Dirk:** Look at the character Holmes came up with . . . I don't like seeing women treated that way. This guy he plays, Johnny Wadd, it's always about slapping some girl around or whatever. It's not right. It's not cool, it's just not *sexy*. I mean it's not *sexy* like it should be, Jack.<sup>34</sup>

**Reed:** This guy's more of a James Bond type character. You know, he's classy. He's a world-traveled guy.

**Jack:** I like that.

**Dirk:** Reed could play my partner.

**Jack:** I like that a lot.

**Dirk:** We could make it really good Jack. Honestly. If you direct it, we make a whole series with a whole story. It's exactly like we've always talked about. Please?

**Jack:** When we get back, set up the typewriter. See what comes out of it. But I have to talk to The Colonel when we get to Vegas. And Dirk, you've got to work on The Colonel too. You've got to be committed.

**Dirk:** Right, right, Jack, I'll do whatever I have to do!

**Jack:** Does this character have a name?

**Dirk:** His name is Brock Landers.

**Reed:** His partner's name is Chest Rockwell.

**Jack:** [*laughs*] Those are great names!

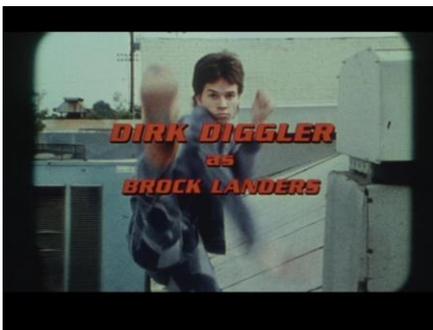
Reed's invocation of Ian Fleming's iconic British spy character as a corrective to Holmes's misogynist Johnny Wadd character suggests a desire to affix this particular product to a known narrative quantity. The explicit sexual scenes, he

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<sup>34</sup> The meta-commentary here is somewhat circuitous. Dirk is referring to 1970s porn icon John Holmes. Ironically, Diggler's character is loosely based on Holmes, and the series that Dirk is proposing in this scene is in fact a parody of the very series (*Johnny Wadd*) that Dirk decries as something to be surpassed. Furthermore, in one of the clips of the series that we actually see, the Brock character calls a woman a bitch, slaps her, and then uses foreplay as a means of interrogation. Dirk's emphasis on a non-misogynist version of pornographic cinema clearly falls by the wayside as the series progresses.

imagines, will receive an automatic boost of respectability, not only because Dirk's Brock character will be a suave and non-violent charmer, but because of an intertextual link to a well-known and respected fictional figure. Dirk and Reed's desire to "quote" – both in their pitch to Horner and in the ensuing films themselves – the clichés, character types, and narrative possibilities of the Bond franchise represents a capitulation to the ideological authority of mass culture. If it is recognizable as comparable to a James Bond film, Dirk and Reed reason, it is a "real" film, "exactly like [they]'ve always talked about."

The development of this series is an important turning point in the film. It represents the fruition of Jack's vision for narrative pornography and allows Dirk to essentially redouble his adolescent fantasies. Already making a good living by being paid to have sex, he now fashions himself as a martial arts expert and action hero:



Throughout the film, Dirk's childish preoccupation with karate – or at least with a fetishistic and highly westernized idea of what karate entails – is a recurring theme, and furthers the theme of Dirk's sense of self being bound purely to

physicality, to bodily movement and expression.<sup>35</sup> Dirk's relationship to his real conditions of existence, to return to the Althusserian perspective, is solidified through an appeal to mass audience's infatuation with an established genre and the opportunity to delve deeper into the textual realization of boyish fantasy. At the same time, he is integral to fulfilling Jack's auteurist vision. Even though the Brock Landers series is, we quickly realize, a badly-scripted and cheaply-produced enterprise whose narrative is no more compelling or less perfunctory than the "audition" story in Dirk's first film or even the *Logjammin'* scene in *The Big Lebowski*, Jack regards it with genuine pride:

**Jack:** This is the best work we've ever done.

**Kurt:** It's a real film, Jack.

**Jack:** It feels good.

**Kurt:** You made it fly.

**Jack:** You know, this is the film I want them to remember me by.

This conversation, suffused with mutual approval and accomplishment, cruelly underscores what is perhaps Anderson's animating thesis for the film – a thesis that flies in the face of his remarks in the Gavin Smith interview quoted above:

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<sup>35</sup> Dirk's initial fall from pornographic stardom and Jack's good graces carefully intertwines these two bodily elements. Unable to maintain an erection due to methamphetamine abuse, Dirk becomes belligerent and picks a fight with Jack. In what he clearly sees as the ultimate declaration of masculine toughness and mastery, Dirk declares "I know fucking karate," a threat by which Jack is utterly undeterred. In other words, the quite literal failure of the phallus is compensated for with a marshaling of the rest of the body's resources. Martial arts, after all, theoretically utilizes every body part *except* for the genitals. That Dirk's hysterical gesture of masculine bravado *also* fails demonstrates that his exit from Jack's textualizing world is predicated on a total bodily failure.

The imposition of narrative neither automatically validates the interrupting spectacle's claim to artistry nor mitigates the prurient preoccupations of the viewer or the text itself; Horner has essentially produced just another porno, not because he *deviated* from his vision, but *in spite of* his adherence to it. The imposition of narrative, as in the Althusserian model of a subject's relations to his life and labor, allows for fantasy on the level of sexual indulgence within the nature of the secondary text itself, but, more importantly, on the level of Horner's understanding of his "real" conditions of existence, his role in a filmmaking economy.

Our first glimpse of a completed Brock Landers film begins with a prologue in which Jessie (Melora Walters) plays a tourist whom Dirk (as Brock) immediately seduces in a Los Angeles restaurant. The seduction scene lasts 56 seconds, ends on a cheesy and robotically-delivered entendre ("I could die of starvation before I get something in my mouth") and abruptly cuts to the sex scene proper. However, this introduction is interrupted by an opening credits sequence that, curiously, lasts down to the second exactly as long as the film's "cold open," and introduces Dirk and Reed's characters and the *Brock Landers* series. Throughout these opening credits, the emphasis is not on sex, explicit or otherwise, but on the action-film/police procedural exploits that we understand to be the series' narrative pretext. In other words, although we transition directly from pornographic sex scene to (very loosely) Bond-influenced action montage, neither sequence is at all able to incorporate or account for the other.

And here, Anderson seems to represent the failure of his own ideal, that pornography can be modified to incorporate genre convention and narrative, or vice-versa. The *Brock Landers* series seems the closest thing to an intra-filmic representation of that gambit, given its precise division, rather than incorporation, of explicit sex and genre film heroics. The sex scene has nothing to do with Brock's presumed action heroism, and the action-filled opening credits do not even remotely hint that the film is pornographic. The two forms, despite Jack's best efforts, resist co-integration.

The irony of Dirk's structured and text-dependent identity is intertwined with its inevitable failure. Despite fashioning himself as a karate expert, and complaining bitterly when his dubious black-belt status is called into question, we see him savagely beaten by a gang of homophobic men after he returns to his old vocation of publicly masturbating for a few dollars. Jack is not only not the least bit cowed by Dirk's violent posturing, but manages to get in the only punch of the confrontation. In a cinematically stunning and narratively climactic hold-up scene, rather than jumping into the fray, Dirk recoils from the sudden and inevitable eruption of violence. Of course, it's not that an actor should necessarily be expected to embody the same traits as the character he plays, but it's quite clear that Dirk sees himself as possessing the same traits possessed by his Brock Landers character. Likewise, Dirk's belief that he is a natural rock star is undone when we see him recording a demo tape, clearly believing that this will be his comeback, his next avenue of success. His off-key singing and

hackneyed lyrics are almost impossibly bad.<sup>36</sup> After finishing the recording process, he doesn't even have the money to get the tapes from the studio. He has used porn's particular performative textuality as a means of constructing himself, and the loss of access to this mode of expression precipitates the downfall of his ideological existence. To be melodramatic: It seems that without porn, he is nothing, and still, he retains his stage name rather than revert to Eddie Adams. Even without all of the other symbolic accoutrements, he attempts to hold onto the most basic signifier of the fantasy that he can regain his ideological position in the world.

In the film's final act, the nature of the manufactured fantasy changes both in terms of medium (Horner reluctantly switches from film to videotape) and cultural reception, and the principal characters find themselves trapped in various economic, legal, and social dilemmas. The enjoyment so robustly apparent in the free-floating camera sequences and montages that punctuated the earlier narrative is replaced with drab representations of hopeless circumstances. Once this encounter with an authoritarian, bureaucratized social order begins, the realm of hedonism that was so consistently depicted as purely enjoyable in the film's first half fails to provide respite. Performative sexuality is displaced from the authorship and production of narrative texts (however

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<sup>36</sup> If this denigration of Dirk's musicianship needs any evidence beyond subjective taste, the film spells it out for us and Dirk. Trying to browbeat the studio owner to release the demo tapes, Dirk and Reed explain that if they are simply given the tapes, they'll run over to the record company, sign a lucrative contract, and come back with the money. Aside from demonstrating a tenuous understanding of how the music industry works, Dirk is calmly told that he is in a catch-22, implying that the owner knows perfectly well that they will not be given a record deal, much less a cash advance.

“tacked-on” the narrative might have been) to outright prostitution and an abandonment of artistic principles in order to produce low-budget recordings of sleazy encounters between starlets and random men on the street. The loss of access to the means of textualization (for Dirk) and of a credible sense of idealism to apply to the authoring of texts (for Horner) dessicates the two men’s constructed identities.

Throughout *Boogie Nights*, the fictional audience of Horner and Dirk’s texts is never shown in the act of viewing. This presumptive audience’s impact upon the secondary authorship is undeniable; after all, the money and glowing critical reviews that Horner’s coterie receives must be a consequence of a substantial viewership. But the audience, which Mulvey theorizes as believing in its own essential invisibility, an invisibility without which “fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness, and truth” is in turn *dramatized* as invisible, or merely as a potentiality. Only one character who even admits to being a viewer of Jack’s is shown, and not only is he not shown in the act of watching, but he is quickly subsumed by the creation of textuality, as Jack cajoles him into performing on camera.<sup>37</sup> Viewership, in other words, is diegetically non-existent;

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<sup>37</sup> We are given precisely one glimpse of another possible (but unconfirmed) viewer: Anderson shows a marquee reading “Jack Horner Presents *Spanish Pantalons*,” and then the camera angles down slightly to a man running along the sidewalk, a female companion in tow. The transition from marquee to rushed-looking couple could imply that they are trying to reach the theater in time for a showing of Horner’s latest offering, but this is not confirmed. Even if this shot was intended as a depiction of two viewers/consumers (and I am not suggesting that this is *necessarily* the case), we do not see such consumers in the *act* of consumption. In other words, we never see anything at all like Gaspar Noé’s porn theater-attending Butcher character (Phillipe Nahon) in *Seule Contre Tous* (1998). Noé features an interminable long take point of view shot of the Butcher watching a secondary pornographic text – an absurdly-repetitive image of penile-vaginal penetration – that not only establishes pornographic representation as dehumanized and

even the slightest hint of intra-narrative spectatorship (this single consumer explains that he watches Jack's films with his frat brothers) is repurposed as performance, redirected into the creation of still more secondary text.

In narratives of character authorship, spectatorship is hidden while textuality and performance are centralized and privileged. Furthermore, as *Boogie Nights* makes especially clear, the products of authorship function as fetishized blank slates upon which performance and narrative inscribe character ideologies. That the film's particular secondary texts are of a genre that is (stereo)typically at odds with cinematographic and narrative integrity might be understood as an indicator of the delusional nature of those ideologies' permanence. The existence of secondary texts neither allows us audience members to maintain distance, as in the typical narrative film, nor to implicate us for our desire for well-cordoned-off fantasy, as in the Brechtian work of auteurs like Haneke or Greenaway. We recognize the primary text characters' understanding that they are performers and authors but, with the exclusion of a diegetic audience, we are denied the intra-filmic surrogate that classic psychoanalytic film theory insists is necessary for identification and enjoyment.

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mechanistic (hardly original claims) but also situates this representation as a product of the viewer's pseudo-voyeuristic experience rather than the author's creative experience. *Boogie Nights*, released only one year earlier, takes precisely the opposite tack.

## Chapter 2

### **Voice-Over, Performativity, and the Containment of Abjection: *Double Indemnity***

“Never trust the teller; trust the tale.”

-D.H. Lawrence

“We didn’t need dialogue; we had faces.”

-Norma Desmond, *Sunset Boulevard*

#### **The Sound Film & Voice-Over**

This chapter will engage with a broad and contentious point of debate in film studies: the fundamental changes wrought by the introduction of sound. And as a subcategory of that debate, in working toward a discussion secondary textuality in classic film noir, we will address the often-reviled narrative device of voice-over. By analyzing a classic of the noir genre, I will demonstrate that voice-over takes on a fundamentally different role when it is articulated within the film’s diegesis and is thus bound explicitly to the film’s visual representations. The effect of this particular trope is a radical inversion of a core tenet of cinema studies: That the image, historically and artistically, always precedes sound. However, I will argue that in these films’ narrative space, image exists mostly as a product of, rather than a starting point for, the utterances on the soundtrack. Furthermore, I will take this claim a step further by examining films in which the words are not merely spoken but recorded in some way, channeled into the creation of a contained material text, a physical prop in the primary text’s

fictional world. The Dictaphone cylinders in *Double Indemnity* play a substantial role in the primary narrative as a means of creating – and containing – a specter of monstrous femininity.

In a spirited defense of the voice-over device, Sarah Kozloff remarks that “a series of interrelated prejudices has kept us from either taking [voice-over] very seriously or hearing it clearly,”<sup>38</sup> prejudices that she identifies as both ideological and aesthetic in nature. Her defense of voice-over, ultimately, rests upon the broader claim that there is no inherent reason to view the speech and other effects afforded by sound as merely ancillary to the moving pictures. But certain strains of historical film scholarship repeatedly disavow this egalitarian stance. As William Rothman, in a work that is singularly devoted to privileging the image, puts it with regard to the entirety of Hitchcock’s oeuvre:

One of Hitchcock’s deepest insights is that no moment in any film can be fully comprehended without accounting for the camera. Another is that, in the camera’s tense and shifting relationships with its human subjects, the author’s and viewers’ roles are intimately revealed. Yet another is that the camera’s presence is fundamentally ambiguous. It frames our views: the instrument of our gaze, it shares our passivity. But it also

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 8.

represents the author: *it is the instrument of his presentation to us, his "narration,"* and manifests his godlike power over the world of the film.<sup>39</sup>

Rothman appears to be arguing here that, indeed, the image is the primary unit of filmic discourse, the filmmaker's true product, and that language is thus necessarily secondary. This quotation, after all, comes from his chapter on the silent film *The Lodger*, and while the other four works that he discusses in this classic study are all sound films, the book's inclusion of over 600 stills, along with Rothman's clearly prioritized attention to *visual* detail, implies an adherence to what is essentially film theory's dominant ideology<sup>40</sup>: That sound arrived late to filmmaking and has never ascended to the privileged position of image. Jean-Louis Baudry begins his classic essay by pointing out that Freud – in the same year that Auguste and Louis Lumiere screened their 50-second film *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumiere a Lyon* (the first known public exhibition of moving pictures) – draws a similar, but even more universalized comparison: "Let us simply imagine the instrument which serves in psychic productions as a sort of complicated microscope or camera."<sup>41</sup> For Freud, then, no less than the everyday psyche of the subject is aligned with the mechanized production of images.

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<sup>39</sup> William Rothman, *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 6-7. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>40</sup> Meaning, in Althusserian terms, that it is ideology masquerading as common sense.

<sup>41</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Qtd. in Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, in *Cinéthique*, No. 7/8 (1970), pp. 1-8.

Let us examine a few major film theorists who have more directly made such a claim. Rudolf Arnheim, in his “A New Laocoön” essay, dismissively remarks that “Patches of speech are of little theoretical importance as long as they represent merely the minimum concession of a film director who has to meet the demands for dialogue on the part of producers and distributors,”<sup>42</sup> thus regarding the inclusion of sound as a minor and (Arnheim hopes) minimal artistic sacrifice to the exigencies of the studio system. Sergei Eisenstein’s manifesto “The Sound Film” laments that the carefully-constructed communicative abilities of montage will be displaced by a filmic form that he would later say “contains so much poverty of a purely literary sort that its film claims may be put aside,”<sup>43</sup> suggesting that to be literary, to allow cinema to be conflated with other narrative forms, is a fate to be avoided, that it dilutes film’s unique modes of montage and expressionism.

Contemporary critic John Belton suggests that even the *technical* demands of sound could exert undue influence upon the image. In a discussion of Hitchcock’s *Blackmail*, a film renowned for its dramatization of the silent-to-sound transition, he explains that “The design of early sound recording technology played a crucial role in determining the ‘look’ of early sound films . . .

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<sup>42</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, “A New Laocoön,” in *Film as Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), 210-11. Qtd. in Kozloff, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 108. This notion that sound, voice-over in particular, has the detrimental effect of holding cinema back in the undesirable realm of the literary, that voice-over is a pathetic substitution for the 1<sup>st</sup>-person narrator of the novel (Pip from *Great Expectations* is the prominent example), is a major target of Kozloff’s analysis.

the use of multiple cameras on the studio floor [necessary for proper sound synching] severely limited individual camera movement, which threatened to reveal the presence of these other cameras."<sup>44</sup> Not only, then, was the visual suddenly in danger of subordination to the needs of the audible, but the latter threatened to expose the former's very modes of production, to depict in action what Rothman identifies as the auteur's instrument of presentation.

Furthermore, the addition of sound, given these very technological limitations, necessitated a compromise of what could even be shown in the visual register. The frantic excitement of the "Into the City" tracking shot in Murnau's *Sunrise* or the gymnastic set pieces of Buster Keaton simply could not exist as sound films. Sound recording in the late 1920s demanded camera units so encumbered by sound equipment that they were restricted to short pans and a minimum of actor movement.

But of course, the classic rejections of sound film were motivated not only by practicalities and purist aesthetics, but also ideology; some saw its development as the corruption of a universally accessible, and necessarily politicized, art form. This fundamentally Benjaminian perspective evokes the exclusionary and fascistic tendencies of "aura"; it is not only reproducibility, the silent film purists insisted, but the absence of language's hindrances, that makes cinema the ideal transgressive textual form. Benjamin himself contributes to

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<sup>44</sup> John Belton, "Awkward Transitions: Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and the Dynamics of Early Film Sound," in *Musical Quarterly* (1999, Vol. 83), 228-30.

this conversation, remarking “I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry *designed to break the revolutionary primacy* of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically.”<sup>45</sup> But Bela Balazs perhaps most idealistically expresses this position when he writes that film art “may bring together the people and nations, make them accustomed to each other, and lead them to mutual understanding. The silent film is free of the *isolating walls of language differences*.”<sup>46</sup> In these explicitly Marxian critiques, verbal articulation is characterized as nothing short of a tool of the ruling class, a marker of rigid authority and symbol of artificially-imposed boundaries, capable of decimating cinema’s power to galvanize the common man.

Whether one’s criticism is directed toward the aesthetically jarring shift from silent cinema to the talkie, or the allegedly exclusionary and partitioning capabilities of language, our concern with respect to voice-over is based on a third problematic that combines elements of these two: The imposition of subjectivity upon the objective image. Kozloff swiftly rejects such essentialization, claiming that “Neither [sound nor image] holds a monopoly on conveying personal, cultural, or ideological slants, and neither deserves censure for making communication possible or efficient through clearing up

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, Letter to Theodor Adorno, in *Walter Benjamin & Theodor Adorno: The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* (Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 1999), 295. My emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Bela Balazs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York, NY: Dover Books, 1970), 44. Qtd. in Kozloff, 10. My emphasis.

ambiguities.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the image is not innately pure; it can be manipulated and repurposed in and of itself, without the extra aid of language instructing the viewer on how to understand it. Eisenstein, surely, would have to have been the first to concede this point. His near-obsessive preoccupation with montage, both in his theoretical writings and his own films, is rooted in that method’s capacity for not just creating but *dictating* meaning through visual manipulation. As Belton puts it, “Eisenstein’s editing in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) lays bare the chain of cause and effect that leads from a soldier’s bullet to a mother’s death, to the headlong flight of a baby carriage down the Odessa steps, to the baby’s death . . .”<sup>48</sup> Likewise, D.W. Griffith demonstrated very early in cinema history, in the climactic crosscutting scene of *The Birth of a Nation* (1912), that suspense and identification can be essentially manufactured through image alone. Film language, appropriately manipulated, precludes sound as an expository necessity.

But these prominent counter-examples to Balazs’ grandiose notion of the image as inherently neutral and thus as holding great potential for the unification of mankind, as Kozloff explains, run counter to Roland Barthes’ theory of the polysemous, which is clearly sympathetic to the ideologically-minded opponents of sound film, stating that:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Belton, *Awkward Transitions*, 238.

When it comes to the symbolic message, the linguistic message no longer guides the identification but *interpretation*, constituting a kind of voice which keeps the connoted meanings from proliferating . . . With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text thus has a repressive value . . . [it] *directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often-subtle *dispatching*, it remote controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance.<sup>49</sup>

This assumption regarding the relationship of image and the words appended to it, that language purports to lend objective solidity to the subjective image, has clear links to the silent/sound debate, but is particularly relevant to films that extensively deploy voice-over. Dialogue or incidental sound, after all, typically still exists in the filmmaker's omniscient register. Voice-over is routinely spoken by a major character within the narrative, thus blurring the line between the contained fiction of the film itself and the (also actually fictional) world that exists as "real" to its characters.

A curious exception to this, appropriately from the noir genre with which this chapter is primarily concerned, occurs in *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick 1956). The disjointed, non-chronological, flashback-intensive visual representations of the elaborate racetrack heist are supplemented by a voice-over from a non-identified third party (Art Gilmore) who appears neither in the film's visual or

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<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heat (Hill & Wang Co., 1978), 275.

audible diegesis. The voice-over itself is absent from the film's narrative world and the narrator's tone and cadences suggest the innately objective position of a journalistic reporter; it is reasonable to suggest, then, that Kubrick does not intend for the viewer to have any reason to doubt this speaker's statements. While this speaker clearly knows the full story and is present to guide us through it (with the aid of representative images, of course), the narration is strategically constructed so that key pieces of information are provided at moments that allow them the greatest *dramatic* – rather than informative – effect. Roger Ebert hints at the primacy of the voice-over in this film when, alluding to Gilmore's "exact, passionless voice," he states that "[Kubrick's] narrative approach seems blunt, but the narrative itself is so labyrinthine we abandon any hope of trying to piece it together and just abandon ourselves to letting it happen."<sup>50</sup> Without the reassuring authority of Gilmore's guidance, Ebert implies, attempting to follow the convoluted diegetic narrative would be substantially more difficult. In other words, Gilmore's narration (and absence from the fictive world of *The Killing*) would appear to exemplify Barthes' argument that language guides the reader through the signifieds of the image with something of an agenda (to help us arrive at the "correct" understanding of the images). And yet, Ebert goes on to remark that aside from "plac[ing] great emphasis on precise dates and times of day," Gilmore's narration "serves only to confirm *what we can see for*

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<sup>50</sup> Roger Ebert, review of *The Killing*. RogerEbert.com, 2012.  
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120109/REVIEWS08/120109985>

*ourselves.*"<sup>51</sup> This deeply contradictory statement, that the voice-over is in fact redundant, that it exists in an essentially unproblematic and complementary relationship with the image, illustrates further the deceptive complexity of the voice-image relationship.

Other instances of film history further complicate the automatic assumptions that viewers tend to make regarding voice-over's ontological status. In *Psycho*, as Marion Crane leaves Phoenix with the money stolen from Mr. Cassidy, we hear in voice-over a conversation between the sleazy businessman and Marion's meek boss Mr. Lowery in reaction to the missing \$40,000. Though Marion's facial expressions are arguably reactive toward this dialogue, suggesting that she is imagining it in anticipation of their reactions, there is no definitive way of confirming that Marion's imagination is the source of the sound. From a film language perspective, it is no less likely that the men *are* having this conversation, that Hitchcock simply imposed the sound of dialogue taking place in Phoenix over the image of the woman who is the topic of their discussion and is several hundred miles away from them. So while this dialogue between Cassidy and Lowery adds an ominous note to Marion's embezzlement, we viewers have no solid position from which to situate its relation to the narrative as a whole, and thus, no way to tell, for instance, whether Cassidy's sadistic promise to extract his \$40,000 from Marion's "fine, soft flesh" is the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

product of Cassidy's already-established misogyny and sadism or of Marion's guilt-riddled and possibly masochistic imagination and sensibility.

These examples of ambiguity by no means dilute viewerly enjoyment or comprehension of their respective films – one certainly needn't understand the precise narrative status from which Cassidy's voice emanates in order to appreciate the film as a whole – yet they open for interrogation the assumed direct relationship between sound and image. And by extension, in the discussion that will animate the rest of this chapter, between primary and secondary narrative. If ever a film were to be selected as a singular representative of the silent/sound transition, it would be not *Double Indemnity* but Wilder's masterwork, made six years later, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) maniacal rejection of dialogue and diegetic sound, self-interested as the rejection might be, provides an ironic, retroactive underscore to the interplay of classic *noir* imagery and hefty reliance on sound that comprises *Double Indemnity*.

### **A Noir Parody and the Problems of Voice-Over**

Bill Watterson's 1980s newspaper comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes* may seem an odd choice of reference for further exploring this topic, but it depicts both the stereotypical language of a noir narrator and voice-over's ontologically complex relationship to the visual text in a surprisingly instructive way. Throughout the strip's decade-long canon, 6-year-old Calvin repeatedly appends to any given

situation a fantasy structure wherein he takes on a heroic persona while his parents, teachers, or classmates are relegated to antagonistic roles within his chosen narrative. These fantasies tend to be occasioned by the imposition of some banal or relatively unpleasant task: Calvin being made to demonstrate a difficult math problem on the board at school, or clean his room at home. In other words, his creation of narrative excitement is explicitly Althusserian: the unpleasant every day world is not merely elided by fantasy, but incorporated into it, transformed into something exciting, validating, and (always) rooted in the intertexts of genre convention. When Calvin engages in such narrativization, Waterson will alternate between the real, omnisciently-rendered register and Calvin's imagined world of textuality to show precisely what real-world elements have been interpellated into the fantasy, how the fantasy distorts them, and what correlative role they play there. For instance, as his most common alter-ego character, an intergalactic explorer called Spaceman Spiff, Calvin will produce an elaborate science fiction-influenced narrative. In such strips, the final panel's punchline is invariably based on showing not only what sort of every day situation Calvin has appropriated as fantasy fodder, but also the consequences of his doing so:



Note here not only the clear correlation of everything within the panel representing Calvin's fantasy (left) with that of dissatisfaction and desire (right) – a monstrous alien's limb is actually merely the prohibitive arm of a matronly teacher – but also the overlapping dialogue. The simple phrase "It's all over" can be understood both in the register of a dramatic third-person sci-fi narration reminiscent of countless 1950s B-movies *and* as a simple statement of temporal fact regarding recess. Calvin's second utterance, however, blurs this distinction. Because the second panel is imagistically situated in the real, omniscient world that is explicitly under Watterson's (*not* Calvin's) authorial control, this second utterance could reasonably be regarded as Calvin conceding that recess is, indeed, over: a defeated acknowledgment of the very unsatisfying development that his fantasy was constructed to combat.

In the fantasmatic persona of Tracer Bullet, a Philip Marlowe-like private eye, Calvin deadpans phrases like "I keep two magnums in my desk. One's a gun, and I keep it loaded. The other's a bottle, and it keeps *me* loaded." Watterson has remarked that he is not at all familiar with detective novels or film noir, that he simply based this particular alter-ego on "stereotypes of clichés of the genre."<sup>52</sup> In other words, Watterson suggests that a few aesthetic adjustments and vague allusions can reliably transport a reader into the realm of the hard-boiled, where everyone speaks in punchy one-liners and double entendre-laden

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<sup>52</sup> Bill Watterson, *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (Andrews & McMeel, 1995). The stereotyped clichés to which Watterson refers seem to be visual as well as linguistic. The striking use of black ink in these strips is clearly calculated to reproduce the shadowy cinematography of the typical noir, in particular *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles 1958).

innuendo, even if that reader has never read a Hammett novel or seen a Dmytryk film.

More importantly, we should note that in Tracer Bullet strip sequences, Watterson frequently departs from typical comic strip conventions in one especially remarkable way. While dialogue typically appears in a bubble with a stem emanating from the character producing that speech – the stem is generally a linear continuation of the bubble to indicate speech or a series of disconnected circles to indicate unspoken thought – Watterson frequently drew Calvin's stylized noir narration without any such stem:



These words, then, intrude upon and ostensibly modify the fantasmatic narrative structure that has been created as a respite from the world of desire that the six-year-old subject understands to have been rendered unsatisfying by the demands of teachers and parents (who function in stock noir roles such as The Femme Fatale<sup>53</sup> and The Hired Goon). But they do not intrude upon the visual

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<sup>53</sup> Calvin's mother playing the role of a femme fatale – Calvin will routinely refer to her as "the dame" or "the brunette" – and his father being represented as a sort of shady mob enforcer is, of course, blatantly Oedipal, and this sort of Freudian roleplaying in the mind of a child in the latency stage could likely merit an entire study unto itself.

space in the manner typical of comic strips. In examining the above panel, we are clearly not to understand the doubly fictional Tracer Bullet to be saying (or even necessarily *thinking*) this introductory monologue in this particular instance. Watterson's parody succeeds both linguistically and visually because the clichéd noir *language* supports and validates the clichéd noir *image*. But the language, while corresponding precisely to what we see, comes from somewhere else. With the seemingly minor absence of a connective stem between speech and speaker, theoretical questions arise: If these are meant to be the thoughts of Calvin's fictional creation, why do they seem not to emanate from the avatar of that creation? The answer is that it is clearly a visual approximation of cinematic voice-over. Even when such voice-over is spoken by a diegetically existent character, it is explicitly represented as coming from some other narrative register. This strip, then, does more than merely provide a humorous juxtaposition of hard-boiled dialogue and normative childhood innocence. Intentionally or not, Watterson underscores the fundamentally distinct narrative planes of existence regarding voice-over's intra-narrative exposition and the imagistically-represented events that it supplements. In *Double Indemnity* (and, we eventually discover, in *The Man Who Wasn't There*), the gap between these planes is collapsed and, in the process, these films elevate the authority of the spoken word over that of the image.

## Confessions and Monstrosity: *Double Indemnity*

*Double Indemnity* compounds these problematics by depicting voice-over as both the product of a developed character and as the content of a secondary text within the filmmaker's primary. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White suggest that flashback is the primary cause of a particular diegetic problem in film noir: "the instability of appearances."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Walter Neff's position as the creator of the secondary text that makes up the bulk of the film automatically destabilizes that text's reliability. As Maureen Turim explains, in a discussion of the flashback as a formal way of thematizing fatalism in film noir, "The flashback introduces a reversed temporal order that creates the past as the site of the fiction, as a terrain, a privileged subjective realm of the imaginary."<sup>55</sup> The adjectives "privileged" and "subjective," as we've seen, are crucial; "imaginary" is perhaps an even more damning accusation. Is it possible that Neff's version of events in *Double Indemnity* are as imaginary as six-year-old Calvin's fanciful creation of Tracer Bullet? Flashbacks, especially when structured around a specific character's recollection, must always be seen as the result of a particular character *privileging* a particular version of events.<sup>56</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the scholarship on this quintessential, canonized noir film is consistently reticent on the element of text-creation. While Turim acknowledges with great

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 151.

<sup>55</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 170.

<sup>56</sup> Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, of course, is the undisputed touchstone of this cinematic truism.

understatement that Neff dictates his story “as a note of explanation,”<sup>57</sup> she does not remark in any way on the significance of the audible story’s being captured as a text and being directed at a single character within the film’s diegesis. Henri-François Rey comments vaguely only that the film is “a kind of moral lesson ending with an obligatory confession,”<sup>58</sup> without ever specifying the textual nature of that confession.

But that textual nature is essential to how the film works. While other noir films have interestingly manipulated the *circumstances* under which the secondary text/voiceover is produced – for instance, in *Sunset Boulevard*, we learn almost immediately that the character producing the voice-over will be dead by film’s end (a conceit that would be appropriated decades later in *American Beauty* [Alan Ball, 1999]) – it is extraordinarily rare for the voice-over to be encapsulated into a diegetically material object that figures reflexively into the plot. Joel and Ethan Coen’s masterful postmodern noir homage *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2002) similarly appropriates the idea of character-authorship by revealing in the final sequence that Ed Crane’s (Billy Bob Thornton) narrative of murder, sex, and abject femininity – and thus the creation of all of the film’s images – has sprung from an article he was commissioned to write for some generic “men’s magazine.” Though the mode of intra-narrative production is revealed in the film’s final moments rather than as a structural component of the

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<sup>57</sup> Turim, 184.

<sup>58</sup> Henri-Francois Rey, “Demonstration by the Absurd,” in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York, NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 29.

film itself, as in *Double Indemnity*, the cumulative effect is quite similar: the textual creation distances the author from his own traumatic or aberrant actions and portrays those whom he wishes to marginalize and scapegoat as monstrous, mythical figures made benign by their “fictionalized” status.

*The mourning widow in The Man Who Wasn't There as a repellant figure of abjection.*



*The antecedent of the above image, from Double Indemnity.*



This unique narratography of *Double Indemnity*, I will ultimately argue in this section, allows Phyllis Dietrichson to be created and contained within the boundaries of fictitiousness and storytelling. Her total absence from the primary narrative, her total relegation to the secondary, suggests that she exists solely as a construct of Neff's authorship: that she is a *character*, and not merely a character in *Double Indemnity* portrayed by Barbara Stanwyck, but a mythical

composite of feminine sexuality and monstrosity, of dark anti-family impulses that, unlike Keyes and Neff, fails to traverse the secondary-primary boundary. While most noir films take pains to construct such a femme fatale, Wilder delegates this responsibility to his anti-hero Neff. The primary text serves as terrain for the failure of homosociality and masculine accomplishment. The secondary text serves as an imagined world in which that failure is, conveniently, wrought by Woman-as-monster. That the world of the secondary text, which is of course in this film simply a simulacrum of the “real world” as represented by the primary, would function as a field of monstrous containment is a trope that has gone on to be repeatedly appropriated in contemporary horror. For instance, in *Ringu* (Hakata 1998) and its notorious American remake *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002), the (also highly-gendered) monster is contained within a VHS tape and threatens only those who watch it. *Cloverfield* takes a different approach by presenting the secondary text as the totality of the film (this topic will be explored in detail in the following chapter) and, because the characters refuse, even as their plight dramatically worsens, to turn off their video camera, the Manhattan-destroying monster exists purely within a secondary frame. Even in the *Harry Potter* saga, the deeply-abject Voldemort selects as one of his Horcruxes (objects that contain pieces of his soul or malevolent essence) a diary that itself functions as an imposed text-within-text earlier in the series.

Barbara Creed’s conception of the monstrous feminine emerges from Julia Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in the latter’s *Powers of Horror*, which

defines the concept as “the jettisoned object, [that] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”<sup>59</sup> Commonly, “abjection” is appropriated as a critical term encompassing a wide variety of abhorrent acts and substances that constitute the ontological distinctions (between human and non-human) that define monstrosity. For instance, in his horror film survey *Abject Terrors*, Tony Magistrale introduces it as being located in “sexual perversity, gender ambiguity, torture, incest, bodily wastes, murder, death, and the feminine body.”<sup>60</sup> The last of these sundry concepts will of course become pertinent in our discussion of Phyllis Dietrichson, but Creed focuses more closely on abjection’s “construction in the human subject in relation to [Kristeva’s] notions of a) the ‘border’ and b) the mother-child relationship.”<sup>61</sup> Phyllis’ exclusion from the boundaries of “real life” as represented by the primary text (as well as periodic Oedipally-charged moments of interaction with Neff, such as her playful suggestion during a moment of verbal roleplaying that she might have to discipline him with a “whack over the

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<sup>59</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981), 2. The opening pages of Kristeva’s foundational essay run through a variety of first-person-specific definitions, but this one is particularly intriguing for its allusion to an “hallucination” – as in Neff’s fantasy of his own victimization and the possibility of escape – and the “annihilation” to which he exposes himself by going to see Phyllis one last time.

<sup>60</sup> Tony Magistrale, *Abject Terrors: Surveying the Modern and Postmodern Horror Film* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Co., 2004), xvi.

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Creed. “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 37.

knuckles” and his reply of “suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder”) further serve to situate her within the framework of abjection.

But Creed and Kristeva both also locate abjection in situations whereby “the individual fails to respect the law and where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar, a traitor . . . abject things are those which highlight the ‘fragility of the law’ and which exist on the other side of the border that separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction.”<sup>62</sup> Creed’s statement departs from Kristeva’s belief that immorality itself is not abject, and that immorality, in fact, can be aligned with grandeur and pomp while abjection is immorality obscured from social view and suffused with sneakiness, cunning, betrayal, and petty self-interest.

My discussion of the film proceeds from the assumption that the scenes of Neff driving to the office, actually recording his confession, and trying pathetically to flee after Keyes’ arrival, comprise the primary/omniscient text. They are clearly Wilder’s representations, meant to be read as unadulterated by any discursive influence from Wilder’s characters. In this register, anything could theoretically be depicted because we are not bound to Neff’s perspective. It would be within realistic expectation for Wilder to cut to a scene of Keyes waking up and getting ready to head into the office<sup>63</sup> where he would (as he in

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<sup>62</sup> Creed, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Such a scene, of course, does not occur. Even in the primary narrative register, Wilder stays closely with Neff. But the important thing is that he *could* have shot such a scene without disrupting the “rules” of representation. When we are in the secondary/flashback register, such a scene would be extremely disruptive; its existence would be impossible according to the logic

fact does in the final scene) overhear much of Neff's narrative/narration. We are able to take Neff's haphazard arrival at the office as "true," as a representation proffered by an unbiased and omniscient narrative entity. However, this *theoretically omniscient* scene, like the others that punctuate Neff's flashback-intensive story, imparts very little knowledge of the plot's going-on. The dialogue that Neff begrudgingly engages in with the elevator operator as he ascends to his office is deliberately trite and inconsequential, a world away from the richly-detailed, suspensefully-articulated story that is about to begin:

**Operator:** Working pretty late, aren't you Mr. Neff?

**Neff:** Late enough. Let's ride.

**Operator:** You look kind of all in, at that . . .

**Neff:** I'm fine.

**Operator:** How is the insurance business, Mr. Neff?

**Neff:** Okay.

**Operator:** They wouldn't ever sell me any; they said I had something loose in my heart. I say it's rheumatism.

**Neff:** Yeah?

By contrast, Neff's narration, and the sense that he wishes for Keyes to receive this narration in a very specific way, at once precedes and, in a Barthesianly polysemous fashion, *shapes* the flashbacks' representational content. As soon as

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of the film's narrative device. Indeed, the only way that we are able to gain access to anything that Keyes says or thinks but does *not* directly say to Neff is for Neff to snoop in his office and listen to a Dictaphone cylinder that Keyes has recorded.

he makes his way to his office, loads a recording cylinder into the Dictaphone and begins to record his narrative, his grunted monosyllabic responses to the elevator operator transform, as if by the very fact that they are being recorded and that he is now in a position of authorial performance, into precisely the sort of slang-intensive and, ultimately, *masterful* locutions that, as Bill Waterson's cartoons underscore, are instantly recognizable "stereotype[s] of clichés." In a laudatory article, Richard Armstrong suggests that *Double Indemnity's* dialogue "does not waste a word in setting scenes and fashioning them to the motion of the plot . . . the screenplay's power consists in a punchy mélange of Chandler's deft descriptions, Cain's rootless California ethos, and the vigor of Wilderian storytelling."<sup>64</sup> While this is largely difficult to argue with – the dialogue throughout most of the film is quite good and satisfying indeed – this focus on linguistic performance is deliberately subdued in the opening sequence.

Two scenes that clearly call attention to the link between Neff's performative mastery of discourse and the proffered image come immediately to mind. The first is in fact two versions of essentially the same moment: Neff going to do business with Mr. Dietrichson and being intercepted by Phyllis. The first of these is their initial, erotically-charged meeting, and represents the first shift from primary to secondary text. Phyllis's allure, potential monstrosity, and depiction as an (object) object within Neff's gaze/narrative are established almost immediately in her first scene (which is also the first transition from

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Armstrong, *Billy Wilder: American Realist* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2000), 26.

primary to secondary text). Neff's original, and somewhat insistent, purpose for arriving at the Dietrichson home is to conduct business with Mr. Dietrichson. As usual in the homosocial exchange economy outline by Eve Sedgwick, Mrs. Dietrichson thus begins her role as both a barrier and an object of exchange between Neff and Mr. Dietrichson. Neff's future arrivals at the Dietrichson's house, we're clearly intended to understand, are to continue his flirtation, and indeed, the murderous plan that Neff and Phyllis gradually put into action is contained within the parameters and language of business, a particular business about which Mrs. Dietrichson is explicitly excluded, as she is quick to claim that "my husband never tells me anything." As surely as in horror classics like Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Whale's *Frankenstein*, monstrosity springs directly here from the career-driven ambitions of the male protagonist, but in the form of some Other that that protagonist can disavow. Neff soon says in voice-over, speaking as always to Keyes, that maybe he should have known Phyllis had murder on her mind as soon as she mentioned accident insurance, essentially and absurdly characterizing himself as the naïve innocent and Phyllis as a diabolic or malevolent force. So at this point, in Neff's privileged view, Phyllis is not *made* monstrous or diabolical. She is *a priori* monstrous. At the very least, Neff's desiring gaze and ambitious salesmanship unleashes a monstrosity that she has just barely repressed up until this very moment. Crucial to note, however, that just as this diametric relationship to evil and murder is established, we have still only seen Phyllis – and since we are in the secondary

register in which all visual and verbal discourse belongs to Neff, we are to understand that he too has only seen her – both as an object of desire and as a conduit to further professional prosperity.

In the scene in which Phyllis lays out her plan more explicitly, Wilder's camera (and remember, in this secondary register it represents Neff's subjectivity and gaze, *regardless* of whether it's represented as a textbook point of view shot) once again first presents her body to us. Neff's voiceover guides a transition from his office, the seat of professional ambition, to the staircase of the Dietrichson home, the realm of domesticity and burgeoning abject energies. What seems at first to be simply Neff's private, fleeting memory of Phyllis – "I kept thinking about Phyllis Dietrichson, and the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg" – is re-marked as the visual representation of his narrative. Again, we witness dialogue that arcs seamlessly from flirtation and sexual excitement: Neff's posture at the front door is practically a parody of male cockiness, and his smirk of excitement upon learning that Mr. Dietrichson isn't home is subtle but unmistakable.



Discussing the particulars of accident insurance, Neff expertly (albeit monotonously) runs through a sales pitch, reminding us of his mastery of

salesmanship: "Oh, he could have enough to cover doctors and hospital bills. Say \$125 per week cash benefit. Around \$58,000 capital sum." After Phyllis more insistently hints at her murder/insurance fraud scheme by asking if she can take out a life insurance plan on her husband without his knowing, Neff replies:

You mean you want him to have the insurance policy without him knowing about it. And that means without the insurance company knowing he doesn't know about it. That's the set-up, isn't it? . . . I think it's lovely. Then if some dark, wet night, that crown block did fall on him . . . Only sometimes it can't quite make it on its own. It needs to have a little help. Of course, it doesn't have to be a crown block; it could be a car backing over him, he could fall out of the upstairs window. Any little thing like that, just so it's a morgue job . . . Look baby, you can't get away with it. You wanna knock him off, don't you?

Again, we are shown a complex amalgamation of professional language and acumen, domestic pleasantries, unsubtle flirtations, and finally, an exposure of malevolence. Not only does Walter catch on to Phyllis's plan, but, in the face of her disavowal of murderous intention, he narrates for us and for her precisely how the plan would be carried out, which is to say that in some sense we are now in a *third* narrative register. We have Billy Wilder's film (primary register) about Neff's narration to Keyes (secondary register), within which he narrates to Phyllis (third register) precisely the plan that will become the major narrative plot that unfolds in the secondary through his narration to Keyes, a narration

that, because it is *recorded* as a confession and apology, will become damning evidence within the primary narrative.<sup>65</sup>

But let us return to monstrosity. In an essay on Brian DePalma's filmic adaptation of Stephen King's first novel *Carrie*, Shelley Stamp Lindsey charts the progression of the horror film as its motifs and tropes become entangled with the family space:

Domestic space is terrorized in films like *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Amityville Horror*, and *The Poltergeist*, which bring home horrors conventionally rehearsed in Transylvania or outer space. Alternately, the nuclear family itself breeds monstrosity in *Rosemary's Baby*, *It's Alive!*, and *The Omen*, or yields a teen monster in the midst of a tortured adolescent trajectory in *The Exorcist*, *Martin*, and *Amityville Horror 2*. The family finally *is* monster in *The Hills Have Eyes*, and *Near Dark*.<sup>66</sup>

This lineage of the cinematic family space as post-gothic and monstrous discounts the extent to which the femme fatale figure embodies precisely the elements that make the female monster in these much later works so horrifying: unapologetic sexuality, a capacity for violence, and a seething conflict between different modes of feminine propriety that manifest in unspeakable acts and bodily representations. And while in the typical noir, the femme fatale is not

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<sup>65</sup> Verbal narrations within the secondary story under Neff's narrative control are a constant throughout the film. Whenever Keyes hits upon a new theory of how the murder took place, he doesn't just explain it: He tells it as a story, in present tense, with flourishes and narrator like-commentary.

<sup>66</sup> Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Carrie's Monstrous Puberty," in *The Dread of Difference*, ed. Thomas Schatz (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 279-80.

necessarily construed as a product of domesticity, *Double Indemnity*, perhaps the most iconic of all noir films (or certainly one of three alongside *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*), reinscribes the femme fatale/monstrous feminine figure as precisely such a product. Her rage toward Mr. Dietrichson is a direct result of the latter's boorishness, the obvious implication that he has tired of her as a trophy wife. And from the few scenes that we see with Mr. Dietrichson, it is apparent that Phyllis's rage is not without justification. Wilder's direction of actor Tom Powers – or, again, Neff's biased narrative representation of the character – make Mr. Dietrichson not exactly a sympathetic figure whose death an audience would mourn. The dissolution of the family space configures Mr. Dietrichson as a sort of marital monster in his cruel disinterest and mocking of his wife, but he is about to be eliminated by a far more dramatic instantiation of malevolence: one, coincidentally, that we might think at this point he has created by his own neglect, and one that, if we are to believe Lola Dietrichson, Phyllis has engaged in before.

In this scene, Walter has decided to participate in Phyllis's scheme, and she, in turn, has confessed that despite her previous protestations, the murder and insurance scam is precisely what she had in mind. Note that we begin in the primary register, seeing Neff making the recording, not the narrative result of that recording. Note also, when we reach the part of the scene in which Phyllis and Neff discuss the details of the crime and the importance of Mr. Dietrichson

taking the train, the grotesque contortions of their facial expressions<sup>67</sup>; the monstrosity of their particular noir narrative roles begin to manifest in facial contortions that may be nothing so disturbingly as Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* or Samara in *The Ring*, but still, they can't quite keep the demonic impulse from surfacing. At the same time, though, their manic expressions are highly libidinal: As they almost jubilantly plan the murder, they continue to look at each other with undisguised desire.

Here we see Walter's ability to manipulate his sales skills toward the murderous project and the not-exactly-murderous but extremely unpleasant and unsettling interactions of the Dietrichson family. Domesticity, the ideological domain of the feminine figure, is now suffused with resentment, bitterness, and sexual pulsions that, quite literally (as they take place on the front doorstep) look *outside* of the marital arrangement and its attendant domestic space for satisfaction.

*Double Indemnity* structures its narrative in such a fashion that, like the legalistically-minded epistolary novel, it can (must) be read as perpetually creating its own fictive content within that same fictive framework. This is where the film departs most noticeably from any sort of affinity with the primary-secondary relationship in *Boogie Nights*. While the motivations of the

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<sup>67</sup> Stanwyck does a fine job of subtly contorting her face whenever she thinks about or plans her husband's murder, but a moment of exposition later in the film adds substantially to the idea that her face is indicative of her malevolence: When Lola tells Neff that she watched Phyllis wearing a black veil and hat ("before she needed a black veil and hat!"), she is just as shaken by the look in Phyllis' eyes as by the more damning evidence that Phyllis is preparing to be in mourning.

principle character-authors may be similar, the split of narrative registers enacted by this authorship in each film is fundamentally different. *Boogie Nights* offers a relatively straightforward distinction between primary and secondary narrative. We are either in P.T. Anderson's fictional world or in Jack Horner's fictional world *within* that of Anderson's. The characters are fully aware that they are creating visual texts, whereas in *Double Indemnity* Walter is only creating audio texts; their relationship to the accompanying, deceptively subjective, images that he is apparently narrating is always questionable. As I argued in the previous chapter, with some very distinct exceptions, the cinematographic nature of each register in *Boogie Nights* allows us to immediately recognize which one we are looking at, and the juxtaposition of one with the other works toward particularly rich development of ideological/character relations. *Double Indemnity* employs a seemingly simple flashback/voice-over structure familiar to myriad noir narratives, and thus serves as an exemplary case study for the problematic relationship between voice-over and visual representation and, because the very act of voice-over is highly relevant to other goings-on in the film, to the core questions of this study. The motivations, methods, and textual medium of Jack Horner in *Boogie Nights*, one might instantly aver, have rather little in common with those of Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*. The one trait that these two men – a 1970s pornographer with dubious artistic pretensions, and a seemingly average postwar bachelor/insurance salesman – seem to have in common is their mutual

residence in metropolitan Los Angeles. On the contrary, it is important to note that each character is fundamentally animated by, and thus transmits into his discursive productions, an overwhelming sense of shame. Further, this shame is intimately linked to (or perhaps simply the result of) a masculine bravado and brash pretense of – there is no better word for it – *shamelessness*. Like many characters of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century epistolary novel, for which the assemblage of a legal document was the primary goal,<sup>68</sup> both men produce their texts as a perverse sort of *mea culpa* or confession: a formal attempt at contrition, a casting out of guilt and shame. Of course, this is far more literal in *Double Indemnity* than in *Boogie Nights*. In the latter, as we saw in the previous chapter, Horner simply tries to salvage his professional dignity by appending narrative convention to explicit sexual imagery. The resulting films, while profitable, serve as an unintentional index of his self-conscious fear of artistic and human failure. They are a hopeless bid for auteurial recognition, as though Horner feels the need to apologize for their shameless content.

*Double Indemnity*, on the other hand, involves a straightforward confession; one that seems, in fact, to have from the beginning an official “by the book” quality even as Neff disavows its status as confessional:

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<sup>68</sup> This is the case in Richardson’s *Clarissa* as well as Collins’ *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. These novels are not just among the undisputed heavyweights of the epistolary novel form, but also both result in a novel that exists – not as a novel, exactly, but as a textual product – within the novel’s fictional world. The book that we hold as “actual” readers is also theoretically a prop in the narrative, a legal record of testimony and, most significantly, a confession that bears upon the lives of its fictional contributors and readers.

Office memorandum, Walter Neff to Barton Keyes, Claims Manager. Los Angeles, July 16th, 1938. Dear Keyes: I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it. I don't like the word confession [. . .] I killed Dietrichson. Me, Walter Neff, insurance agent, 35 years old, unmarried, no visible scars. Until a little while ago, that is.

Neff's introduction to his own monologue demonstrates his facility with standard office protocol, as the opening words could be read either as force of habit or as a sardonic acknowledgment of the banality (at least when compared with a tale of murder, seduction, and deceit) of a typical office memo. The comprehensive details by which Neff identifies himself further the sense that what he is producing is, in spite of his claim to the contrary, intended to function as a sort of *official* declaration of culpability. The emphasis on "official" here is crucial, as the crux of my reading of the film as a Character Authorship narrative is the distinction between what Walter regards as the creation of an intimate transmission of narrative knowledge from himself to Keyes, and what we see to in fact be a highly public text. This to-the-point quality of his introduction, the statements of bare facts concerning date, time, place, and official identity, is clearly meant not just to make the Dictaphone cylinders into a juridically admissible text (this is incidental) but to appeal to Keyes' *fetishistic* appreciation of empirical precision. Joan Copjec categorizes Keyes as the product of an inter-war culture in which "Entire bureaucracies grew up around these numbers to

count, cross-reference, and analyze them,”<sup>69</sup> and Walter knows his (intended) audience. His structuring of the story, his going through the motions of bureaucratic procedure, like his decision to create the narration itself, is for Keyes’ benefit.

We learn through the course of the narrative that Neff feels shame over fooling Keyes, over allowing Keyes to believe in him, even to defend him to suspicious colleagues. Interestingly, this defense is not articulated in Walter’s presence, but via Dictaphone memo that Walter finds while snooping in Keyes’s office, looking for evidence that Keyes might suspect him. Since this snooping takes place in the secondary register, we in fact briefly enter yet another theoretical *third* narrative register. However, Keyes’s memo, in keeping with Copjec’s assessment of him as a no-nonsense figure more interested in hard evidence than sentimentality and narrative, is less a story than a simple statement of exculpation for Walter, mainly supported by supposedly irrefutable fact. But it is also in this moment that Neff learns of Nino Zachetti’s (Byron Barr) role in the plot, that he is the one Phyllis plans on running off with, that Neff has been set up as “the patsy.” The discovery of Keyes’ voice memos provides the final piece of the story for us as viewers and, by extension, for Neff’s telling of his story. In other words, even when Neff seems briefly to suspend his own narrative control and introduce someone else’s discursive contribution, it is crucial that that contribution is contained within a physical text.

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<sup>69</sup> Joan Copjec, “The Phenomenal Non-Phenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir,” in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso Books, 1993), 170.

Walter's confession, insofar as it meets the criteria of that genre in spite of Neff's apparent distaste for it, is less a confession of two murders (and massive insurance fraud to boot) than one of the relatively minor transgression of violating the paternal/homosocial bond that he shared with his boss. It just so happens that the resulting structure of the document coincides with the "officialness" required by the social order of a legal text.

In the previous chapter, I attempted to delineate character performance from character authorship, and while Neff's authorship of the Dictaphone cylinders is the primary narrative-constructing act of authorship, the rest of the film is rife with performance and theatricality. Most memorable is Keyes' devastating rebuttal to Mr. Norton's decision that Mrs. Dietrichson is not entitled to collect insurance money on her husband's death, based on the (incorrect) claim that it was a suicide.<sup>70</sup> Copjec rightly describes this scene as "Delivered with great rhetorical flair and punctuated by the frenetic gestures of a man impatient with, even contemptuous of, his opponent."<sup>71</sup> In other words, it is a demonstrative performance, right down to meaningful intonations and choreographed movements, communicating not only that Dietrichson must be paid but also that, as a front-office company man, Norton lacks the acuity of a claims manager. Norton's rebutted speech is itself delivered in a performatively

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<sup>70</sup> Ironically, this monologue remains enormously satisfying in spite of the dramatic irony that it underscores: the viewer, even while enjoying Keyes' evisceration of Norton's sententious performance, knows very well that Keyes' premise is also incorrect.

<sup>71</sup> Copjec, 168.

dramatic manner, filled with haughty inflections and the intonations of a privileged, upper-class dialect. Keyes recognizes this quickly enough to tell him during a clearly calculated pause: “You’ve got the ball, let’s see you run with it,” before laying waste to his superior’s self-important theories.<sup>72</sup>

Other characters engage in similar theatrics. We see Phyllis Dietrichson move through a succession of roles (some of which work in collusion with Walter, others against him): the long-suffering wife, the torrid lover, the grieving widow, the Mulveyian object of the Look, and, of course, the pistol-wielding femme fatale. Nino Zachetti, privileged medical school dropout, adopts a tough-guy proto-greaser persona that Neff easily undermines simply by telling him that Lola Dietrichson (Jean Heather) still loves him. The affable Mr. Jackson (Porter Hall), the only witness to Neff’s impersonation of Mr. Dietrichson, self-consciously styles himself as a straight-shooting Everyman, a persona that insistently emerges from his being “a Medford man.” Most prominent of these performances, of course, is the film’s centerpiece sequence, Neff’s masquerade as Mr. Dietrichson. While one could argue that Nino and Jackson’s performances are more in the service of crafting a specific identity for its own sake, the three most prominent moments of performance – those of Phyllis, Neff, and Keyes – are, in keeping with what I outlined in the previous chapter, about simple expediency: gaining and maintaining a situational advantage over others.

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<sup>72</sup> It’s worth noting that when Keyes eventually does hit upon the correct interpretation of how Dietrichson was killed, his performative storytelling is no less theatrical nor self-aggrandizing. It even begins with “Walter . . . I’m a great man.”

The film's emphasis on performativity, however, does not dilute the symbolic importance of Neff's narrative. While I have explicitly claimed that Character Authorship is in many ways just an exacerbation of intra-narrative performance, here the two modes are deeply entwined. The performative nature of the secondary characters simply reinforces their function throughout the film: They are *characters* not only in Wilder's film but in Neff's text. This is particularly important in thinking about Mrs. Dietrichson, a violent femme fatale, but one safely contained within the secondary register of filmic discourse, one that exists, as far as we know, strictly within protagonist/antagonist Walter Neff's storytelling. She becomes, through her isolation within Neff's tale, something very much like a fictional character, like Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine bogeywoman, the seductive existence and influence of whom Neff, even as he blithely realizes, in the film's final moments, the inevitability of his own execution, is perhaps able to repress with the comforting if childish reminder that "It's only a story." This is yet another way in which *Double Indemnity's* structural affinity with *Boogie Nights* is weakened; objectified as the female porn actresses in the latter film may have been, they existed on both sides of Horner's camera and, by extension, in both registers of Anderson's film. As exemplified by Rollergirl's limo scene, they existed as fantasy objects *and* as complexly desiring human characters. Though she desires extremely even as she is fantasmatically framed by Walter's look, Mrs. Dietrichson is not similarly granted existence in the homosocially-charged primary register that is

obsessively concerned with preserving Keyes's good opinion of Walter. Walter may bear the gunshot wound, the symptom of his murderous involvement with her, as he drags himself back to the office, but she herself exists solely in the realm of authorship.

Keyes is, ostensibly, the *known* and intended reader of Neff's confessionally intimate text. But his relationship to the Dictaphonic text is actually ambiguous. We do not know at what point in Neff's narrative he began to listen in, and thus how much of the story he actually knows. He simply avers that he has been there "long enough." Furthermore, he does not consume the text itself, but rather witnesses Walter in the act of creating it. The true audience for Neff's textual creation, the final scene suggests, will be much larger, much more public, than just Keyes: a judge, a jury, the press, and the public will consume it, assess it, and judge its author accordingly. *Double Indemnity* thus ends on a note eerily similar to its near-contemporary *Rope* (Hitchcock 1948), in that the protagonist/murderer, whose machinations we viewers have been privy to and invested in throughout the film, is discovered by a paternal, mentor-like, and incidentally complicit figure. Keyes, after all, unwittingly teaches Neff how to manipulate actuarial probability just as Rupert Cadell teaches Brandon and Philip the philosophy that they channel into David Kentley's murder. In both films, the father-figure performs a tour de force monologue that acutely expresses his defining characteristic (insurance business expertise and Nietzschean moral relativity). In both films, the credits roll upon the realization that the police are

closing in (having been summoned by the paternal figure), that the central murder, in both cases characterized as “perfect” by the murderers themselves, will not be gotten away with. While David’s limp body in the cassone is the only evidence that will be needed to fulfill Rupert’s prediction of the death sentence for his former pupils, the final exchange between Neff and Keyes suggests not only that taking the time to narrate and record his confession will prevent Neff from escaping, but that the cylinders will go on to be consumed by a trial jury, an audience well beyond that for whom they were intended:

**Keyes:** Walter, I'm going to call a doctor.

**Neff:** (Bitterly) What for? So they can patch me up? So they can nurse me along till I'm back on my feet? So I can walk under my own power into that gas chamber up in San Quentin? Is that it, Keyes?

**Keyes:** Something like that, Walter.

**Neff:** Well, I've got a different idea. Look here. Suppose you went back to bed and didn't find these cylinders till tomorrow morning, when the office opens. From then on you can play it any way you like. Would you do that much for me, Keyes?

At this juncture, the very act of creating “these cylinders,” which has been the backbone of narrativity for the entirety of the film, presents itself as a serious impasse for our protagonist. The decision to come clean to Keyes has not only prevented him from getting across the border before running out of time (and blood) but, now that he is caught, will clearly be submitted in textual-form as indisputable evidence of his guilt. Indeed, Wilder shot (but declined to include in the final cut) a denouement in which Neff is escorted into the gas chamber. At

no point, apparently, was it deemed necessary to include a courtroom scene, in spite of such scenes' ubiquity in Hollywood thrillers; so damning is Neff's self-produced text, so inevitable is a "guilty" verdict, that such a narrative moment was never necessary. This, we must emphasize, returns to the confused nature of Neff's performative textual creation. We understand, as does Neff after the fact, that his decision to create his confession will lead to his exposure to the entire social order. Like Brandon and Philip at the moment that Rupert opens their apartment window and recklessly fires off three pistol shots to alert the outside world, he will experience the consequences of an intimately-committed crime and an intimately-beseeking confession in a fully public realm. But that particular audience is entirely a theoretical potentiality as the film ends. No wild courtroom scenes or an execution scene in the vein of *Angels With Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938) wherein the anti-hero's uncorrupted associate watches grimly as his friend receives a not-underserved death at the hands of institutional power. Neff's text was for Keyes and Keyes alone, and while we fully understand that it will go on to be consumed in the public realm, Wilder carefully and pointedly excludes such a representation. The audience, this time not just a subculture of prurient porn viewers but society writ large, for which a trial jury might theoretically stand in, is once more made diegetically nonexistent, alluded to but never shown.

The beginning of this chapter summarized the circumstances and objections that suffused cinema's incorporation of sound and, in particular, the

creation of the voice-over device. While Kozloff offers a variety of justifications for it, and film noir scholarship typically fixates on the hard-boiled protagonist/anti-hero's dependence on it, I want to emphasize the narrative implications of a rare occurrence in genre film: the voice-over that exists as produced text, not merely as an emanation from some non-specific post-filmic void. Strangely overlooked even in the one genre that has semi-recurrently produced it, this device serves to throw the visually-rendered events of the film into doubt, to constantly remind us that they are a privileged and biased version of events intended to afford the author/speaker the opportunity to shape his ideological relation to society, represented here solely and perhaps inadequately as the patriarchal figure of authority via Barton Keyes, through audio-textuality. My alignment of Mrs. Dietrichson with the figure of the monster, to be sure, is not to suggest that she is in fact a monstrous human being. How could we really even know, when her entire existence emerges from Neff's perspective, a perspective shaped by the fact that she has just shot him. Rather, I want to suggest that her positionality throughout the film – as existing on the margins of the goings-on of the male characters, as an object of the objectifying gaze, as a seemingly oppositional force to family life and reproductivity, as being unflinchingly committed to violence (though we only actually see this violence once and in this case it's aborted before a fatal shot can be taken), as a token of exchange in a homosocial economy, as a stock femme fatale who is *constructed* by Neff's gaze and by Neff's discursive narrational prowess – renders her not

merely ideologically troubling, but a concrete embodiment of the most basic and, frankly, *unimaginative* of emasculating, castrating, and, finally, misogynist fears.

## Chapter 3

### Found Footage, Traumatic Acts, & the Banality of the “Mockumentary”

-*What are you doing?*

-*Making a documentary.*

-*Of what?*

-*Of things.*

-*Mean Creek* (Jacob Aaron Estes 2004)

While this project’s concern thus far has been the transitional moments between primary and secondary textuality, we must also discuss a subgenre whose production has grown exponentially in the past two decades: Films in which the secondary text overlaps entirely with the primary. In these texts, there are no discernible moments at which the actual filmmaker seems to cede narrative power to a primary character; from start to finish, these films are *already* under the purported control of a fictional character, and thus, theoretically, the characters on screen are *perpetually* aware that they are in a position of performing for some textualizing apparatus. Rather than discuss the gaps and transitions between primary and secondary, and those registers’ modulations of one another’s thematic content, this chapter will focus on the narrative and ideological implications that arise when primary and secondary are in complete congruence. While films in which character authorship periodically supplants the primary enact a fictionalized mediation of fictionalized textual fragments, fully secondary films enact a fictionalized *absence* of mediation.

Until recently, such films have almost inevitably fallen into the genre that Christopher Guest has refined since his debut *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), the so-called “mockumentary.” These films are presented as traditional documentaries of some rarefied cultural topic; Guest’s work, for instance, has fictionalized excess-indulging rock bands, small-town community theatre, and dog shows enthusiasts, among other disparate and seemingly-arbitrary subject matter. The fundamental conceit of the mockumentary is its coy distortion of reality: it is fictional, narrative storytelling presented through the trappings of an expository form typically expected to remain unbiased, detached, and, of course, truthful.<sup>73</sup>

But in practice, of course, the documentary form is routinely geared toward decidedly ideological ends. *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl 1935), for instance, purports to be a documentary of the Third Reich’s Nuremberg Rally, but is certainly no less a work of propaganda than the silent classics *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1912) and *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein 1925). The latter films are known widely for promoting Jim Crow-era cultural politics and Soviet revolution, respectively, through storytelling that – though clearly depicting events that really occurred or were representative of typical historical occurrences – is recognizably rooted in narrative, cinematic, and *fictional* formulations. *Triumph*, however, adheres to a recognizable documentary form;

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<sup>73</sup> Also, of course, actual documentary is often a secondary text-driven genre, as many such films – particular those dealing with historical events – are made up of edited-together texts that were originally created by various people and for reasons unrelated to the documentary itself. In other cases, and this is most commonly the form upon which mockumentary styles itself, the documentary filmmaker will decide upon his or her subject and then create original footage. In this case, such footage would fall under the category of primary text.

all of the representations of high-ranking Nazi officials, for instance, are “played” by the actual people. Contemporary examples (e.g. Michael Moore’s documentaries on the Bush Doctrine, firearms, and health care, or the hysterical agitprop of the *Zeitgeist* series) make the point even more clearly: the documentary form presents a paradox of fictionality. The documentary implicitly promises, by its very genre categorization, detached and unmediated truth; yet, of course, we are deeply skeptical of its motivations, always looking for cracks in the façade of impartiality, keenly aware that even the most lauded documentary is quite capable of ideological involvement.<sup>74</sup> At the outset of her study *The Archive Effect*, Jaimie Baron, citing Hayden White’s *Metahistory* and the rethinking of history’s tendency to be studied as a series of linear causes and effects, remarks “tropes [are] deployed by historians in order to turn the archival documentation of events not only into representational narratives but also into particular *kinds* of narrative, emplotted according to the literary structures of the romance, the comedy, the tragedy, and satire.”<sup>75</sup> As in *Boogie Nights*, the dimensions of the act of narrativization always overlap with ideology and the

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<sup>74</sup> While it is perhaps naïve to suggest that a typical 21<sup>st</sup> century viewer truly expects an absence of bias in documentary, the politicized reaction to documentary tends to be far more vehement than that of typical narrative film, whether historical fiction or simple allegory. Compare, for instance, the right-wing outrage provoked by Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with the reaction to fictional narratives concerning Bush’s foreign policy, e.g. *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce 2008), *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes 2005), and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow). Those who might take offense at an anti-war stance surely know that documentary is not *really* inherently objective, yet they are still more likely to suggest that they have been betrayed or tricked when a documentary film engages ideologically.

<sup>75</sup> Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 2.

drive to conform to recognizable story-types that affirm preconceived notions and politically-motivated narratives.

The popular documentary of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, in fact, regularly comes under public scrutiny for its alleged biases. The coining of the portmanteau “Schlockumentary” and the perpetuation of certain media outlets’ contention (a contention that is emblazoned in a slogan, if rarely put into practice) that all politico-cultural discourse must maintain a “fair and balanced” approach to right- and left-wing sensibilities, demonstrates an ethos wherein documentary or historical reportage, because they fall under the heading of non-fiction, must be neutered of authorial purpose and stance. They must be assemblages of facts, facts that dare not work in support of a thesis. When Joan Copjec invokes Pier Paolo Passolini’s withering critique of Zapruder, she summarizes this paradox:

[the] subjective long take goes hand in hand with an inability or refusal creatively to *choose* a camera angle, with an acceptance of the position in which history happens to have placed him. Ironically, this reasoning describes a *subjective spectator* as a mere *passive recorder of events*, a mere *object*, or a *slave of history* who forfeits, as a consequence, all claim to objectivity.<sup>76</sup>

The contemporary documentarian is put to an unpleasant choice: to be either slave of history or biased ideologue. A central claim or unique angle, in an

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<sup>76</sup> Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 202.

asinine culture of “fairness,” is always suspect. In other words: a documentary is merely an assemblage of words and images designed to create narrative and, by extension, argumentation. It’s categorization as “non-fiction” is often misread in mainstream culture as meaning that it aspires to objectivity.

The “mockumentary” further complicates this relationship by presenting narrative fiction through the trappings of a form associated with – if not actually adhering to – objective truth. As with other character-created texts addressed in this project, these works pose an artificially-produced problematic of authorship. Creation of the secondary text is diegetically attributed to fictional characters, and the subjects who perform in those texts are thus shaped by the character-author’s prerogatives. But unlike the films addressed previously, these films do not break from the text-within-text to provide an alternative perspective on the characters. The distinction between Dirk Diggler/Eddie Adams in the primary text and Dirk Diggler *qua* Dirk Diggler in the secondary is a crucial point of comparison for understanding Anderson’s characterization (and Wahlberg’s portrayal). On the other hand, the fictional fanatical dog owners in *Best in Show*, for instance, can *only* be read through their conscious performativity as rendered by Guest’s proxy fictional documentarians. While Narratives of Character Authorship with a distinct primary/secondary division allow characters a respite from performance, fully secondary texts compel them always to be “on,” to self-

consciously modulate their actions in response to the fictional camera's presence.<sup>77</sup>

It's important to note from the outset the problematic semantics of the portmanteau "mockumentary" as a catch-all for films in which the secondary overlaps the primary from start to finish, or even for films that follow documentary structures but are clearly fictional. First, the term is no longer sufficient: "found footage" films have, for the past decade, essentially dominated this sub-genre of character authorship. Found footage films do not automatically constitute a documentary structure and, in most cases, are produced, according to the films' framing device, out of motivations far removed from the ideological and/or expository imperatives of true documentary. Films and television shows that might be perfunctorily categorized as mockumentary have in fact transcended the genre's boundaries.

Second, I would argue that the semantics of the term itself are troublingly vague; it is unclear, in any given usage, whether the "mock" refers to a simple facsimile or imitation (as in *mock-up* or *mock apple pie*) or to the mean-spirited teasing inherent in *mockery*. In other words, does the term neutrally acknowledge that these texts are simply fictional works stylized as documentary, or suggest that something, whether form or content or both, is being

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<sup>77</sup> For instance, in *Paranormal Activity* (2009), when one of the two principals is asked by his girlfriend how much he spent on the fancy camera he's purchased, he replies – while the camera in question is rolling, of course – "About half of what I made today" (he's a day trader). This blithe but boastful reply, of course, comes from a performative motivation; not merely an expository remark or unsubtle bragging about his earning power, it is uttered with full understanding that it is being recorded and therefore has the potential to be heard by an audience.

lampooned? Furthermore, in the case of this latter possibility, the term is unclear as to *what* is being mocked: The conventions of documentary filmmaking (form) or the subjects of the specific work in question (content).

The term “Fully Secondary Text” is meant simply to communicate that the primary text we viewers watch *always* carries the pretense of being character-authored, of presenting the illusion of being one narrative layer removed from our spectatorship. The documentary film, of course, will continue to hang over this genre, since all of these texts purport to be the fictional representation of a non-fictional artifact.<sup>78</sup> But I strenuously contest the notion that the fully secondary text, even if it is in the traditional mockumentary mode, should be regarded as a subset of documentary itself. Strangely, the most prominent accolade on the jacket of Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner’s *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing*, one of very few book-length studies on this topic, declares that the anthology “explores in depth a *subgenre of documentary film* so often ignored.”<sup>79</sup> But to regard mockumentary as simply a variation on or different version of documentary film is to not only put undue

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<sup>78</sup> It seems practically inconceivable, after all, to expect a fully secondary text in which the secondary is a work of fiction created by a character in the primary, because there would, by definition, be no recourse to a purely primary register that would allow us to see the distinction. Such a film would simply collapse the primary/secondary boundary and *be* a traditionally fictional film. For example, if *Boogie Nights* was composed entirely of its secondary text, it would simply be a collection of simulated pornography rather than a film about the creation of *actual* pornography. It’s what happens in the primary, after all, that allows us to suspend disbelief and see what is made in the secondary as real, relative to the primary. Dirk and Jack wouldn’t win prizes for fake pornography, after all. The primary accepts it as real and so we do as well.

<sup>79</sup> John S. Katz, Qtd. in/on Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (eds.), *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), back cover.

weight on the question of form, but to ignore that, in the former's case, adherence to the form in question is plainly contrived. Documentary, ideologically suspect and full of ulterior motive though it may be, traffics in meta-narrative, while fully secondary and mockumentary texts are able, through their irrefutable status as fiction, to produce pure narrative – despite their embrace of a form that purports to foreclose it.

The following section will provide brief readings of three documentary-structure narratives that are wildly disparate in terms of commercial popularity and subject matter. The two common denominators are (1) that all three texts are ostentatiously and improbably preoccupied with banality, mundanity, and the minutiae of every day life *even as* they construct compelling dramatic storylines, and (2) that they show keen awareness of the modern consequences of sudden, seemingly unmediated exposure to a huge audience; the threat/opportunity of what we might call the YouTubeization of late capitalism always hangs over these characters' actions.

By maintaining a documentary conceit, these texts ensure that, rather than appearing contrived or excessive, their often-melodramatic storylines maintain a pretense of realism. This is not to say that any viewer is mistaking these works for true, non-fiction documentary. It is to say that these texts are able to get away with preposterous storylines and characters because those storylines and characters are presented through a form that we automatically

equate both with compelling oddities, and, simply (even when we know better) with *truth*.

### ***The Office*: Documentary Purism and the Banality of Cringe Comedy**

The “U.S. version” of *The Office* originally premiered as a straightforward remake of the BBC show of the same name, a mockumentary-in-the-making in which the show’s entire diegesis is stock footage of a bland office in a nondescript office park. Despite near-unanimous acclaim, The U.K. version lasted for only two “series” (the BBC term for what we typically call seasons in the U.S.) and didn’t initially make inroads with American audiences. In the remake, executive producer Greg Daniels modeled the characters, setting, and premise after the original, and at first produced episodes that mirrored the narrative rhythms of the original. However, its popularity by the end of season 2 led to its taking on a narrative life of its own, and a large part of its thematic project has been the exploration of perpetual performance, textualization, and – as in the original – these concepts’ relation to banality and boredom.

Outside of cinema, the tenets of documentary, appropriated by the basic sitcom structure, have produced some of the most critically and commercially successful television programs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The persistence of the documentary conceit varies; *Modern Family*, for instance, features the sort of “talking head” commentaries that are indispensable both in true documentary and reality television, allowing characters to articulate their thoughts on plot

developments without actually stating them to other characters, but the actual diegetic action of the show looks like a standard single-camera sitcom, albeit one in which characters will make the occasional flustered or amused facial expression directly to the camera.<sup>80</sup>

*The Office*, however, rigorously maintains the pretense that its entire existence is due to an ever-present film crew shooting footage for an upcoming documentary on the Scranton, Pennsylvania branch of Dunder-Mifflin, a small paper wholesaler.<sup>81</sup> The show's mockumentary style has two major effects. First,

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<sup>80</sup> The relationship between the fictional documentary crew and the characters in the show/fictional documentary was increasingly riffed upon and thematized as the show hit its later seasons. For instance, when major character Michael Scott departs from Scranton – and thus will no longer be part of the documentary – his final act is to hand over to the cameraperson the lapel microphone that has (fictionally) allowed his talking-head interview moments to be heard. His final goodbye is thus actually mouthed but inaudible, as he has been disconnected from the filmmakers' apparatus. When Pam (Jenna Fischer) is nearly assaulted by an angry warehouse worker, a crew member bursts into the diegetic frame to ward the attacker off with a boom microphone. Finally, the finale of the show itself revolves around the revelation that the documentary has at last been completed and a finished, edited version of the previous nine years of material is about to air. In all of these circumstances, what occurs is an intrusion of the means of textual production (theoretically the primary text) into the world of the secondary, a development that, as we will see in Chapter 4, can create difficulty of interpretation.

<sup>81</sup> While shows inspired by *The Office*, such as *Modern Family* and *Parks and Recreation*, are relatively lax in their adherence to documentary realism, *The Office*, especially in earlier episodes, exhibits an intense awareness of the aesthetics and limitations of the genre. Discussing the purity of this approach, producer Michael Shur explains the filming setup for a scene in the episode "Did I Stutter" in which Michael attempts to avoid an employee who's angry with him: ". . . the story's about Michael, having been yelled at by one of his employees, being very scared and not knowing what to do. So we had this scene that was B-roll during a talking head where Michael started to walk to the bathroom, but he would have to cross in front of Stanley, and he was so scared that he walked the other way, went down the stairs, walked all the way through the parking lot, up the stairs, back through the annex where Toby sits, in back through the thing to go to the bathroom, then went back, just to avoid Stanley. And we had this endless debate about, 'Is this possible? Could the camera operator legitimately get to all of the places we would need him to be in order to shoot this sequence?' But we made Randall Einhorn [the episode's director] walk it to see, like, okay, if this is the way we want to shoot this, you need to show us that a real camera man in a real scenario could get to all those places in time to shoot all of those shots. He did it, and so we were like, 'Okay, then go ahead and shoot it.'" [Todd VanDerWerff, "Michael Shur Walks Us Through Season 3 of *Parks and Recreation*," *The Onion AV Club*, 2011. <http://www.avclub.com/article/michael-schur-walks-us-through-iparks-and-recreati-59372>]

it blurs the distinctions between character performativity and textualization outlined in Chapter 1. Second, it allows for a seemingly paradoxical version of mainstream entertainment wherein drama, intrigue, and melodrama emerge in spite of the text's insistence on – and foregrounding of – dullness and banality.

Daniels' view of the show seems to confirm that this was less an accident than a strategy: "fictional TV isn't delivering that, these moments where you don't know what is going to happen. Most of the time, fictional shows play at such an *unreal* level you don't really care what happens."<sup>82</sup> But again, little of what happens on *The Office* differs from what occurs in standard sitcoms. The "unrealness" to which Daniels alludes is a characterization of form, not content. The difference is that the presentation allows for it to seem "quirky but real," rather than plainly contrived.

*A typical long-take shot from The Office. Its affected imperfectness – the unusual distance of the camera from its subjects, the distractingly foregrounded and unfocused object that intrudes upon the frame – underscores mockumentary's central conceit: that camera mechanics are always controlled by actual people within the primary diegesis.*



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<sup>82</sup> Qtd. in William Booth, "With *Office*, NBC Goes off the Beaten Laugh Track." *The Washington Post* 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47391-2005Mar18.html>. It is perhaps worth noting that Daniels contrasts *The Office* with "fiction" despite the fact that his show is *entirely* fictitious and scripted. This is likely a testament to the power of its simulated non-fiction form.

Though by no means the first series to embrace the now well-trodden subgenre of Cringe Comedy, *The Office* was certainly the first to bring it to mainstream cultural consciousness and to flourish with that particular viewer-text relationship. Cringe Comedy, a mode of dark comedy that imparts excessive discomfort – something bordering on vicarious social anxiety – is deeply related to the discussions of ideology and narrative laid out in chapter one. Gary Susman points out that “Cringe comedy often borrows the techniques of reality TV – the relentlessly tracking camera, the confessional asides – to find humor in the difference between a character’s self-image and the way he or she actually comes off to other people.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, when a grotesquely socially inept character like Michael Scott (Steve Carrell), *The Office*’s deluded regional manager, tries, for instance, to perform a Chris Rock comedy routine<sup>84</sup> that riffs on the usage of a racial slur (“Diversity Day”), and believes that he is coming across as genuinely humorous, edgy, and likeable to his deeply uncomfortable subordinates, he enacts essentially the same flawed dynamic of self-definition as Dirk Diggler when he performs as Brock Landers. In his flamboyant performance, he attempts to inspire a certain reading of who he is and what he embodies. The

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<sup>83</sup> Gary Susman, “Discomfort Zone,” *Time Magazine Online*, 2013.  
<http://entertainment.time.com/2013/05/13/discomfort-zone-10-great-tinge-comedies/>

<sup>84</sup> The routine in question is “Niggas vs. Black People” [Chris Rock, *Bring the Pain*, 1997], a relatively lengthy stand-up bit that was deeply controversial upon its release, in spite (to some extent *because*) of its being authored and performed by a black man. Given that Rock makes brash distinctions between upstanding and degenerate black people, and labels the latter with the most loaded of racial epithets, a white man reciting it in a corporate atmosphere is clearly going to cause problems.

only difference is that while Dirk/Eddie exists in a primary register and Dirk/Brock exists in a secondary one, Michael exists in two different but indistinguishable versions of secondary text: both the sitcom diegesis itself and the supplementary talking-head interview that constitutes the documentary footage that recursively constitutes the show itself. And the uncomfortable “cringing” effect that these scenarios incite is exacerbated by the mockumentary form. A character embarrassing himself in front of others in a traditional sitcom, we can imagine, will only be witnessed by the other characters present in the scene. In mockumentary, we understand the moment to be captured for posterity, sparking the anxiety of realizing that a faux pas or damning remark cannot be forgotten or allowed to modulate and diminish in others’ memories. Though Michael will try many times throughout the series to deny having said or done something embarrassing or compromising, the very fact that even these denials are being constantly incorporated into the ever-growing metatext of the show suggests the futility of his trying to reinscribe a different version of himself.

Even worse for Michael, the documentary footage that comprises *The Office*, within the world of the *The Office*, has a much larger potential audience outside of the characters in a given scene. So when Michael insists on reciting the Chris Rock routine a second time – another character, Kevin, has inflectionlessly explained it to the leader of a mandatory diversity workshop, and Michael insists that he’s “butchering” it, thus reiterating his apparently sincere belief that he, Michael, is a gifted comedic performer – we are reminded,

through unconventional (for a sitcom) camera movements, fluctuations in focus, and even the well-known “beep” sound that obscures inappropriate language,<sup>85</sup> that Michael is not merely deeply embarrassing himself, but doing so on camera, and will thus likely be exposed to and judged by an audience well beyond his work and social circles. Social media and YouTube have impressively demonstrated their ability to destroy careers and lives through the dissemination of unthinking statements or actions far less horrific than Michael’s.<sup>86</sup> Mockumentary and cringe comedy thus intertwine and bolster one another’s central dramatic purpose.

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<sup>85</sup> Other television programs have experimented with hinting at vulgar language, so much so, in fact, that a database of narrative tropes (tvtropes.com) has given the convention its own name: “Curse Cut Short.” In the *Seinfeld* episode “The Pool Guy,” for instance, upon being told that George will not like that she is socializing with his fiancé, Elaine blithely replies “I don’t really give a . . .” and cuts herself off via slamming door before the inevitable sentence-completing “shit” or “fuck” can be heard. But *The Office*’s documentary narrative structure is ideal for this trope, since it does exactly what actual documentaries and reality shows would do in the same situation, and the high-pitched “beep” is a universally-understood signifier of verbal censorship. At the moment of the beep, it’s clear that Michael has uttered the verboten “N-word” and the disgusted response of his gathered co-workers leaves no doubt that while we audience members heard an extradiegetic tone, they heard the actual word.

<sup>86</sup> Two recent examples of this include a woman in Michigan who posted on social media a photo of herself dressed for Halloween as a victim of the Boston Marathon bombings and a Republican congressional aide who wrote an “open letter” that criticized Sasha and Malia Obama’s outfits during a public event. In both cases, the offending woman was viciously mocked and criticized (in some cases actually threatened) by thousands of virtual strangers via the same sort of social media outlets with which they’d broadcast their transgressions in the first place. But more pertinent than this obvious irony – that the same medium that allowed them their moments of expression also allows them to be shamed for those moments – is that in neither case did the offender set out to be controversial or to make a serious statement about an issue or for that statement to be made widely public. In fact, both women insisted that, above all, they were trying to be humorous, to mark themselves as clever and witty and incisive. Moments of self-expression, of trying to establish a certain identity, once released to the world, hold the power essentially to destroy the self-expressing subject. Michael Scott never faces any such consequences, but, because of the show’s basic structure, the potential for such looms over his most embarrassing and/or offensive moments.

Jason Middleton, in a recent study of this “embodied spectatorship” mode of comedy, points out that Michael’s departure from the show in Season 7 is marked by sentimentality from both a dedicated television audience and the characters within the show. Despite being “unbearably awkward and obnoxious,” Michael leaves a deeply positive legacy as boss and character. The reason for this, Middleton posits, is “his unwavering optimism and identification with a *fantasy* of himself.”<sup>87</sup> In Chapter 1, I outlined the argument that character performativity tends to be impromptu, a means to an end designed to deceive or elude, while textualization tends to be an ideological act. The fully secondary nature of *The Office* troubles this dynamic. On the one hand, Michael’s perpetual performative buffoonery is seldom, if ever, calculated to fool anybody – it is earnestly delusional. Rather, his performances are almost exclusively meant to promote a certain image of himself, an image in which he is a friendly, likeable boss, and a person with limitless cultural capital. In a word, he wishes to be cool.<sup>88</sup> But, for the most part, he himself does not create discrete textual

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<sup>87</sup> Jason Middleton, *Documentary’s Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 155.

<sup>88</sup> Of course, by any reasonable standard, he is not the least bit cool. Two of the show’s most persistent running jokes are that he grates, irritatingly and immediately, on almost everyone he meets and that his pop cultural references are always substantially outdated. In the 2009 episode “Gossip,” for instance, he and Dwight (Rainn Wilson) attempt to engage in Parkour, an exercise in moving creatively between two fixed points (e.g. jumping from one desk to another rather than walking the distance between them). In a talking-head commentary, Jim – in his usual straight man capacity – refers to it as “The internet sensation of 2004.” Furthermore, Michael has engaged in authorship of his own when trying to be particularly forceful in his self-definition. In “The Merger,” for instance, a large group of new employees arrives at the Scranton branch office and, as a welcoming gesture, Michael screens a music video that he and Dwight have produced, titled “Lazy Scranton,” based on the Saturday Night Live music video-oriented sketch “Lazy

artifacts toward this purpose; the existence of the film crew makes his performance into a *de facto* textualized performance. Distinguishing the traits of fiction with those of autobiography in his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement,” Paul de Man writes:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined [by the] medium.<sup>89</sup>

It’s easy to think of Michael Scott’s pervasive drive toward performance and theatricality as simply a facet of his personality and everyday life.<sup>90</sup> But then, of course, we remember that the entire show’s diegesis is framed by the documentary film crew. Following de Man’s assessment, it is clear that Michael’s “autobiography” is not merely the sum of his lived experiences, but the result of his arrogation of the textual mechanisms of documentary. While in *Boogie*

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Sunday.” In moments of particular need to project a certain version of himself, Michael is unafraid to author his *own* texts to be then shown through the fully secondary one that makes up the show itself. Furthermore, that “Lazy Sunday” is its antecedent is of particular significance: Not only was Lazy Sunday a fairly outdated cultural phenomenon at the time of this episode’s production, but it is widely recognized as the urtext of viral video. In other words, Michael’s desire to perform and self-textualize is consistently caught up in the trappings and intertexts of pop/digital culture – an oeuvre that is, by its very definition, both susceptible to pale imitation and essentially unstable and unending.

<sup>89</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), 69.

<sup>90</sup> This perspective, though I don’t entirely endorse it, is supported by several plot developments, such as the revelation that he takes improv classes (wherein he is despised by his teacher and classmates).

*Nights* and other texts with distinctive primary/secondary shifts, we have textualized performance along with “everyday life” and thus can make reasonably-informed claims about the characters’ relationships to that performance, in *The Office* our entire understanding of these characters is shaped by the secondary frame and the expectation of total, ceaseless performativity. What they are like outside of the mockumentary frame – but within the fictive universe in which the mockumentary is made – is unknowable.

Furthermore, we should note, the documentary structure as a narrative conceit means not only that the characters are at all times either in a state of performance or, at least, *potential* performance, but that the movements and general behavior of the camera can also be read as a *character* within the show. In a typical sitcom or movie, of course, the director makes decisions about what type of shot to use, how long to hold it, whether to pan or cut to an insert shot of some significant object in order to emphasize it, and so on. But the fantasy for the viewer is that these shots are “just happening,” that the film’s mise en scene and editing are not part of the film’s world itself. In mockumentary, every choice of visual perspective can and must be read as integral to, and taking place within, the film’s diegetic logic, controlled by a character who exists within that logic. For instance, in the episode “Golden Ticket,” Michael introduces a Willy Wonka-inspired marketing ploy whereby any customer who finds a golden ticket in their order receives a 10% discount. The ploy turns out to be disastrous, as the company’s largest client finds five of them, thus destroying Dunder-Mifflin’s

profit margin. As Michael tries to downplay his (total) responsibility for the fiasco, despite the fact that moments earlier his taking credit for the idea was captured by the documentary crew, the camera pans down and right to hold a shot of the top hat from the Wonka costume he had been wearing throughout the day. In other words, this visual reminder of Michael's culpability and managerial incompetence is deliberately produced by someone within the secondary text. The action and play of the camera can be understood as, essentially, its own character, rather than, as in Mulvey's schema, a component of the spectatorial experience that calls as little attention to itself as possible.

While the show's plot develops along the lines of commonplace modern themes – racism, sexuality, romance, professional mobility, shifts in business models and economics<sup>91</sup> – and produces fairly standard plots with typical cliffhangers, will-they-or-won't-they sexual tension, and the like, the show's style essentially goes out of its way to dampen engagement and suspense, practically daring viewers to recognize that they're raptly watching a show about unremarkable office workers in an unremarkable locale. In one of the show's first extended sequences to take place outside the office ("Email Surveillance"), salesman Jim (John Krasinski) holds a barbecue for his co-workers, a party at which absolutely nothing noteworthy or dramatic happens. While typical sitcoms

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<sup>91</sup> That the fictional documentary's subject is a paper company, essentially a symbol of eminent obsolescence in an increasingly-digital marketplace, adds to the ennui and sense of purposelessness among the Dunder-Mifflin staff, underscoring the mundanity of the show's circumstances; not only are the characters' lives and actions essentially banal, but they serve to animate the illusion that their industry is one of long-term viability.

use party set pieces either for the farcical hijinks enabled by having a large number of characters in one setting (*Frasier*, in particular, excelled at this) or, if the gathering is organized by teenagers, to depict adolescent hedonism, Jim's party is simply a low-key gathering of middle-aged adults, most of whom spend their time discussing work. At one point, the camera lingers on salesman Stanley (Leslie David Baker), accountant Oscar (Oscar Nunez), and customer service representative Kelly (Mindy Kaling):

**Stanley:** I didn't think the premium laser color copy batch would sell as well as it did.

**Oscar:** It surprised us all. I'll tell you why. Because –

**Kelly:** I'm sorry, guys. Can we please not talk about paper? There's gotta be something else we can talk about.

This dialogue is followed by uncomfortable throat-clearing and then silence. The whole tableau lasts less than fifteen seconds.

I read this as a telling moment in *The Office's* overall narratography. It presents the gloomily realistic obverse of Neff's nearly-sexy recitation of insurance terminology or Keyes' masterful wielding of actuarial statistics in the scrappy service of subtly attacking Norton's managerial cluelessness in *Double Indemnity*: both moments in which a performative demonstration of one's workplace knowledge and competence is practically exhilarating. First, Stanley's topic of discussion, complete with a seemingly-endless string of dull adjectives, establishes the basic mundanity of these characters' interactions. Oscar's

response is a model of simultaneous understatement and hyperbole, demonstrating not only that he too was surprised, but that – at least in his own mind – this is a topic of widespread interest and discussion. The line is delivered intensely, sincerely, but not in an over-the-top, obviously disproportionate way. By the time Kelly delivers her rejoinder, we recognize that, in addition to simulating the real-world limitations of documentary, the show is equally committed to a relatively realistic portrayal of unglamorous middle-class day-to-day life and is thus full of similar moments in which characters helplessly confront the uneventfulness of their lives. Furthermore, in the characters' inability to detach themselves from asinine work chatter in an ostensibly social setting, this moment underscores what Erik Adams identifies as one of the show's dominant themes:

This is a series that believes deeply in cyclical patterns. It's something the British *Office* – which put a roundabout right there in the opening credits – passed on to its American cousin. For years, the characters of [the U.S. version of] *The Office* have gone 'round and 'round, stuck in an orbit circling Dunder Mifflin Scranton.<sup>92</sup>

Adams' word choices here suggest stagnation, depression, and, as he puts it with regard to two characters who make especially bad choices, "downward spirals." Yet, the show remained popular for nine years, won Emmys, and was responsible for the metastases of catch-phrases and signifiers into the cultural

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<sup>92</sup> Erik Adams, Review of "Finale" (Onion AV Club, 2013), <http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/the-office-finale-97430>

consciousness. Certainly, the workplace comedy is nothing new, but its representation in more traditional sitcoms has always relied on the conceit that the main setting is far more exciting than it would be in reality; *Cheers*, for instance, gives us far more exciting and dramatic events than could possibly transpire in any working-class Boston pub. In its dogmatic adherence to documentary strictures, *The Office* accomplishes a daring, improbable feat for mainstream television: It develops dramatic storylines and rounded characters not just in spite of its banal setting, but in spite of its *emphasis* on that banality. That emphasis is partially driven by the show's content, its insistence upon the unremarkable and unglamorous (not to mention its skewering of those who try to attain remarkableness or glamour), but is just as much a product of the show's documentary-footage form. The fictional pretext that the entire show is composed of accumulated footage, prior to any sort of editing or narrative assemblage, makes it plausible that even the most humdrum interaction or event would be included.

### **Completed Mockumentary: *Best in Show* and *Fear of a Black Hat***

*The Office* ran for eight and a half seasons and thus produced well over 100 hours' worth of episodes, every single one under the pretense of being documentary footage that would later be edited into a feature-length film.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The increasing need for a viewer to suspend disbelief in order to imagine that a film crew would continue gathering footage for this long is spoofed in the parody newspaper *The Onion*

Obviously, hours upon hours of “raw footage” would be unfeasible for a single film, so this particular subgenre of the mockumentary is highly unique, suitable only for a sitcom format. The classic mockumentary, on the other hand, presents the viewer with a stable, finished work: a text, essentially, that simply pretends to be something it is not.

From a movie trivia perspective, *Best in Show* (Christopher Guest 2000) and *Fear of a Black Hat* (Rusty Cundieff 1994) are circuitously linked: *Hat* is widely described as a hip-hop reimagining of *This is Spinal Tap* (1977),<sup>94</sup> which was Guest’s original mockumentary and, to this day, is regarded as the definitive parody of the excesses of the music business. *Best in Show* presents itself as a documentary of show-dog enthusiasts preparing for, traveling to, and participating in the semi-prestigious Mayflower Kennel Club Dog Show.

Both films are presented as completed documentaries and maintain, at least early in their run times, a realistic enough mimicking of the form that a naïve viewer could conceivably believe they are actual, albeit bizarre, works of

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with an article titled “*The Office Ends as Documentary Crew Gets All the Footage it Needs.*” Interestingly, although the article pokes fun at the show’s widely-perceived decline in quality at this point in its run, it plays along with the pretense that it’s a real documentary. [<http://www.theonion.com/articles/the-office-ends-as-documentary-crew-gets-all-the-f,6988/>]

<sup>94</sup> It’s certainly possible to overdetermine the intertextual relationship of *Hat* and *Tap*, and I will hereafter cease to compare the two. Certainly, the critical response to *Hat*, while highly favorable, seemed unable to resist calling it a Black/Urban/Gangsta/Rap/Hip-Hop version of *Tap*, and the film’s marketing (admittedly minimal though it is, as the DVD is near-impossible to get ahold of) latched onto this dismissively racist characterization by giving it a retroactive subtitle – “The First Drive-By Comedy!” – a description that pertains to precisely nothing that transpires in the film. It seems, in fact, solely intended to capitalize on the burgeoning culture of fear, contemporary to the film’s production, surrounding white middle class Americans in response to the trio of racialized cataclysms that marked the early 90s: Rodney King’s beating, the 1992 L.A. riots, and the rise of gangsta rap that followed trailblazers NWA and Public Enemy: a culture of fear that, of course, the film itself skewers mercilessly.

sociological non-fiction examining rarefied subcultures. This, in fact, squares precisely with Craig Hight's schema for typical mockumentary, as he claims that "Often the point, in fact, is to delay this flagging of fictionality, or to put the viewer in a position where their initial reading of a text requires them to *make continual assessments* over what is real and what is not."<sup>95</sup> I would argue that this is especially true of *Best in Show*, whereas *Fear of a Black Hat* eventually veers into complete absurdist fantasy.

Both films also invite serious critical analysis of race, gender, class, and the nature of popular entertainment. John Kenneth Muir remarks that *Best in Show* "reveals this world of class warfare, or more accurately, class distinctions, where different dog breeds represent the various characteristics of their owners,"<sup>96</sup> and while this assessment is reasonable – the upper crust couple of elderly industrialist and trophy wife win with a perfectly manicured poodle and a couple from Tribeca win Best of Breed with a dainty Shih Tzu, while lower-middle-class characters enter scrappy terriers and bloodhounds and other working dogs – the film's exploration of class is certainly not limited to the (apparently inherent) symbolism of particular dog breeds. For instance, a scene in which a working-class couple from Florida attempts to check into their hotel with a bad credit card and pathetically insist that it should work because they

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<sup>95</sup> Craig Hight, *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire, and a Call to Play* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18.

<sup>96</sup> John Kenneth Muir, *Best in Show: The Films of Christopher Guest* (New York, NY: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2004), 149.

haven't yet received a second notice from the billing department<sup>97</sup> is juxtaposed with another couple checking in without incident and immediately decorating their room with silk tapestries and lamps. Yet another couple, clearly meant to represent yuppie materialism, consistently allude to brand name clothing, and recount the story of how they met, while working "on [their] Macs" at adjacent Starbucks locations.

But what truly divides the wealthy dog show participants from the working and middle-class is their respective relationships to performance within the secondary text. Both coteries' behavior could be described as "theatrical," but the non-affluent participants' moments of performativity are depicted at best as provincial and rube-like, if not as bumbling failure. Harlan Pepper (Christopher Guest) has two moments of attempted performance for the intra-filmic documentary crew, first recounting a story of how, as a child, he would amuse himself – and irritate his mother – by memorizing and reciting the name of every known variety of nut. In telling the documentarians about this quirk, he slips into a recreation of a typical interaction between his childhood self and his mother:

I used to be able to name every nut that there was. And it used to drive my mother crazy, because she used to say, "Harlan Pepper, if you don't stop naming nuts . . ." And the joke was that we lived in Pine Nut, and I

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<sup>97</sup> Continuing upon the "Cringe Comedy" factor and its attachment to mockumentary, as outlined in the previous section, this scene is extraordinarily difficult to watch.

think that's what put it in my mind at that point. So she would hear me in the other room, and she'd just start yelling. I'd say, "Peanut. Hazelnut. Cashew nut. Macadamia nut." That was the one that would send her into going crazy. She'd say, "Would you stop naming nuts?!" And Hubert [Pepper's dog] used to be able to make the sound, he couldn't talk, but he'd go "rrrawr rrawr" and that sounded like Macadamia nut. Pine nut, which is a nut, but it's also the name of a town. Pistachio nut. Red pistachio nut. Natural, all natural white pistachio nut.

Later, stopped for the night in an RV park, a clear marker of both lower-middle-class residence and travel, Harlan shows off his current hobby, ventriloquism. In attempting to give a demonstration, he stumbles over a word and has to consult a handbook to remind himself how to pronounce the word "fat" without moving his lips. Gerry and Cookie Fleck (Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara) present themselves to the documentarians as a perky, upbeat couple through a series of impromptu performances, all clearly designed to veil their various problems, in particular Gerry's anxiety about Cookie's promiscuous past and their shared financial insecurity. At a barbecue in their hometown, shortly before making the trip to Philadelphia for the dog show, they serenade their friends with an original song, sung in off-key *a capella*, called "God Loves a Terrier," which the other guests applaud with condescending politeness. At the hotel, before checking in – or attempting to, as their bad credit will end up relegating them to the janitor's closet – in response to a blandly routine question about their drive up from

Florida, Gerry attempts to provide the hotel manager (Ed Begley, Jr.) with an anecdotal run-down:

Put a few clicks on the old odometer, let me put it that way. Good weather for most of it. A little cloudy coming up through West Virginia, and then it, uh, stayed overcast through Virginia, but uh, once we get into Pennsylvania, it's still, uh . . . it's still overcast.

These working-class characters' small, impromptu moments of performance – ostensibly calculated to show the camera and thus the fictional documentary's audience some aspect of their personality and inner life, the usual ideological gesture of self-definition – are marked by a sense of “trailing off”: They begin with gusto but don't know where to go, and thus succeed only in casting Gerry and Harlan as ineloquent simpletons incapable of participating in the self-defining project of textualized performance. These characters essentially embody what John Kucich calls, in reference to the Victorian novel, *reverse slumming*: “a mode of middle- or lower-middle-class performance that mimics upper-class behaviors so as to reaffirm social hierarchy in the very process of denaturalizing it . . . to assume some degree of mastery over what they simultaneously distance as socially other.”<sup>98</sup> In these *Best in Show* sequences, the lower/middle-class grasping for social status is not just about the content of

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<sup>98</sup> John Kucich, “Reverse Slumming: Cross-Class Performativity and Organic Order in Dickens and Gaskell.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Indiana University Press (Spring 2013), pp. 471-499

performance, but the accessibility of performance in the first place, and having that performance be received, appreciated, and textualized.

The well-to-do characters, on the other hand, enjoy a relationship with performativity that could be described as “privileged.” In another checking in scene, one that underscores its tonal inversion of Gerry and Cookie’s fiasco by reversing perspective and shooting the lobby from the opposite side, Scott (John Michael Higgins) and Stefan (Michael McKean) interact with the manager in a flurry of performative rejoinders and palpable self-assurance.

**Scott:** Where are you from, like, Norland [Norway]?

**Manager:** I’m Irish-German.

**Scott:** Bratwurst and shillelaghs . . . paging Dr. Freud!<sup>99</sup>

The wealthy characters’ performances create complete narrative arcs, whether that arc is as short as Scott’s crude joke or a long-form anecdote. This is true even in the performative mode of a tantrum. Upon losing her weimaraner’s favorite toy, the caricaturized yuppie character Meg (Parker Poesy) berates first the hotel staff and then a clerk at a pet store who suggests an inferior

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<sup>99</sup> Scott and Stefan’s relationship, as well as the former’s hyperperformativity, embraces a model of the 1990s cinematic gay couple that was essentially codified by Robin Williams and Nathan Lane’s characters in *The Birdcage*: A relatively stern, financially secure, normatively masculine man paired with a carefree, irresponsible, “Queen” archetype (this latter terminology is invoked at the outset of the Scott/Stefan scene, and Scott takes mock offense when the hotel manager confirms their queen-sized bed). Both men in this dyadic trope will have a comfortable relationship with performance – invariably, the butch man will adopt a dry straight-man persona and the feminine man will play the clown (in *Modern Family*, this trope is made literal: the character Cam [Eric Stonestreet] actually engages in classic clowning as a hobby). Comedian Patton Oswalt calls this latter type The Magical Quip Machine, and remarks that its repetition is akin to “putting on blackface and tapdancing” (*Finest Hour* 2009). Of course, these fictional pairings have antecedents in earlier work, but it was not until *The Birdcage* that they would be presented as *openly* gay in mainstream film and television.

replacement. Though mired in hysteria, Meg's theatrics are articulate and effective, as those on the receiving end of it are either provoked or cowed. These characters are also frequently provided with a receptive forum for performance. Wealthy trophy wife Sherri Ann (Jennifer Coolidge) and her hired dog handler Christy (Jane Lynch), for instance, are interviewed on a local morning show about their poodle's grooming routine for the show. Where Harlan and the Flecks engage in haltingly truncated performances, which are met in turn with contempt or indifference, the other three show entrants, all bearing signifiers of conspicuous consumption, display an easy familiarity with performativity. They treat the documentary in which they will appear as merely the latest instance of their being paid close attention to, of their social importance being validated. If Muir is correct that *Best in Show* functions as an allegory of class-based archetypes at the turn of the millennium, I would add only that it is the characters' style of interaction with the secondary register, not the breed of their dogs, that is most closely tied to their status. Scott and Gerry, in their respective check-in scenes, create an especially stark contrast of flamboyant, affluent cosmopolitanism and awkward, semi-impooverished provinciality.

Where *Best in Show* aligns documentarized performance with class, *Fear of a Black Hat* aligns it with racialized and politicized masculine bravado. Or rather, *Hat* portrays political rhetoric's loss of potency when it's delivered from a position of that bravado. The film persistently depicts and inverts stereotypes of

black masculinity and performance. In one of very few critical reactions to the film, Jacqueline Fulmer invokes Henry Louis Gates:

[*Fear of a Black Hat* is] an example of African American art that displays consciousness of previous traditions and confidence in the 'legitimacy of black experiences as artistic material' and applauds Cundieff's and the other artists' 'zest for parodies' and the self-conscious echo, imitation, parody, and revision of their 'riffing' and 'signifying' on African American culture.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, while the film's representations of rap music's crass reputation is the core of its cultural and scholarly appeal, *Fear of a Black Hat's* attention to form and its decidedly less racially-loaded target – the mass market pop documentary – make it an exemplary fully-secondary film. Aside from *This is Spinal Tap*, the film's clear textual touchstone is the long-running *Behind the Music* series, which has aired on the VH-1 network since 1997. Each episode profiles a well-known band or solo performer in typical pop-documentary fashion: An overly-earnest voiceover intones clichés as archival concert footage alternates with talking head interviews with the band members, and, invariably, a compelling narrative emerges. Over and over, the purportedly non-fiction show follows narrative conventions so predictable that they feel like tropes of fiction: Humble beginnings, a big break, high expectations, otherworldly success, excess and

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<sup>100</sup> Jacqueline Fulmer, "Men Ain't All: A Reworking of Masculinity in *Tales from the Hood*, or, Grandma Meets the Zombie," in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 115, No. 457/458 (Summer - Autumn, 2002), 422. Internal quotations are from Gates, "Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge." *Time Magazine*, October 10, 1994.

indulgence, tragedy, reality check, comeback. In aping this structure, *Hat* asserts that, for viewers, the appeal of such documentary is not the opportunity to access and understand the creative process of one's favorite artist, but to indulge in a biographical storyline that, with only small changes to particular details, is utterly non-unique, indistinguishable from that of a dozen other semi-washed-up bands.<sup>101</sup>

Despite the turn to surrealism, the flouting of believable plot developments, and subtle fourth-wall-breaking, *Hat* challenges the idea that a mockumentary's subject is necessarily a completely fictional construct. As with *Spinal Tap*, one could persuasively argue that the rap group the film profiles, Niggaz With Hats, is at once real and not real. While the backstory and exploits portrayed in the mockumentary are clearly satirical fiction, Cundieff actually wrote every song on the (actual) soundtrack, which in turn comprises the fictive group's discography. The music videos that are shown in small excerpts – and which represent a third stratum of textual performance, as each one represents a document that exists as a material object and exerts influence on the main narrative – are also available in full on the DVD's bonus features. And the songs themselves, though clearly riffing on major trends in hip-hop history, hold up as

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<sup>101</sup> For example, Cundieff provides intertitles to locate, for instance, the group's hometown as Tough Neighborhood, USA. This is a clear reference to a long-standing trend in which rappers allude persistently to their hometown and, unfailingly, portray it as both the best (i.e. the coolest, the most authentic) and the worst (i.e. the toughest, the highest crime rates). NWH's namesake, N.W.A., was particularly active in this trend, as almost every track on their seminal 1988 record (itself titled *Straight Outta Compton*) makes reference to South Central Los Angeles and its culture of crime and danger.

legitimately accomplished works.<sup>102</sup> Unlike a typical Narrative of Character Authorship, text-creation goes well beyond the boundaries of the film itself. While other films in this subgenre might have a handful of disjointed outtakes or “extended footage,” that archival material is still completely fabricated, and would likely not hold up as an independent, complete work. Outtakes from the filming of the porn-films-within-the-film of *Boogie Nights* would not constitute a collection of porn films; they would simply be footage of Mark Wahlberg and others pretending to have sex. In *Hat*, the footage that didn’t make it to the movie still exists independently of its parent text, and could reasonably be viewed as a series of stand-alone music videos no different from those broadcast on MTV.

As in *Best in Show*, however, banality and failure mark the (non-musical) performances of NWH. Ultimately, a song like “Guerillas in the Midst” is less a parody than a stylistic facsimile of and homage to the late 80s black empowerment-influenced rap scene. The hedonistic lyrics and music video for “Booty Juice” is barely more crass or juvenile than its referents, the early-90s MTV-promoted output of artists like Wreckx N Effect or Sir Mix-a-Lot. But in charting a biographical narrative to connect these third-register texts, Cundieff

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<sup>102</sup> The increased popularity of musical dramas in cinema and television, e.g. *Glee*, *Pitch Perfect*, *Nashville*, and *Empire*, has created a small corpus of contemporary narratives that seem to do something very similar, as the songs that are produced and performed by characters in the primary text (even if not performed in full) are also available through media outside of the shows and movies themselves. The difference, aside from the fact that Cundieff himself wrote all of the material that, within the film, is supposed to have been written by his character, is that the songs are not *just* songs, but are also subordinated to visual texts – music videos – that take over and play an active role in the mockumentary’s narrative.

repeatedly portrays the group as shallow opportunists and cultural dilettantes. Their attempts to perform outside of their prescribed venue of rap showmanship are revealed to be as asinine and directionless as those of Harlan and Cookie and Gerry. The high-art pretensions that they attach to their lyrics and videos are as ironic and deluded as those of Jack Horner. For instance, asked by the fictional documentary-maker about the group's name and their gimmick of wearing outlandish hats on stage, group leader Ice Cold (Cundieff) responds in aggressively political terms:

See, that's what NWH is all about; we got a whole hat philosophy. I mean, back in the day when there was slaves and stuff, they would work in the hot sun all day. You know, with the sun beating down on them. Hatless! I mean, not even a babushka. You know? So by the time they got back to the plantation, from being in all the heat, they were too tired to rebel against their masters. So what we're sayin' with Niggaz With Hats is "Yo! We got some hats now, motherfucker!"

Ice Cold continually uses such meandering historical narratives in an attempt to elevate his group's violent, misogynist lyrics to precipitous political relevance. Even a song that is almost entirely composed of anal sex imagery is circumscribed by the characters, in their attempts to define their carefully cultivated personae for the secondary/documentary text, as politically and socially-oriented. In one of the film's most humorous moments, Ice Cold begins this explanation by averring: "See, the butt is like society . . ."

In *Hat*, the characters' most pervasive and visible attempts at such signification occur in impromptu performative moments – captured for the documentary – in which they comment on, and try to mold receptions of, already-created performative texts as well as their own image. As we know, no author really *can* circumscribe the meaning of his or her work; the NWH musicians' repeated attempts to do precisely this fail, and not just axiomatically, but because the meanings and narrative arcs that they invoke are calculated to fit the template of the pop/rock star biography genre. They become, in turn, mass-circulated banalities, drained of urgency and portent.

### **Found Footage & New Horror**

Found footage film, like all subgenres of the fully secondary text category, is rooted in the vicissitudes of real documentary filmmaking. But while the latter will use the found footage artifacts to provide historical veracity – or at least a pretense of it – those artifacts will be interspersed with voice-over commentary, interviews with subject matter experts, and, at times, dramatized or staged depictions of the events being discussed. The found footage narrative film genre takes one of two essential forms. In the fully secondary form, the entirety of the film is presented as an audiovisual relic without any outside mediation or commentary except for a *de rigeur* on-screen prologue that ominously explains the fictional context in which the footage was found. In a non-fully secondary form, the structure is similar to any other narrative of

character authorship, except that the secondary texts are discovered throughout the course of the movie rather than texts that we see being created in the primary register.

Two things are especially noteworthy about this genre, the first being that its popularity has exploded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While a handful of such films were art house staples in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s (*Cannibal Holocaust* [Deodato 1980] and *Man Bites Dog* [Belvaux 1993] are among the most notable, though the former, while heavily reliant on a documentary film as its secondary text, is not *fully* secondary), once *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick 1999) and its slew of marketing material attempted to blur the lines of fiction and non-, found footage became a routinely-deployed narrative form. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, it is almost without exception used in the horror genre. A comprehensive list of found footage horror films since *The Blair Witch Project* yields well over 100 movies, several of which have titles that explicitly allude to the structural involvement of intradiegetic text-creation and/or its attendant technology (e.g. *V/H/S* [Bettinelli-Olpin 2012] and *Rec* [Balaguero 2007]) and one of which is, in fact, simply titled *Found Footage* (Bartlett 2011).<sup>103</sup> And although *Blair Witch* is this subgenre's key forebear and spiritual urtext, the genre is split more or less evenly between fully and partially secondary diegeses.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *V/H/S* doubles down on the structural conceit by presenting itself as a fully secondary found footage film that depicts a group of petty criminals stealing and viewing a collection of videotapes. In other words, it's essentially a top-level anthology film along the lines of Duvivier's *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), except that both the framing device and the various texts that comprise the anthologized stories are found footage.

Before moving on to the discussion of a fully secondary found footage film, I want to explore the question of why such a specific narrative pretext should become so inextricably linked to a certain genre, fully secondary or not. One might reasonably suggest that found footage has *revived* horror from the lowbrow 1980s slasher flick and the self-important excesses of torture porn, and the reason for its appeal is, I believe, at once viscerally simple and theoretically complex. The secondary texts in these instances suggest narrative events that exist irrevocably in the past, beyond spectatorial access or amelioration. A central tenet of this dissertation is the establishment of secondary texts as material objects in the primary, and, in the horror genre, these objects consistently function as specters of ghastly occurrences that underscore the predicament of characters in the primary. Whereas in a typical 80s slasher picture, for instance, we can watch Michael Meyers or Jason Voorhees bear down on a victim from stylized perspectives and understand this to be happening *now* relative to the film's diegesis (and thus also invest in the possibility, however remote, of escape or vengeance), viewers of found footage accounts of mayhem are rendered helpless by the incidents' relegation to the past; they are viewing representations (intradiegetically speaking), ones composed to suggest the starkest of realism, rather than, as in typical cinema, a

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<sup>104</sup> That said, those found footage films that reach culturally iconic status seem recurrently to be fully secondary; *Blair Witch*, *Cloverfield*, and *Paranormal Activity* are without question the Big Three of the genre.

highly stylized presentation meant to evoke the thing or event itself unfolding in the present moment.<sup>105</sup>

On the one hand, this strategy tends to neutralize suspense; *Cloverfield* is nearly devoid of suspense because, typical of its sub-genre, it begins with a brief preamble that establishes what we are about to watch as the contents of a home video that is now “Property of the U.S. Government” and was “retrieved from Site US-447, formerly known as Central Park,” suggesting that the film’s events will result in a state of martial law and the obliteration of, at the very least, midtown Manhattan. From the opening shot in a Manhattan high-rise, then, we have no reasonable expectation that the protagonists will survive the film’s running length. As a rule, appearing within the secondary text of a found-footage horror movie, whether fully secondary or not, does not bode well for any character’s well-being.

But where suspense is sacrificed, this method appends to horrific plot events an additional sheen of abjection and shock-value, an effect that emerges from the intersection of form and content. Found footage in cinema is, without exception, character-authored and thus a fictional version of the humble “home

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<sup>105</sup> In the otherwise-forgettable *Saw II* (Darren Lynn Bousman), the first sequel in the premier torture porn franchise, this relationship between found footage and primary narrative provides a surprisingly effective plot twist. A police officer, Eric Matthews, has spent the entire film watching surveillance-type footage of a group of people trapped in a house outfitted with various booby-traps, and, believing that it is a live feed, has been working to free them based on what he can see happening. Ultimately, it turns out, this footage was pre-recorded – the film’s climactic reveal involves a SWAT team breaking into the house and finding only an array of VCRs, rather than the group of desperate kidnapping victims they expected – and so everything Matthews has tried to do, it turns out, has been futile. This revelation, I would argue, simply dramatizes the effects that found footage horror typically provokes.

movie.” The home movie embodies quaintness, a persona of the wholesomely everyday, the unremarkable. Children’s recitals, interminable little league games, family events that were boring in the first place and, often, unspeakably dull on video. In a variety of horror films since the 1980s, the genre of the home movie has, ironically, been deployed for this exact reason. In the same way that perversity and evil seem markedly more disturbing when they exist in the underbelly of quiet Eisenhower-esque suburbs,<sup>106</sup> when “dark forces roil and passions seethe beneath the green lawns and PTA potlucks of Anytown, USA,”<sup>107</sup> a document that seems merely to be composed of exceeding banality, when interrupted by murder, rape, and demonic hauntings, only amplifies the terror of that malevolence.

Even the mere visual aesthetic of the home movie is capable of augmenting the brutality of a violent scene. In an evaluation of *Mean Creek* (Jacob Aaron Estes 2004) – a film that begins and concludes with found footage – James Kendrick addresses the opening scene in which a middle school bully named George sets up a camera to create a “documentary” of himself doing lay-ups on the school basketball court. We see another boy, Sam (Rory Culkin), begin to interfere with the camera, and, upon noticing this, George charges and beats

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<sup>106</sup> E.g. *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock 1943), *Blue Velvet* (Lynch 1986), *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton 1990), *Serial Mom* (Waters 1994), *Happiness* (Solondz 1998), *American Beauty* (Ball 1999), &c. &c.

<sup>107</sup> David Foster Wallace, “David Lynch Loses His Head,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1997), 205

him savagely. In the midst of the beating, the film's perspective switches from secondary to primary. Kendrick argues:

We see part of the scene through the low-res videocamera lens, giving us a *firsthand* view of George's foul-mouthed ruthlessness. His viciously violent turn on Sam seems to hinge on some kind of twisted instinct, rather than any sense of justified reaction.<sup>108</sup>

Kendrick's use of the adjective "firsthand" here is telling. He clearly suggests that our supplementary glimpse into George's violent pathology is somehow made more visceral (even going so far as to, rather baselessly, deduce that it was motivated by instinct rather than reaction) simply by the secondary textual perspective through which it's represented. On the surface, Kendrick's claim is puzzling. Regardless of whether it's in the primary or secondary register, we're seeing one teenager ruthlessly assault a smaller, clearly weaker teenager. Either way, given that it's the beginning of the film and this scene occurs *in media res*, we have little context or back story through which to make sense of the beating (although George does yell *I told you never touch my camera, didn't I?!*, suggesting that the confrontation is not without precedent, or at least that the two have a history of conflict and mutual antagonism). And unlike in previous films we've examined, there is no primary text-level pretense for this shift from secondary to primary, no moment at which a character picks up and switches off

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<sup>108</sup> James Kendrick, Review of *Mean Creek*. *Film Desk Reviews* (Q Network Entertainment Portal, 2004). <http://www.qnetwork.com/index.php?page=review&id=1350>. My emphasis.

the camera, for instance; the shift simply occurs.<sup>109</sup> I would argue, however, that it's not merely the low production value aesthetic, which *always* marks the primary-secondary shift, that makes the secondary any more horrifying or immediate or "firsthand." Rather, it's the capturing of banal activities and our conditioned response – a highly modern response, at that – to associate the sudden appearance in cinema of homemade amateur footage depicting seemingly benign events with the sudden irruption of trauma, even of history-making events. The first recording of a plane striking the World Trade Center, we might recall, was not produced by a professional news crew in a helicopter, but by a pedestrian on the street who was filming something far less compelling when the roar of the jet, and then the jet itself, suddenly disrupted his document.<sup>110</sup>

Other recent films, operating in both the supernatural and realist modes of horror, have also cultivated this technique of allowing the banal home movie to give way to traumatic excesses and abject practices: In *The Sixth Sense*

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<sup>109</sup> *Mean Creek* is also notable in its use of character-authored texts for another narrative choice that deviates from the major films discussed in this project. While the secondary texts in *Boogie Nights* and *Double Indemnity* are never shown being consumed by their intended audience, *Mean Creek* concludes with a handful of police officers watching George's documentary. The film's climax involves George's drowning death during a revenge prank gone too far, and the kids responsible worry – at least in passing – about how they will get away with the killing if George's camera is ever found. Thus, the secondary text, as in the other films, exists as a material object of concern in the primary. But unlike these other films, in which third parties are never shown consuming the texts (though we know that they do or will), Estes provides a clear scene of people watching George's video.

<sup>110</sup> The following is a completely subjective remark, but I would argue that a viewing of this "man on the street" footage of the first plane striking the North Tower, followed by any footage produced by a professional news outlet that day, will confirm that the former text is harrowing and visceral and life-altering in a way that the latter simply cannot touch.

(Shyamalan 1999), the young protagonist (Joel Haley Osmond) is instructed by the spirit of a dead girl, Kyra, to find and play a home video at her funeral. This secondary text begins with the little girl putting on a puppet show, precisely the sort of performative childhood exercise for which camcorders were marketed. Hearing her mother approaching, Kyra jumps into bed, leaving the camera running. Not knowing she is within the hidden camera's gaze, the mother enters the room with lunch on a tray and adds housecleaning solvent to Kyra's soup. Kyra's murder<sup>111</sup> at her mother's hand, then, is not merely established, but textually depicted well after it is too late, within the film's primary register, to save her. While the film is replete with disturbing imagery – a far more graphic shot shows the back of a child's head blown off – this scene is, I would argue, the most disturbing because of its interplay of banality and malevolence within not only the same secondary text, but within the same static, unblinking shot. As in Kendrick's assessment of *Mean Creek's* opening scene, the horrific act is made more unbearable not through an explicit depiction, but through its capture on video being incidental, secondary to the film's major visual register, and juxtaposed with expressions of normative innocence.

In *Manhunter* (Mann 1986), the protagonist detective Will Graham (William Petersen) is able to track down the "Tooth Fairy" murderer of two families only when he realizes that whoever has committed the crimes must

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<sup>111</sup> It's actually unclear whether this was out-and-out filicide or, as is hinted, an extreme case of Münchhausen syndrome by proxy, the practice of a caregiver deliberately inducing sickness out of any of several possible motivations.

have seen their home movies, and discovers that the only thing linking those families is the service they used to develop the tapes. Graham is well-known in the law enforcement community for his ability to empathize with serial killers, and so his viewing takes on a wholly different dimension as we realize that these documents of nostalgia were repurposed as a means of exploiting the families' vulnerabilities.<sup>112</sup> Finally, in *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson 2012), the protagonist, true crime author Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke) discovers a cache of Super 8 movies in the home of an infamously murdered family. In a neat meta-satire of the banal home movie trope established in the previously mentioned films, the dully-titled videos suggest ordinary, forgettable activities but depict gory massacres that, one realizes in hindsight, correspond sardonically to their ho-hum titles. Thus, *Lawn Work '86* depicts not a summer afternoon's routine of hedge-clipping and garden maintenance, but a man being run over by a ride-on mower; *BBQ '79* shows an entire family being burnt to death while trapped in a car. And so on. Derrickson, in other words, recognizes and parodies – though *Sinister* is by no means a parodic film – the grim potential of the impulse to record for posterity the every day moments of family life.

These examples highlight the efficacy of found footage in horror.

Furthermore, none of these three movies were marketed as found footage films despite the fact that, within the primary narrative of all three, the secondary

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<sup>112</sup> This overview also applies, of course, to *Manhunter's* remake, *Red Dragon* (Ratner 2002), a film whose reason for existence seems to be solely to establish a complete filmic canon of Thomas Harris' original trilogy with Anthony Hopkins as Lecter.

texts are, indeed, *found* or *stumbled upon*, by major characters. To Graham, for instance, the home movies exist in the same modality that fully secondary found footage films like *Blair Witch* are purported to exist to us viewers. And, in key scenes, all three seem almost to anticipate the genre's forthcoming popularity and narrative power. The banality of domestic spaces and activities, as well as the impulse to textualize them, is consumed and overwritten by insidious violence, whether through the way they're used or some sort of revelation concerning their content. Character-authored texts, in this context, are not, as in *Boogie Nights* and *Double Indemnity* and even *The Office*, canvases of ideological self-definition nor venues for the flaunting of discursive mastery, but unstable artifacts that foreground a distinct possibility of slippage between the mundane and the horrific. They underscore the narrative potential of dramatic irony, a device that privileges the bygone event and its impact on the spectator. The horrific is amplified not only by the spectator's understanding – in contrast to the unwittingly doomed character – of the traumatic event, but also by its retroactive shaping of the narrative proper.

*Cloverfield* exists solely as a character-authored text. For the most part, the author is Hud (T.J. Miller), an awkward young man charged with filming testimonials at the protagonist Rob's (Michael Stahl-David) going away party. He continues filming as the party is interrupted by the total destruction of Manhattan by an implacable monster, thus producing a documentary-like record of what will be a watershed historical moment, a spectacle of destruction that is

both an intertext to and darkly triumphant surpassing – by many orders of magnitude – of 9/11. Periodically, this narrative track is interrupted to show snippets of what had been previously recorded and is now being “taped over”: an ostentatiously carefree romantic day in which Rob and his apparent girlfriend Beth(Odette Annable) wake up in a Central Park West apartment and make plans to visit Coney Island.<sup>113</sup>

In “Enjoying 9/11: The Pleasures of *Cloverfield*,” James Stone applies Slavoj Žižek’s now-iconic reading of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks – and more specifically, their at once horrifying and sanitized representation on the news<sup>114</sup> – as spectacle, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, to the notion of coordinated mass destruction as both thrilling and aesthetically-pleasing. Stone’s conclusion is that *Cloverfield* has two interlocking purposes: to suggest that “we have reached the point where they can be treated with a little less reverence [and] that while 9/11 was undeniably traumatic, it was always on some level, a thrilling spectacle,”<sup>115</sup> and galvanizes this claim by captioning a still of the decapitated

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<sup>113</sup> That the final product of found footage would be consistently interrupted by glimpses of footage that it was recorded over is, of course, highly improbable. The cameraperson would have to repeatedly stop recording, allow the tape or digital card to advance a few seconds, and then resume recording. The only way in which this conceit is accounted for is some sort of complaint from every character who handles the camera (others besides Hud periodically take over) that he or she is unfamiliar with its functionality, apparently implying that they are just pressing buttons at random.

<sup>114</sup> E.g. “It is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people.” Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. (London: Verso, 2002), 13. Qtd. In Stone, “Enjoying 9/11: The Pleasures of *Cloverfield*” *Radical History Review* 2011, Volume 2011, Number 111: 167-174.

Statue of Liberty with the ominous sentence fragment “A nation in love with images of its own destruction.”<sup>116</sup> But the accusation that a spectatorial public harbors a fetish for grand-scale destruction, I would argue, is misplaced in a conversation about *Cloverfield*, even if it’s true in general. The film depicts no more or less enjoyment than any standard action-disaster film, and the level of destruction depicted is no more unprecedented or apocalyptic than innumerable other films. Furthermore, Stone’s reading, which seems motivated more by post-Bush-era axe-grinding than filmic analysis, ignores that similar claims would have to be made of *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and countless others. For all of the overdetermined readings of the beheaded Statue of Liberty, it seems sufficient to point out that it’s little more than an allusion to *The Planet of the Apes*. Instead, I would argue that *Cloverfield*’s visceral power and major thematic statement come from a *familiar* tableau of urban destruction presented in a *novel* form that decidedly forecloses an omniscient perspective. The viewer is unable to step back and see what is happening in its entirety, a perspective that allows for distance and detachment. While most disaster films will include a shot from a key character’s point of view so as to force our first glimpse of something shocking to align with that of a protagonist – to see what he or she sees, and thus cement viewer/protagonist identification in a moment

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<sup>115</sup> James Stone, “Enjoying 9/11: The Pleasures of *Cloverfield*,” in *Radical History Review*. No. 111, *Visual Representations*. Fall 2011, 168.

<sup>116</sup> Stone, 166.

of abject wonder<sup>117</sup> – it is also typical for intermittent shots to allow for a fuller view and understanding of what’s happening. Ironically, of course, full exposure to a terrifying spectacle makes that spectacle feel far less abject than do limited, fleeting glimpses. As Todd McGowan says of the disorienting opening scene of *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noe 2002), “the fragmented glimpses don’t allow us to comprehend fully what’s going on and thus free us to envision the most extreme behavior that we can imagine.”<sup>118</sup> Similarly, narratively restricting the film’s action to the point of view of a single character who is, like everyone else, trying to avoid confrontation with a monster, results not only in a spectatorial sense of what it would be like to be in the thick of a panicked metropolis, but also in an antagonist that, for most of the film’s running time, cannot be fully apprehended. Seen only as a grotesquerie (one critic vividly likens its movements to a dislocated elbow, an analogy that feels surprisingly spot-on), and, until the film’s climax, only in fleeting glimpses, the monster’s excesses – it’s taller than any of the Manhattan skyscrapers, unfazed by any and all military countermeasures, and ejects an army of hideous larval spider-like creatures into the streets to attack the fleeing humans while it continues laying waste to the city itself – serve only to underscore the stupefying mundanity that its arrival

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<sup>117</sup> For instance, in *The Day After Tomorrow*, after New York City is flooded, the severity of the situation is driven home when a cargo ship drifts lazily down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, past the New York Public Library. Rather than showing this in a detached, objective shot – an overhead view, for instance, of central Manhattan’s grid system – it is shown in a highly subjective shot, appended to protagonist Sam’s (Jake Gyllenhaal) vantage point. Shots linked to character perspective in this way are the only possibility in *Cloverfield*.

<sup>118</sup> Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 212.

supplants on the primary/secondary text videotape that constitutes the film proper. Not only is the material being recorded over the sort of romantic travelogue, in this case a day trip to Coney Island, that would find no interested audience – it’s the sort of thing that even those who recorded and star in would likely never actually watch – but the going-away party that Hud is filming when the destruction begins is filled with clichés of farewell and good wishes and people who begin their monologues with caveats like “We don’t actually know each other, but . . .” The secondary text’s original reason for being was to serve as a record of disinterest and reluctant social obligation. Prior to the presumably world-changing event that it ultimately captures, it is the quintessence of performative banality.

But the humdrum recordings that precede the attack – and are thus part of the main story’s linear timeline – as well as the snippets that periodically interrupt it, form a narratography that embodies and mirrors two core theoretical aspects both of fully secondary film and of found footage horror. It goes well beyond the (admittedly well-trodden) trope of the good and wholesome concealing or giving way to the abject and sinister; in *Cloverfield’s* schema, chaos and brutality is far more random and disorganized. The found footage horror genre, like horror more generally, depicts depravity motivated by traceable pathologies. This is the case in all of the films I briefly discussed above. Those pathologies may seem all the more frightening for their co-existence with family warmth and small-town morality, but they are still open to firmly-

established taxonomies and explanation. The *Cloverfield* monster is never explained, has no backstory, no motivation. It is a pure force of aggression and destruction. And the lead up to its rampage is not Rockwellian and wholesome, but rather the routine shenanigans of well-off young adults in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Manhattan: drinking, partying, premarital sex, conspicuous consumption. The grim lesson to be taken from Abrams' film is not, as Uncle Charlie puts it in *Shadow of a Doubt*, that "if you ripped off the fronts of houses, you'd find swine" but that any moment, banal or momentous or even/especially *both* – and this latter category is crucial, as we saw in *The Office* – can always erupt into trauma, destruction, and loss.

And just as the fragmented glimpses of the monster refuse to yield a complete or systematizable view of the film's locus of terror, the fumbling of the camera by its various operators and truncated excerpts of the previously recorded excursion to Coney Island refuse linearity. It would stand to reason to assume that the fully secondary character-authored text would embody non-disjointed linearity in a way that the primary-secondary dynamic is incapable of. The latter, after all, by definition, involves diegetic shifts of authorship and thus, by extension, mutability of perspective, medium, and purpose. Yet, all three of the works examined in this chapter have been highly self-disruptive: *The Office*, *Fear of a Black Hat*, and *Best in Show* constantly break up their own narratives – minimal though their plot arcs are – with interviews, irrelevant asides, archival material, and even (fictive) advertisements. *Cloverfield*, despite its apparent

simplicity, the unmediated result of Hud turning on a camcorder and pointing it at whatever he sees, turns out to have exponentially more contributors than the typical primary-secondary film; whereas *Boogie Nights* alternates between Anderson and Anderson/Horner, and *Double Indemnity* between Wilder's omniscient framing text and Neff's voiced-over narrative, *Cloverfield* is the work of Hud, Jason (the protagonist's brother who is roped into cameraperson duties by his girlfriend and swiftly pawns them off on Hud), and Rob and Beth in the flashback shots. Even the U.S. government, or some shadowy national security agency of it, plays a role in creating the final text that comprises Abrams' film, as the opening shots show official-looking bureaucratese superimposed over the footage indicating that it was "retrieved at incident site US-447."<sup>119</sup> Far from the self-assured seamlessness that the ideologically-minded documentary might hope to achieve – even as that too tends to be composed of a variety of media and footage – these films, in spite of existing only in one narrative register, are big and messy and multivalent narrative spectacles, but ones in which performance, theatricality, textualized self-definition, is absolutely unceasing.

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<sup>119</sup> This opening image, which functions almost as an intertitle but, true to the film's fully secondary pretensions, is worked into the text itself, rather than being non-diegetic. It establishes, in a near-meta way, that the film belongs firmly in the found footage subgenre. It is also certainly possible, perhaps even tempting, to argue that because the video is, intra-narratively, in the possession of the government, and our viewing of it is thus mediated by that possession, it might well have been edited or doctored to meet some sort of propagandistic goal. On the one hand, I lean toward the position that this interpretation is in no way supported by any evidence within the text itself. The only indications of this mediation in the first place are the beginning and concluding intertitles (the concluding one is even less detailed, simply a video watermark of "Property of U.S. Government"). On the other hand, of course, if the videos were manipulated between the characters' filming and our viewing, the manipulators would surely be careful not to leave any evidence of this.

And still . . . even in these multi-faceted texts, we do not see the secondary being consumed, viewed as final products by a diegetically existent audience. In the final chapter, we will see the reversal of this paradigm, as the protagonists are not the authors but the recipients and intended audiences of the secondary texts. The authors, on the other hand, will remain invisible, unknown, shadowy forces of surveillance and superego.

## Chapter 4

### When the Author Vanishes: The Secondary Text as Discipline in *Caché*

“I like to remember things my own way: The way I remember them, not necessarily the way they happen.”

-Fred Madison, *Lost Highway*

“He convinces us that his vision unmask the world in which we *actually* live.”

-Sam Tanenhaus, *New Republic*

Released eight years apart, in 1997 and 2005, David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* and Michael Haneke’s *Caché* have quite a lot in common. Both films hinge upon inscrutable images and plot turns that render definitive critical readings impossible. Each represented, upon its release, a potential return to form for a celebrated auteur whose previous offering – *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Le Temps du Loup*, respectively – had been widely regarded as a disappointing misfire. Each introduces, early in its run time, an intriguing development in which a bourgeois couple finds on its doorstep a video tape that, without context or explanation, contains footage of the couple’s own home. Each couple experiences a degree of marital strain incited by the videos. Each film contains one wholly unexpected, jaw-dropping death scene. And each involves, at some crucial moment, a disembodied voice, transmitted through some late-twentieth-century telecommunications device, asking for or delivering information about a

man with the surname *Laurent*.<sup>120</sup> While my engagement in this chapter will be primarily with *Caché*, it bears noticing that Haneke's film strongly bears evidence of Lynch's influence, and I will allude to significant similarities throughout my reading.

Of course, the connection to this project's central concern involves the unnerving, surveillant videos that arrive without fanfare on the couples' tasteful, suburban front stoops and the plots – fantasmatic in *Lost Highway*, realistic in *Caché*, but deeply challenging in both – that these texts incite. Textualization as surveillance and, by extension, *punishment*, of course, is not a particularly new idea, and can be, as I briefly outlined in the introduction, traced back to the genesis of the English novel.

Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* is obsessively invested in notions of patriarchal Law and panoptic discipline, and repeatedly depicts the perpetual creation of self-compounding text as integral to the latter. Since the entire premise of the book revolves around Clarissa's family pressuring her to marry the porcine and undesirable Mr. Solmes – a pressure by which Clarissa is utterly unbowed – it is easy to regard the patriarchal system as empty, as simply propped up by the Law in the Lacanian sense: the entrenched structures of

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<sup>120</sup> This might well be Haneke paying tribute to Lynch, acknowledging the similarities in plot between the two films. In *Lost Highway*, Fred Madison receives an intercom message from a man who enigmatically intones "Dick Laurent is dead," a name and statement that will hang over and bookend the entire film. Haneke's protagonist in *Caché* is named Georges Laurent, and, early in the film, his wife takes a phone call from an unidentified man who states flatly "Je voudrais parler avec l'homme par le nom de Georges Laurent" ("I would like to speak to the man called Georges Laurent").

hegemony that demand familial obedience and give substance to the otherwise-empty authority of the father.

In psychoanalytic theory, the figure of the father is inherently imbued with a potent, authoritarian disposition because he is presumably aligned with the Master Signifier.<sup>121</sup> It is his very *name* that commands prohibition and obedience, and, perhaps most importantly, concretizes meaning; as Todd McGowan puts it, “unlike all other signifiers, the Master Signifier does not fluctuate, providing a ground for the system of signification. Whereas all other signifiers acquire meaning through their relationship to other[s] . . . the Master Signifier refers only to itself.”<sup>122</sup>

But this authority is illusory; the actual, human father is not the phallic Master Signifier, but an embodiment of it. McGowan explains: “the authority of this symbolic father depends on a collective belief in his power. This is what makes the subversion of the father a relatively straightforward matter. It consists in simply showing that the father doesn’t really have the strength he pretends to have.”<sup>123</sup> Insofar as we conceive of Law as a matter of familial and domestic obligations and processes, then, the subversion of Law is a matter of demonstrating the impotence of the patriarchal order. *Clarissa* accomplishes

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<sup>121</sup> The Master Signifier, in this sense, is essentially synonymous with the phallus, demonstrating the inextricability in dominant culture of aggressively masculine signification and authoritative meaning.

<sup>122</sup> Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 42.

<sup>123</sup> McGowan, 53.

this by exposing paternal authority as an essentially empty system. It represents patriarchy in decay, stripped of the ability or wherewithal to perform *either* of its fundamental tasks: in roughly the first half of the novel, it fails to enact Law (that is, to prohibit), and, in the second half, it fails to protect. As Lois Bueler puts it, “for whatever reason, none of the men responsible by patriarchal right or pretense for Clarissa’s physical, social, or spiritual well-being behave with full responsibility toward her.”<sup>124</sup> Rather than prohibit and protect in the way expected of a potent patriarchy, the family appropriates the economy of epistolary exchange that Clarissa compulsively engages in.

But where there is *semblance* of Law, there must be enforcement – or at least some pretense of it – and this is one of many areas in which the novel’s prodigious epistolary *form* comes to play a role in its own content. The Harlowes’ patriarchal failure is mitigated by the letters’ tendency to function as a means of surveillance. All of these elements – anxiety over who has seen which letters, attempts to transcribe or misrepresent authorship, and, finally, Belford’s project of collecting them into a coherent narrative – coalesce to form a pervading *fear of exposure*, made all the more threatening by the ceaseless compulsion to continue writing, to deploy more letters to correct the problems caused and encapsulated by the previous ones. Foucault writes that “visibility is a trap”; in *Clarissa*, which character is ensnared in this trap at any given time depends upon who is presently in control of the system of permanent visibility that Foucault

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<sup>124</sup> Lois Bueler, *Clarissa’s Plots* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 75.

identifies as the Panopticon. This system, one must recall, represents “the perfection of power [which] should tend to render its *actual* exercise unnecessary.”<sup>125</sup> *Clarissa* presents an enclosed world in which the Law of patriarchy, of Name of the Father, has proven itself untenable, but the system of surveillance engendered by the epistolary form serves nonetheless to instill anxiety in reaction to transgression of that law.

In his study of surveillance in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, D.A. Miller focuses “not on the police, in the modern institutional shape they acquire in Western culture during the nineteenth century, but on the ramification within the same culture of *less visible, less visibly violent* modes of ‘social control.’”<sup>126</sup> Although Miller’s focus is, emphatically, the Victorian novel, one can identify elements of his argument in the anxiety-building system of “Law” enforcement that Richardson constructs in 1748. Along with Foucault, Miller’s thesis suggests that modes of social control needn’t be overt in order to effectively function, and it is fitting that the ephemeral Law – a system which, unlike law, cannot be written or made into contract, which is indeed “less visible” – should be supported by such an equally fantasmatic system.

In *Clarissa*, this system is encoded in the very structure of the novel itself. Miller describes this system of surveillance and enforcement as a power that eschews physical coercion in favor of “being *voluntarily assumed* by its subjects,

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<sup>125</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977), 200-1.

<sup>126</sup> D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), viii.

who, seduced by it, addicted to it, internalize the requirements for maintaining its hold.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, participation in the epistolary process is not only voluntary, but one that the characters generally take up with an almost erotic relish. Consider Clarissa’s triumphant “I resume my pen!” (987) following her long absence, or Lovelace’s injunctions to his own quill, “Lie down, pen, for a moment!” (911). Their continual writing of letters is not just a narrative engine, but a ceaseless compulsion. Writing to Anna Howe is, in addition to her refusal to marry Solmes, the one area in which Clarissa is quite willing to defy her parents, at one point commenting “I must write as I have opportunity, making use of my concealed stores: for my pens and ink (all of each that they could find) are taken from me” (320).

*Caché* enacts a similar dynamic, as it reproduces the two key elements of panoptic discipline created by the epistolary process: The panoptic function fills a void of power left by an unwilling, unable, and largely invisible patriarchy (certainly no institutional power is going to “call out” the bourgeois Georges Laurent), and the surveilled subject compulsively contributes to and involves himself in the very process of surveillance. Georges expresses anxiety and revulsion at the realization that he is not only being watched, but being made to *understand* that he is being watched, but he also enables and perpetuates the

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<sup>127</sup> Miller, 61. Here, Miller is specifically discussing the modes of power used in Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (Dickens, 1839).

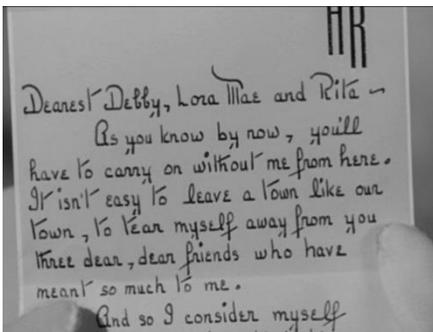
surveillant process by investing in the vagaries of spectacle and disavowing, refusing to be affected by, the video-texts' superegoic effects.

### **Haneke's Anonymous Textualities & Superego's Failure (or, is Georges Laurent a sociopath?)**

The imposition of epistolary elements upon filmic narratives – as a means of creating suspense and an atmosphere of surveillance, as well as constructing a “true” profile of characters who might wish to think of their lives in more idealized terms – long pre-dates Haneke and Lynch. *A Letter to Three Wives* (Joseph Mankiewicz 1949) opens with three affluent women receiving a letter from a mutual friend (albeit one whom they persistently gossip about) named Addie, informing them that she has “Run off with one of [their] husbands.” Addie’s pointed decision to omit the detail of *whose* husband she’s referring to, of course, instigates the film’s mystery. And while this letter itself is brief and blunt, it leads each woman to reflect on her marriage in a way that reveals its strained and imperfect nature: Deborah felt uncomfortable as a newlywed in her husband Brad’s well-to-do social circle; Rita, an ambitious career woman, tends to leave her husband George feeling emasculated. Curiously, though, each woman’s reverie is narrated in voice-over not by the woman at the center of the story, but by Addie, who plays some ancillary role in each marriage’s tension. In other words, each wife’s confrontation of her *real* relation to the social order (or at least to the social institution of marriage) is incited by Addie’s letter, which

not only sets into motion the film's central mystery, but also seems to know – as the voiceover makes clear – more about each woman's psyche than Addie herself really *could* know. Even before the letter arrives, her voice-over intrudes upon the film's soundtrack, making acerbic replies to Deborah, Rita, and Lorna Mae's conversations. Furthermore, as in *Caché* and *Lost Highway*, the film's mise en scene goes out of its way to regard the source of the surveillant secondary texts as a void: while we have no reason to doubt that Addie is, in fact, the author of the letter and the speaker of the voiced over commentary, she is almost literally a specter in the film's diegesis. She appears onscreen only once, shot from behind to obscure any distinguishing features, and the film's final shot is of a champagne glass that seems to tip itself over, an ostentatious moment of poltergeist-like supernaturalism suggesting that Addie literally haunts and watches over these couples in their private moments.

*The transformative moment of A Letter to Three Wives: Handwritten correspondence filling the cinematic frame. As literal a representation of "filmic epistolarity" as can be.*



*Caché*, following the surveillant-video plot point, also mainly unfolds in a way that, like most of Haneke's work, largely adheres to realism and everydayness. Georges and Anne become increasingly tense with one another, especially once the videos – benign in and of themselves – are supplemented with crudely-drawn images of a boy vomiting blood and a decapitated chicken. We learn that, as a small boy, Georges lived with an adopted Algerian boy named Majid, about whom he begins to have vivid, violent nightmares. He begins to suspect Majid is the source of the videos and confronts him. We learn that at eight years old, Georges, jealous of Majid's presence, made up lies about Majid (mainly that he had been coughing up blood) to get him removed from the house. The adult Majid denies any involvement, but, when Georges and Anne's son Pierrot goes missing, they are able to persuade the police to arrest Majid and his son; they are released when it turns out Pierrot had spent the night with a friend without permission. Majid invites Georges back to his apartment, and, telling him that he wanted Georges to be present, removes a pocketknife and cuts his own throat, dying almost instantly. Majid's son berates Georges, and the film ends on a deeply ambiguous – perhaps secondary, perhaps not – shot of Pierrot's school.

*Caché* and *Lost Highway* both revolve around a textuality of panopticism that emerges from a position of unstable authority that seems initially to be more a matter of posturing than true phallic authority, and, as the films proceed, more an expression of the protagonists' psyche, a forced self-evaluation, than

the product of some shadowy third party. In fact, in both films, while such a shadowy third party does presumably exist, (Majid or his son in *Caché* and the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*,<sup>128</sup>) and impacts the narrative in various ways, both men express bewilderment at the idea that they are somehow imposing themselves into or violating the domestic and psychic space of Georges and Fred, respectively.

*The suspected source of surveillance, represented by oppressed, marginalized Majid and abject, transgressive Mystery Man.*



Majid and his son, despite their unwavering insistence that they have no involvement in the production of the tapes, are, for various reasons that the film

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<sup>128</sup> It should be noted here that, as quasi-antagonists go, these two characters could not be more different. Mystery Man exudes a sense of flamboyant confidence and (as Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* might have characterized it) “suave” eroticism, whereas Majid is soft-spoken and passive. Mystery Man is encountered at a Hollywood party, while Georges confront Majid in the latter’s squalid apartment. The key similarity, however, is that both characters deny involvement in intruding into the protagonist’s life, and the films are maddeningly coy about whether we are to believe them.

makes explicit, prime suspects up to the very end of the movie.<sup>129</sup> These are deeply marginalized characters, impoverished and still affected by French atrocities in Algeria and in France itself, and, if they are indeed the source of the videos, they continue the Harlowe family tradition of impotent male figures, stripped of social and symbolic power, deploying a mechanism of panoptic surveillance as a substitute for actual power.

While the secondary texts of the previous three chapters have been the result of distinct character authorship, and an encapsulation of how those characters' desires to construct and promote a particular identity or relation to the social order (with very mixed results indeed), in these final two films, we see characters who have no direct involvement in the secondary texts' production, who receive them unsolicited and with revulsion, and, finally, whose repressed, primitive, and amoral selves, rather than some egotistic ideal, inheres within their content. All this is to say, these videos are ostensible manifestations of superego, which, as Freud points out, is perpetually "ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon some other, extraneous individuals."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> For instance, after Majid and George's first meeting, Haneke cuts to a secondary text of a video of that meeting, suggesting that there is a camera hidden in the apartment. The infamous final shot of the film shows Pierrot and Majid's son – characters who should not know one another – meeting on the front steps of Pierrot's school, suggesting some sort of collusion among all three.

<sup>130</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Peter Gay, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 84.

The notion that a surveillant, unsolicited, domestically-invasive video signifies superego is actually first explored by Todd McGowan with respect to *Lost Highway*: “. . . the videotape that appears on Fred and Renee’s front porch indicates the presence of some observing agency. Like the superego, whoever is observing their house with a video camera seems to be an intruder, an alien figure.”<sup>131</sup> *Caché* deploys its mysterious video surveillance plot as an instantiation of superego as well, but, for Georges, the superegoic function does not take. So strong is Georges’ sense of the legitimacy of his symbolic identity that he is able to resist the exposures of the superego even as it ramps up its recriminations and imagery.

While the film arguably declines any progress toward solving its central mystery (the source or producing agent of the videotapes) the meaning of the videos themselves, what they are forcing Georges to confront, is carefully revealed in such a way that Georges experiences, in near-equal measure, pulsions of shame and guilt as well as outward aggression. By this I mean that we learn the root of Georges’ anxiety, but *not* who is forcing him to confront it. As Catherine Wheatley puts it, for Georges, “the enemy is everywhere” and “he and Anna descend into an attitude of paranoia, secrecy, and mistrust.”<sup>132</sup> This incisive claim neatly summarizes the intersection of Freud and Foucault’s signature theoretical edifices: In absence of a direct, repressive apparatus (to

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<sup>131</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 160.

<sup>132</sup> Catherine Wheatley, *Caché* (London: Palgrave Publishing Co., 2011), 35.

return to Althusserian terminology) to force Georges to reconsider his place in the world, the Panoptic disciplinary machine does exactly this by instilling anxiety and near-crippling suspicion that manifests in Georges as a need to lash out and portray himself as a victim.<sup>133</sup>

One of the first instances of this occurs when Georges and Anne leave the local police precinct after receiving another tape, this time accompanied by a crude, childlike drawing of a boy vomiting blood. They bemoan that the police refuse to get involved so long as the videos' sender has not made an overt threat.<sup>134</sup> As they step into the street, a young bicyclist nearly collides with them, then skids to a stop as Georges escalates by yelling "Watch out, dickhead!" This turns, essentially, into a stalemate of blame and culpability; Georges and Anna stepped into the street without looking, but the cyclist was going the wrong way down a one-way street. The cyclist is black, a racial minority like Majid and his son. *Caché* is widely read as an allegory of the repercussions of French colonialism and violence in northern Africa, and so here the spectre of racial difference and intolerance, regardless of whether Georges particularly cares

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<sup>133</sup> At the risk of playing fast and loose with hackneyed Freudianisms: Georges tries repeatedly to rationalize and project guilt in order to keep the superegoic effects of the videos at bay. Most clearly, of course, he engages in repression (the undoing of which is the film's major concern). Or, perhaps, he's merely a sociopath, unperturbed by the nagging of superego's moral(izing) imperatives.

<sup>134</sup> This lack of police assistance will not only be echoed in *Lost Highway*, but is further reflective of my Foucaultian reading of *Clarissa*. The technically (according to the letter of the law) non-threatening, non-violent videotapes render unnecessary the more traditional forms of power traditionally exercised by police. Here, the frustration of the Laurents provides a moment of irony: They are upset that the patriarchal institution will not assist them, is resigning itself to a stance of impotence ("there's nothing we can do!"), but this same impotence is what created a power vacuum that the videotapes are no filling.

about the man's race, is immediately raised. Yet, Wheatley argues that this ought to be read as a (particularly provocative) red herring, that "the scene's place in the film seems more a contribution to the ongoing climate of hostility and fear . . . it is clear that Georges is feeling the pressure of the videotapes, leading us to wonder what further erratic behavior they might give rise to."<sup>135</sup> Wheatley shows that the weight of historical atrocity that critics typically assume to be integral to the film's purposes is in fact secondary, at least in Georges' mind, to his self-involvement in the psychic events of anxiety and aggression. In fact, despite the way that French-Algerian conflict weighs on the film's subtexts, it is only once explicitly referenced, when Georges tells Anne that Majid's parents disappeared on October 17, 1961 – the day of the Paris Massacre – but is content to "leave it at that."

It is perhaps inaccurate, then, to suggest that Georges "submits" to the superegoistic intent of the videos. As Lacan puts it with uncharacteristic succinctness, the superego "operates according to an economy such that the more one sacrifices to it, the more it demands."<sup>136</sup> While the texts that Georges receives – as well as the horrific moment of violence that his pursuit of Majid and near-hysterical insistence on Majid's involvement inevitably leads to – become more insistent and foreboding, Georges maintains, until the end, that he is not to blame, that while the secondary texts have him "on edge," they will not

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<sup>135</sup> Wheatley, 31

<sup>136</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 302.

extract from him any semblance of guilt, shame, or culpability. Even after Majid's suicide, which ought to lead to the apex of Georges' guilt, the moment at which he might finally succumb to shame, Georges remains composed, adamantly refusing the burden of the superego. As Oliver Speck rightly puts it:

Instead of recognizing that he failed to help the grown-up Majid, Georges afterward still acts on his main fear, namely that of tarnishing his public *image*. Even though shaken by the event he witnessed, Georges' primary concern seems to be whether his wife kept up appearances when she sent their friends away on a pretext. And the next day, before falling into bed, he convincingly assures Majid's son that he does not feel guilty at all.<sup>137</sup>

There is not, I would argue, any evidence in the film to suggest that Georges' verbally-asserted lack of guilt and shame is disingenuous. While he experiences intense *anxiety* throughout the film, it is not borne of a sense of moral shortcoming, but pragmatic concern: Safety for his family and himself, maintenance of a carefully-crafted domestic space, and an enduring position as a well-respected citizen and minor celebrity.

In his first visit to Majid's, Georges poses a psychoanalytically-loaded question: *What do you want from me?* Žižek interprets this question, coming from the subject, as bound up with Lacan's *Che vuoi?*:

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<sup>137</sup> Oliver C. Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing, 2010), 173. Emphasis on "image" is mine.

According to the classic Lacanian formula, the logic of the hysterical demand is “I’m demanding this of you, but what I’m really demanding of you is to refute my demand because this is not it!” . . . His own answer to this *Che vuoi* of the Other can only be the hysterical question “Why am I what I’m supposed to be, why have I this mandate? . . . Briefly: *Why am I what you [the big Other] are saying that I am?*”<sup>138</sup>

We recognize that what Georges thinks he is asking is “How can I make this harassment stop?” He assumes that the videos are a means of blackmail, and tries immediately to offer money in exchange for a respite from the anxieties they induce. So on a narrative level, “What do you want from me?” simply means “How do I appease you and return to my normal life?”<sup>139</sup> In Lacanian terms, however, Georges’ questions concerning these secondary texts, can be interpreted as an unconscious inquiry about *who he is*. As opposed to character-based authorship elsewhere in this project, in which, I have argued, the author attempts to ideologically mold his or her subjectivity through textuality into the most ideal possible instantiation – recall Maurice’s desire in *Boogie Nights* to capture his sexual enjoyment in a material object that would influence his brothers’ opinion of him – in *Caché*, Georges recognizes the reversal of this paradigm. The text that he is receiving, he assumes, contains some message,

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<sup>138</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 111-113.

<sup>139</sup> In Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, Thorwald asks precisely the same question of Jeffery. And though Thorwald, we finally learn, is completely guilty in every sense of the term, it’s clear in this concluding moment that he is not seeking exculpation from guilt, but a solution to the problem of Jeffery’s interference.

some set of instructions: a *mandate*, as Žižek puts it. While character authorship involves the fabrication of an ideological identity, *Cache* represents character viewership as an exposé of the reality of the subject, his flaws and weaknesses and perverse desires and secret shames. These secondary texts act as superego and surveillant disciplinarian, even if the subject refuses the shame that ought naturally to accompany this exposure.

### **Textual Slippage**

*Caché* is almost unanimously regarded as a brilliant but frustrating film, and the very reason for its frustrating nature is the discord between primary and secondary texts. The secondary video texts in *Caché*, compared to the garish pornography, tales of intrigue and murder, quirky documentary, and demonic/monstrous invasions explored in the previous chapters, are downright boring in terms of content<sup>140</sup>; it's their context, naturally, that makes them sinister and foreboding. Though the tapes received by Fred (Bill Pullman) and Renee (Patricia Arquette) Madison in *Lost Highway* do feature Lynch's trademark industrial thrum on the soundtrack, and those in *Caché* eventually become more interesting and puzzling, our initial glimpses of them – glimpses subordinated to the look of the characters who receive them – are wholly unremarkable. *Caché*'s opening scene, in fact, is notorious for its duration: a three-minute mounted-

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<sup>140</sup> The drawings, which are less secondary texts as defined by this project (they are shown within the frame but do not supplant the film proper in the same sense), on the other hand, are clearly threatening and sinister.

camera shot of a house's exterior, the payoff of which is entirely retroactive, as we suddenly realize the diegetic status of the shot only when Haneke switches from the secondary text itself to a shot of Anne and Georges.

This is perhaps the first way in which *Caché* fundamentally differs from the other films I've discussed: Not only is the distinction between primary and secondary text difficult to detect in terms of style – perhaps even more difficult for someone familiar with Haneke's work, as the often-static secondary shots are heavily reminiscent of primary text shots in *The Seventh Continent* (1989) and *La Pianiste* (2001) – but the secondary texts themselves are brutally tedious. And tedium, it turns out, is a recurring and underscored theme in this film, making it a natural counterpart to Haneke's feature debut; it restages to some extent the sterile everydayness of *The Seventh Continent*, merely moving the setting from suburban Austria to Paris. As in the films discussed in the previous chapter, secondary texts in *Caché* capture and dramatize not momentous events or milestones, but frustrated tableaux of boredom and routine. Visiting his mother, Georges summarizes his life and those of his family as flatly as one could imagine: "Mostly we chug along. No great highs or lows. I'm fine. Anne's fine. Pierrot's fine."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> The choice of verb – *chug*, or *faire teuf teuf* – is, of course, pointedly bleak, hinting at an inexorable march to some indistinct, yet unquestionably banal, endpoint. The putatively positive adjective "fine," meanwhile, recalls the disinterested affect of a sullen teenager interacting with a nosy parent. All this is to say that, even when visiting a parent whom he does not often see, Georges has little to share but declarations of stagnancy.

Despite Haneke's visual and narrative style, wherein mundanity is depicted through both stylization and hyperrealism, *Caché* has been read as an embodiment of spectacle. Frances Restuccia, in one of the first scholarly critical reactions to the film, frames this boredom as a lack of "active desire," and cites, in an overarching summary of its characters and basic plot rhythms, Guy Debord's twinning of the Society of the Spectacle with "limitless artificiality":

. . . a comatose Georges drives a BMW and moderates a TV talk show (which has to be clipped upon becoming "too theoretical") whose surrounding shelves are filled with fake books. His last visit to Majid's apartment is sandwiched between two stops at a movie theatre.

Georges's mother has befriended her remote control, and his son's room is plastered with a typical teenager's society-of-the-spectacle rubbish.

The conspicuous, chic family living room contains a large, centrally located television (in the place of any windows), on which violent news items, about, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq, run as background noise.<sup>142</sup>

Here, Restuccia is clearly alluding to Thesis 4 of Debord's masterwork, the blunt assertion that, as opposed to being a mere *collection* of images, "[the spectacle

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<sup>142</sup> Frances Restuccia, "Turning Anxiety Into Shame in Haneke's *Cache*." Unpublished Manuscript. 2008. Restuccia also points out that the Society of the Spectacle promotes a "false consciousness of time" and that, accordingly, Georges seems "as immune to Arab-Western relations now as he was as a six-year-old boy" (8). On the other hand, Restuccia also argues that "psychoanalysis and political material in the film are intertwined, rather than the political eclipsing the psychoanalytic" (9–10). I would extend this further and argue that, in fact, the psychoanalytic eclipses the political.

is] a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”<sup>143</sup> And indeed, this seems to be completely applicable to the Laurents’ lives, especially once the videotapes begin to appear.

*The opening shot of Caché, capturing the unremarkable rhythms of everyday life.*



Some of the more traditionally “spectacular” moments of the film, in fact, emerge from interpersonal relations mediated by images and acts of seeing. The film’s second-most-startling moment involves an acquaintance of the Laurents, at a small dinner party that will eventually be interrupted by the arrival of another tape (this time accompanied by a drawing of a decapitated chicken), telling what begins as a personal anecdote but turns out to be a long-form joke with a physical comedy payoff, thus turning a simple monologue into a performative display. When Georges first reveals to Anne that he has “a vague hunch” about who is terrorizing them, Anne is shocked that he will not share any details of his suspicion,<sup>144</sup> and pointedly tells him “You’re impossible to talk to,”

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<sup>143</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1967), 5.

<sup>144</sup> Ostensibly because doing so would require him to reveal the duplicity he used as a child to get young Majid sent away, to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the shame beneath his professional and domestic exterior.

hinting at a breakdown of language in the face of an image-intensive conflict. Finally, of course, Majid's death, a painfully abrupt, yet still theatrical in every sense of the word, suicide-by-throat-cutting (this would be, by far, the film's *most* startling moment) occurs as a result of a series of confrontations with Georges that have all, of course, revolved around conflicts instigated by the images contained within the transmitted secondary texts. "Spectacle," in this relatively visually sedate film, adheres both to the Debordian notion and the typical filmmaking meaning of the term: the presentation of a narrative-disrupting element that, in and of itself, promotes viewer engagement and enjoyment both within its relation to the film as a whole *and* within a finite scope detached from the text's larger concerns.<sup>145</sup>

But *Caché* also consistently blurs the boundaries between primary and secondary in a way that most Narratives of Character Authorship simply do not or cannot. Whereas, regarding the earlier films, my central contention was that audience involvement is essentially disavowed within the diegesis, that the diegesis allows for the creation but not viewing of secondary textuality, in *Caché*, since the protagonists are the recipients, not the creators of the texts, a great deal of intradiegetic viewing goes on, and the ambiguities between primary and

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<sup>145</sup> In *The Violent Woman*, Hilary Neroni specifically defines cinematic violence as akin to a musical breaking from plot for a song-and-dance number: "Violence seems to arrest the narrative as the viewer waits with tension and excitement for the outcome while immersed in the spectacle" (3). How many critics seized upon the Laurent's friend's silly story/joke as a standout setpiece, treating it essentially as a enjoyable standalone moment? How easily/gleefully might a Haneke enthusiast screen for a neophyte the throat-cutting scene (or the clitoral mutilation scene in *La Pianiste*, or the murder of the young girl in *Benny's Video*, etc., etc.), if only to demonstrate how bluntly un-Hollywoodish – or, in the parlance of an undergraduate film student: "fucked up" – Haneke's aesthetic can be?

secondary – which are, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 3, nearly non-existent in this genre – consistently frustrate the possibilities of interpretation. While, as I emphasized earlier, Haneke’s film seems firmly rooted in the stark world of desire and realism, the transitions between primary and secondary constantly threaten to unbalance the viewer’s expectations and contextual understanding. Citing Derrida’s *Deconstruction and Ordinary Language*, Peter Brunette points out that:

Meaning is indeterminate because it is finally dependent on context, and context can never be stabilized and fixed . . . Our uncertainty about [any secondary shot] within the fiction leads to a greater and continual uncertainty, at least in terms of a visual epistemology.<sup>146</sup>

At times, this problematic is deployed not to promote confusion, but to call attention to the film’s form, its meticulous constructedness. The tedium of the infamous opening shot, for instance, is finally broken by puzzled dialogue from Anne and Georges, spoken in the film’s primary register while the secondary still fills the screen.<sup>147</sup>

Later, a pair of consecutive scenes takes the conceit further: First, a shot similar to the opening one – the same perspective, but now at nighttime –

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<sup>146</sup> Peter Brunette, *Michael Haneke*. Contemporary Film Directors Series (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 116.

<sup>147</sup> The secondary text, before being revealed as such, is also rewound at one point, a clear allusion to Haneke’s earlier film *Funny Games* (1997), wherein a VCR’s rewind function not only introduces a sort of meta-magical realism to the film, but is essentially a make-or-break moment for most viewers, the thing that is cited either as astonishingly brilliant or as pretentious and insipid. From the outset of *Caché* (even though it is not at all a direct successor to *Funny Games*) Haneke characteristically dares his audience to make a snap judgment about his work.

occupies the screen, once again for a maddeningly long time. But there is no cut to a discussion between Anne and Georges, no rewinding, no sudden re-marked perspective of the image on a television screen. Is this a secondary text or primary? We are already conditioned to understand it as another surveillant tape, but there is no real indicator, not even a decline in sharpness of the image, to confirm our assumptions.

Following this, we learn that Georges is the host of a roundtable television show dedicated to discussing literature. The smash cut from the nighttime view of the Laurents' house to a close-up of Georges wrapping up an episode again plays with the porousness of the line between primary and secondary. After Georges bids his audience "bonsoir," a stern, megaphone-distorted voice implores him and the four other participants, who are revealed through a zoomed-out jump cut, to "Stay seated while the credits roll, please!"<sup>148</sup> At this point, we might be tempted to interpret what we are viewing

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<sup>148</sup> The officious voice of what we can assume to be some mid-level Assistant Director, especially because of the crackly effect produced by his megaphone, is highly reminiscent of two of the most prestigious films about filmmaking and secondary text production: the final seconds of Godard's *Le Mepris* and the "audition" scene of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*: Like Georges' literary television show, these iconic scenes begin with what seems like a pure performance but then show themselves to in fact be highly mediated by the trappings of production and textualization.



as a secondary text, as a voice from the primary emanates into its field (the fictive, and of course, never-shown viewers of this TV show, after all, will never hear it). The show's participants pretend to continue talking to each other, while "the credits," which we don't even see since they would presumably be added in post-production, are given time to run their course. All of this comprises an extremely complex tableau of primary-secondary relations, even more so because the putative secondary text is incomplete, likely just a point of view aligned with a camera on the show's set. We may or may not assume that the zoomed-out jump cut signals a switch from secondary back to primary. If not, we are viewing a secondary text with a purported feature (the rolling of credits) that is not yet present, meaning we are not actually seeing the exact version of the text that an intradiegetic viewer would. We thus cannot firmly establish our spectatorial footing either as primary or secondary, as we are neither viewing the finished product nor do we seem to be watching the set of Georges' show from some incidental, unmediated point of view.

But these primary/secondary contortions are merely the result of Haneke's playfulness. Later in the film, such moments become maddening, as they seem to promise a key to understanding the mystery, only to take it away through ambiguity. Wheatley points out that "Our ardent desire to piece together the mystery of who is sending the tapes leaves no scene exempt from

scrutiny.”<sup>149</sup> This assessment is near identical to Miller’s observation regarding Collins’ *The Moonstone* that:

*[Everything] might count: every character might be the culprit, and every action or speech might be belying its apparent banality or literalism by making surreptitious reference to an incriminating Truth . . . [at the moment of truth,] sinister objects recover their banality, just as secret subjects resume their inconsequence.*<sup>150</sup>

But almost no scene allows for productive scrutiny. Following Georges’ first meeting with Majid, we cut to a reprise of the end of their conversation. The picture quality is no different from the original version of the scene that we watched, but this time the shot lingers on Majid after Georges leaves in frustration as Majid firmly denies sending either a video or drawing, and then, shortly after Georges is gone, begins sobbing. This turns out also to be a video sent to Georges, as if to say: *If the drawing of a boy vomiting blood, an embodiment of your childhood lie, isn’t enough to induce guilt, perhaps seeing what that lie did to this man will do the trick.* Yet, while this seems on the surface to offer conclusive “proof” that Majid filmed their encounter and has now sent a tape of it to further mock or guilt-trip Georges, it just doesn’t quite add up. Majid shows no awareness of the camera’s presence. He couldn’t possibly have gotten it hidden and set up in exactly the right place in the time between Georges

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<sup>149</sup> Wheatley, 31

<sup>150</sup> Miller, 2 (Miller’s emphasis).

knocking and his opening the door. He couldn't really realistically have even expected Georges to show up in the first place, as the video showing how to get to his apartment was barely decipherable; Georges and Anne had to watch it frame-by-frame just to make out the street name.<sup>151</sup> In other words, although there is apparently a camera in Majid's apartment, one that produces yet another secondary text to be consumed in the primary, the audience remains, against all pragmatic logic, convinced that Majid is telling the truth.

Finally, there is the matter of Georges' unconscious. I have already argued that Georges is immune to the moralizing voice of the superego, that his reactions verge on the sociopathic as self-preservation and barely-believable bravado become his singular mode of interaction with other characters. But Haneke further toys with the viewer through one of the most conventional – and derided – of narrative tropes: the dream sequence. Two brief scenes in the first half of the film suggest themselves to be products of Georges' unconscious. First, immediately following a static nighttime shot of the Laurents' home (from a different perspective than what we've seen thus far), we cut to a tracking shot through a dark hallway. This is wholly different from anything we've seen thus far, as the film to this point has been composed of the static, surveillant long-takes and typical shot-reverse shot scenes for dialogue. We thus know instantly that we are in some new diegetic register. The camera quickly finds a small boy

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<sup>151</sup> This, in fact, brings up another pairing of scenes that are coy about their primary/secondary status. The secondary shot of a car driving to Majid's in order to lure Georges there is, in terms of style, point of view, and mise en scene, identical to an earlier primary shot as Georges drives to his mother's house.

coughing up blood, who looks suddenly at the camera, his expression a complex mixture of guilt and recrimination. Later, in an even more complexly-shot sequence, Georges as a child watches as the same boy works diligently to behead a chicken on a chopping block; the boy then advances menacingly on Georges, in what might be considered the film's signature shot.<sup>152</sup>



These scenes already stand out in terms of form. In a film with precisely measured composition and endless-seeming long takes, they are unique for their use of more complex camerawork and, in the latter of the two, continuity editing. And dream sequences are often shot – depending on whether the filmmaker wishes them to be immediately identifiable as such – with some sort of clear marker or indication. Or, even more blatantly, there will simply be a smash cut to a character waking up in a panic, which is precisely what occurs at the end of the chicken-decapitation scene. The hallway tracking-shot scene, while seeming to correspond neatly with the clearly-marked dream sequence, is given no such treatment, however. Its diegetic status is completely unknowable, as it is not revealed conclusively to be the product of Georges' unconscious, a

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<sup>152</sup> Wheatley, for instance, chose this image for the cover of her book *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image*.

video, or simply a “flashback” conceit of Haneke’s in the primary text. It is, as Brunette suggests, “a wild card that destroys the internal logic of the videotapes that we watch.”<sup>153</sup>

To further complicate matters, toward the very end of the film, we revisit the location of the chicken scene to see Majid being taken away, presumably following young Georges’ lies about his health. This, of course, is the crucial original trauma that, assuming Georges’ “vague hunches” are accurate, has led to the present-time events of the film. Yet this sequence is presented in the same long shot as the film’s secondary texts. Nothing about it suggests a dream. So again, we are given a narratively-crucial image with no indication as to its ontological or diegetic status. These elisions of such status recurrently frustrate attempts to “solve” the mystery, which is, of course, the primary objective of not only the viewer (of this film or any mystery narrative), but of Georges Laurent. The mystery of the videotapes’ source is, of course, *unsolvable* in any conventional or narratively satisfying sense, because they do not exist in the same logical world as the primary text. In previous chapters, the secondary text or texts bore upon the events of the primary just as they do in *Caché* – but in *Caché*, unlike the others, they are not *manufactured* in the primary. They come from somewhere else, an authorless void, a pre-symbolic<sup>154</sup> realm that defies the logic of a film that only *seems* to be invested in realism.

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<sup>153</sup> Brunette, 117

<sup>154</sup> I use this particular Lacanian term because of the texts’ absence of language and utterance, their total lack of affect, and my overarching claim that they come from some void beyond the

Earlier, I compared *Caché's* overall aesthetic of and preoccupation with banality and boredom as reminiscent of *The Seventh Continent*. But while this similarity inheres on a superficial, aesthetic level, the latter film alienates the viewer by refusing to settle into any sort of familiar genre or recognizable plot arc. *Caché*, by contrast, almost immediately involves the viewer (or at least any viewer sufficiently motivated to get past the interminable opening shot) by offering a distinct conflict, a familiar familial dynamic, and the patterns of a recognizable story: the family in peril, threatened by some malevolent outside force. Yet, for all its supposed accessibility, the film is an epistemological nightmare. In the previous three chapters, we saw films whose meanings and means of interpretation are constructed through secondary text as unambiguous stories with clear markers of division from or complete overlap with their primary counterparts. The unsolvable nature of *Caché's* central mystery, and the deliberate ambiguity of primary and secondary elements, on the other hand, introduces a version of intradiegetic textualization that maddeningly resists closure and assessment.

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trappings of culture and society; they register as threatening not in terms of content but, for both Georges and Anne, in terms of implied threats, and, for Georges in particular, because of his recognition of their relevance to his past.

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